

22 July 2018  
Whitsun IX  
Ephesians 2: 11 - 22

To get the full impact of this Epistle reading we have to think back for a moment or two to the First Jerusalem Council where Peter and James, the leaders of the congregation there, summoned Paul to come to a sit down. There was a problem that was dividing the church in the first generation after the resurrection of Jesus. Peter and James were firmly convinced that only Jews could be allowed to be baptized and become members. If a Gentile wanted to be baptized, he or she first had to convert to Judaism. Paul disagreed, saying that God's grace is available to all who believe in Jesus. In short, this truly upset many people in the early church, dividing it, because he was welcoming Gentiles from around the Roman Empire into the church and others were excluding them.

The three men, and probably others, met for the better part of two weeks to resolve this challenge. In the end, it was mutually agreed that Paul and his companions could go throughout the empire, probably the farther from Jerusalem the better, and continue their work among the Gentiles. James and Peter and their group would work to convert their fellow Jews.

We don't know how it worked out, except that for none of them it was either easy or safe. Peter and James were facing the harsh realities created by the radical Pharisees in Galilee who were trying to provoke a holy war with the Romans to drive them out of the Promised Land. They succeeded in starting the war, but they were savagely defeated. The church suffered along with them, and there are indications, especially in the Gospel of Saint Luke and Acts, that the church leaders were making a point of differentiating themselves from the rebellious Jews. And from the Book of Acts and his own letters, church life was rough for Paul, in great part because he was truly having to create everything other than the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Even then, there were different traditions and forms of both of those sacraments. It was rough for the lay members because they were unfamiliar with it all.

The classic example was in Corinth where Paul had to instruct them on something we take for granted - potluck dinners, instead of everyone bringing their own food. Even Paul's companions on some of the missionary journeys were left mentally and physically exhausted and went home.

That much chaos, confusion, and sometimes disagreement is draining.

For the most part, it has not changed all that much over the past centuries. I want to make this very clear: There was never a golden age - not when Jesus was with his disciples, not after the Ascension during the three hundred years of what is often called Primitive Christianity, nor ever since church and state were firmly united by Constantine. It is no different today. No church anywhere can be described as perfect.

Now, that lack of perfection is something I once found to seem rather negative. After all, Jesus tells us that God is perfect, and that we should do our best to be perfect like him. Perfect should always be the ideal, we are told, in every area of life, and we should constantly strive to do everything for Jesus.

Earlier this year I read John Ruskin's three volumes entitled the Stones of Venice. In the second volume he describes in almost ponderous detail that magnificent Cathedral of Saint Mark, and points out numerous imperfections in the columns and capitals, the vaults, and even the stained glass. Instead of criticizing the imperfections, he praised them. That seems counter intuitive, but he made a good point. Only something that is machine made, turned out one identical piece after another, is truly perfect. But to achieve machine perfection destroys the soul of the person at the machine. The artists and craftsmen worked toward the goal of perfect, but were happy never to reach it.

A colleague pointed out that his appreciation for imperfection is common in other cultures from around the world. Many of us have marvelled at the beauty of the rugs woven by the Navajos of the American Southwest. Their belief is that only God is perfect, and that it is wrong for mankind to place too great an emphasis on human perfection. For that reason they intentionally include a few slight mistakes in their work. They are small imperfections, and most people don't see them. But the weaver knows they are there, and it is a spiritual reminder to them of mankind's imperfection and God's perfection.

I think that is a wonderful idea or pattern of life for the church and parish. If we are solely focused on absolute perfect, then we are not going to be happy because we'll never get there. If we make it our one and only goal, we are going to make each other miserable with the disagreements it creates. I believe if ever churches become absolutely and flawlessly perfect, they will be sterile and empty because no one will dare do anything because they will be afraid it will destroy perfection. In fact, the only perfect churches and cathedrals are the ones converted into museums because they don't have a congregation underfoot to mess up things.

Church life is messy, disorganized, and we always have the feeling we have not caught up and will never catch up on everything. Something will be left undone; perhaps things will never be started. We will make mistakes. We will step on each other's toes and bump into one another. That makes room for God's grace and love, and for us to forgive one another.

Just as there has never been a golden age of perfection in the church, there is never going to be one this side of heaven.

What I have noticed is that people who have a purpose, an understanding of what is important, are happy. Again, we see it all around us. A few years ago I was at a gathering where there was a mix of ages, and there wasn't a smart phone in sight. Children playing, older children playing with younger ones, children lending a hand getting ready for dinner and cleaning up. It caught my attention, but someone explained it was because they belonged to something and had a purpose.

At the other end of life, we find people who, after decades of education and work, find themselves retired, and after a little while of enjoying their well earned leisure time, they realize that life has lost much of its vitality.

They need and want a purpose. Some of them go back to work, some of the volunteer, or else they are very likely to become ill and perhaps die earlier than might have happened.

Nowhere in life is there a single model that is 'one size fits all' nor should there be. It is the diversity of opinion, ideas, creativity which is important. For us, as members of this parish family, instead of emphasizing negativity, our purpose is to imitate Christ in all that we are.

Churches are much like that. But wait - there is more! Perhaps you read an article in Forward Day by Day a few weeks ago. On that particular day there was one line that stood out: I wonder how often I have rushed into a situation, intent on fixing it, without taking a moment to acknowledge the grace of God already present."

That's not a hall pass to encourage more messiness, but a reminder that God is present in the clutter, and where ever God is present there is an opportunity to advance - to advance His Kingdom of love for all people, and our love for Him.

And for us, Saint Paul writes in this passage, the focal point is Jesus. We are unified in Him. Our focus will never be perfect, but it always has the potential to be all-encompassing - worship, prayer and praise, education, hospitality, and constantly caring for others.