

Sermon for Christ Church, Spotsylvania, VA
Proper 11, Year B, July 22, 2018
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Bringing Peace"
Ephesians 2:11-22

God, open our minds and think through us; Christ, open our lips and speak through us; Holy Spirit, open our hearts and set us on fire with your love

you may have noticed something a little out of the ordinary in our worship space this morning, all of these backpacks [point to each] on the ends of the pews, in the window sills, in front of and around the altar area [touch the one hanging on the pulpit], and even up on the retable beside the flowers and the cross; about 80 in number, they are here to be blessed before they are given out to schoolchildren and youth before the early start of this school year

I said that the backpacks are going to be blessed, but that's not entirely correct; you see, one cannot really bless things; when we ask God to bless the water used in Holy Baptism, we are really asking God to use the water to bring about a transformation in the person who will be baptized—it is the person who receives God's blessings; when we ask God to bless the bread and wine used in Holy Communion, we are really asking God to use the bread and wine to bring about a transformation in the people who will receive communion—it is the people who receive God's blessings; and when we ask God to bless these backpacks, we are really asking God to use these backpacks and the school supplies they contain to bring about a transformation in the children and young people who will use them—it is the students who will receive God's blessings

and to make sure that some of our understanding of what is going on in this act of giving and act of blessing is conveyed to the students and to their families, each backpack has one of these bookmarks in it [hold up]; it says on one side, "This backpack and school supplies are a gift of love from the people of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania. They were blessed at our Sunday worship services on July 22, 2018, with the prayer on the back side of this bookmark." you will hear that prayer in a few moments, and I will put the text of it in with this sermon on the website; I do want to mention one phrase from that prayer now: "May these backpacks remind them that they have a church community praying for them." so, do continue praying for them

throughout the school year, and I will work them into our weekly Prayers of the People also as a reminder; I want us to feel that this is not a one time handover of things, but an ongoing relationship, even if we do not get to meet the students directly

now, as impressive as it is to see this many backpacks adorning the church this morning, I also look at them with a bit of mixed emotion as I think about the arms-length method of giving we are using; as good as it is that we are providing these backpacks and supplies, think how much better it would be if we also had the 80 or so children and young people here, with their families, to share in our worship services today; think how much better it would be if we had the opportunity to meet the 80 or so students face to face at coffee hour or at school, and even perhaps to have some kind of ongoing relationship with them, through tutoring, or mentoring, or volunteering in some other capacity in their schools; think about how much more of a difference that might make upon their success in school and even on into their lives; and also think how much more of a difference that might make in our lives

our Epistle reading today invites us to think more deeply about our relationships with other individuals, groups, and organizations around our community; what that passage shows us is that relationship is something deeper than arm's-length outreach; it is more than our contributing money or volunteer time to help individuals or organizations; the Ephesians passage is both about connecting deeply with God, and connecting deeply with other people—and especially connecting deeply with people who are different from us; what it shows is that our success in relating to God is closely tied to how well we relate to other people, and vice versa, how well we relate to other people is closely tied to how well we relate to God

Paul is telling us that Christ is God's instrument for bringing people together; for reconciling those who have been outsiders with those who have been insiders; to Paul the outsiders were the Gentiles and the insiders were the Jews, but he is outlining a process and a promise that can apply to any differentiated groups of people who may not otherwise have much contact with each other

Paul says, "he [Christ] is our peace; ...he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall"; in his view there are no "strangers" and no "aliens", but "one new humanity"; and in words echoing Isaiah Ch. 57, Paul

says that Jesus “came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near”

this reading invites us to ask ourselves several different questions about our time and our place here in Spotsylvania County; what kinds of obstructions and dividing walls are there between us and other people or groups? who around us might we consider to be the “far off” or the “near,” the insiders or the outsiders, the “strangers” or the “aliens?” what might Christ be inviting us to do to bring us and others closer together? how might we work to remove any barriers? how can the distances between us and other people be lessened—literally and figuratively?

I’ve already suggested a couple of things that might extend the Backpack Program beyond a one-time, one-sided giving to a two-sided and ongoing relationship, with tutoring, mentoring, or volunteering; how might some of the other outreach we already do, through the Food Pantry and through the Thrift Shop, also be extended to involve more two-sided and ongoing relationships? how might we deepen our relationships with God as we deepen our relationships with other people?

remember that God is always calling us to be involved in the work of bringing peace to everyone around us; this is very close to the statement of focus your Vestry articulated at its retreat back in May; look on the cover of your bulletin and let’s say that statement out loud together: “Engaging people inside and outside of our parish to provide peace and hope for our community;” let’s all think and pray more about exploring, celebrating, and growing our relationships with other individuals, groups, and organizations in our area; let’s all think and pray more about how we can share, firsthand and ongoing, the peace that is in Christ

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Backpack Blessing Prayer

God of Wisdom, we give you thanks for all schools, classrooms, teachers, and students at the start of this new school year. We thank you for these new backpacks, the new supplies they contain, and for all who made donations to acquire them. May the pencils, pens, crayons, glue, markers, highlighters,

erasers, composition books, notebook paper, binders, index cards, rulers, sharpeners, and other supplies help the students learn. We give you thanks for your children and young people who will use these backpacks, and we ask you to bless them with curiosity, understanding, and respect. May these backpacks remind them that they have a church community praying for them. Watch over and protect them every day. All this we ask in the name of Jesus, who as a young person in the temple showed his longing to learn about you, and as an adult taught by story and example your great love for all your children. Amen.