

SPG#180, Pentecost 15A, Proper 16

August 24, 2008

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

Of all the writers in the New Testament there is probably no other single writer where it is more important to establish a context than the Apostle Paul. Whereas Jesus is presented in stories, conversations, and teachings within agrarian scenes, Paul most often in his letters teaches. He does not spend much time establishing the setting from which he writes. I think this is probably done on purpose as he knew that his letters would be read by different communities within differing dynamics. And within Paul's letter to the Romans, there is probably an even more specific context to discern. In his book, *Paul the Convert* Jewish writer Alan Segal refers specifically to the situation in Rome in the years 49-50 AD. In these years the Edict of the emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. But after the edict there was a slow trickle of Jews returning as the edict became less important. This part of Romans, Segal says, is probably aimed at Gentile members of Christian communities in Rome who were not told to leave. So as Jews slowly returned the Gentiles were to, as Paul says at various points in chapter 12, **contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality, live in harmony with one another, do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly, never be conceited, take thought for what is noble in the sight of all; and, if possible, as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.** So the historical context could well be the encouragement to accept displaced Jews who were returning to Rome.

In my reading of Paul, I find that often he uses a specific historical situation to point to a broader and deeper spirituality. Elsewhere in Romans he says, **There is no longer Jew nor Greek.** There are similar statements in Colossians. And in Galatians he says, **There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.**

And so there is radical hospitality, radical acceptance, and radical equality. Whoever comes in the door is guaranteed a place and a status just because of their presence.

Historically there has been some controversy over Paul's statements regarding women and minorities. But how much have inclusive statements like Paul's in Galatians, which we just heard, meant for the rights of women? How much have those statements meant for the rights of minorities?

It is as though Paul is trying to share with us a vision of just how inclusive and loving we can be. And it is as though he is saying this vision is not commonplace among human communities. But he calls us beyond what is commonplace, or even just acceptable. And he says this unusual vision that leads to this radical community is part of our spiritual lives in Christ. And he says in today's epistle, **I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies, or your lives, as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world,** and I read that to say, do not be satisfied with business as usual **But be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good, and acceptable, and perfect.**

And then he continues to describe this unusual and unprecedented community, and he says in this community we would not think of ourselves in an arrogant way, as being above anyone else. And then he says, **For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function. So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.** And then at the end he gives examples of gifts: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, compassion.

So, even after identifying an unusual and spiritual community Paul takes it a step further. He says that we have an unusual companionship. We are all sisters and brothers. But we are, as Paul puts it, “part of one another.” So it seems our companionship is partially realized and partially anticipated. There is the companionship that we live in and the companionship and oneness to which we aspire. And then, even a step further, Paul says that each of us has gifts that are unique. There is a preciousness about each person that is partially realized by all of us and partially hidden or anticipated.

St. Paul’s is a family. I hear that every so often as I move around among you. What if we lived as though we could be even more of a family? What if we lived as though we could be more loving, more accepting, more hospitable? What if we lived as though there is a love and a hospitality that we do not see, and yet reach for? What if we lived as though there is a preciousness and a uniqueness about those who are already here, and those who would come new?

It is no coincidence that those of us who are here today are here to consider unprecedented companionship, unprecedented appreciation of each other, and unprecedented hospitality to all who would come. And so to consider ourselves in the light of new possibility, and to consider our companionship in the light of new possibility, and to consider our hospitality in the light of new possibility is all what Paul would call acceptable to God. But he would also say it is holy.

So, in considering unprecedented community let us be quick to discern the will of God in our lives, to know what is good, and acceptable, and perfect. Amen.