

Proper 24B – October 18, 2009. The Exchange of Peace.
St. Peter's Church

Let's begin with a story by one of my favorite authors, the late Roman Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen. When Nouwen was a professor at Yale Divinity School, a former student came back to visit him. They were good friends and they had a joyful reunion. They walked around the campus telling each other of the great and small things that had happened in their lives since last they were together. They sat together in silence for a time on the lawn in the warm sun and it was the kind of silence that draws people together rather than separates them. Finally the former student looked up and said, "Henri, when I am with you it is as though I am with Christ." Father Nouwen replied simply, "It is the Christ in you that recognizes and salutes the Christ in me. From now on all the miles between us will be sacred miles."

Nouwen was the author of some fifty books, taught in theological schools in Notre Dame, Harvard and Yale and was in demand as a speaker and retreat leader all over the world. And he spent the last seven years of his life as pastor of the Daybreak Community helping men with profoundly mental handicaps to accomplish the tasks of daily living. And there, he said, more than anywhere else in his life, he learned what it really means to recognize the Divine in every human being.

That's not a new idea, of course. It's the foundational principle of the Society of Friends, the Quakers, who speak of "That of God in every person." Parker Palmer says that it's "the being in human being. It's the mystery of beings created in the Image of God."

We Christians don't have a monopoly on the idea that there is the Divine Spirit in every human being. It is implicit in the Muslim word "Salaam" and the Jewish word "Shalom". The Jewish mystics, the Hasidim, call it the "Divine Spark". And, of course, we share the creation story in the book of Genesis in which God is said to have created human beings in God's own image. The Hindus have the word Namasté which conveys the same thought, and the Buddhist profound bow as a way of greeting other people is a choreographed recognition of the divine in the other person. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "If you can't find God in the very next person you meet, it's a waste of time to look further." In fact all of the world's great religions, in one way or another, affirm the sacredness of every human being.

In our Eucharistic liturgy we Christians express this deep mystery in the Exchange of the Peace. Our words, our embrace or handshake or kiss are intended to say, "The Christ in me recognizes and salutes the Christ in you."

And the peace is meant to express not just our recognition of the divine in the other, but also our unity, our oneness in Jesus who promised that "When two or three are gathered together in my name I am in their midst." Underline that word together. It's not just "when you happen to be in the same place at the same time" it's "When you're together" when there's a commonality, a oneness, a shalom among you, then I am there with you. The African concept of UBUNTU, made known to the western world by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, has helped me to appreciate the importance of this emphasis on the unity of the community. UBUNTU affirms that our humanity is inextricably mutual and interdependent. I am because WE are. I am a person through other persons. We are all in this together. What befalls one of us befalls us all. "We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord" As the song goes.

So the exchange of the Peace is meant to express both the reality of Christ in each other and the reality of our oneness in Christ.

But wait, there's more. And this is where this morning's Gospel comes in. You remember James and John sidled up to Jesus and tried to pull a power play – to get Jesus to commit to them the places of

highest honor in the Kingdom of God. Here's Jesus' response in the Peterson translation of today's Gospel lesson:

When the other ten heard of this conversation, they lost their tempers with James and John. Jesus got them together to settle things down. "You've observed how godless rulers throw their weight around," he said, "and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served...."

So the exchange of the Peace in our liturgy is meant to express not only that we recognize and honor the Christ in one another, not only that we are one in Christ but also that we are servants of one another. You see how counter-cultural that is? In this competitive, devil-take-the-hindmost, culture where power, possessions and position reign supreme, the Peace says every one of us is sacred, we're inextricably bound to one another in community and we're called to be servants to one another.

As you may know, your worship committee has been discussing the way we express the exchange of Peace here at St. Peter's and next week we will have a discussion about it in the Adult Forum so we'll all have a chance to discuss it. In fact the peace has been a topic of discussion, some would say an issue, for the decade I've been a member of this parish and probably a lot longer. It's not that anybody wants to diminish the peace; just the opposite. Many of us, and I count myself among those, want to restore something of the sacred meaning to this act which sometimes might be lost in the social chatter and "Hi, how ya doin'" ambience, or when we use the time to connect with people about committee business or comment on the sermon or whatever.

And I admit that I have done all of those things from time to time. It's easy to let our customary way of relating to people take over and this sacred moment in our liturgy can become a mini coffee hour without the coffee.

Not that I have anything against being warm and friendly. I think the restoration of the exchange of the peace in our liturgy has helped to loosen up Episcopalians who used to be called "God's Frozen People." It has helped to remind us of the importance of being a community and not just a gathering of individuals with a "me and my God" mentality. I would not like to see us go back to the stiff formality that often characterized Episcopal Churches and still does in some places.

Nor would I like to lose the opportunity to touch one another with a handshake or an embrace. In this high tech culture I think we need opportunities to touch each other. At Good Shepherd Church where I served as Rector for twenty years they used to call me "The hugging Priest".

But I know I'm not alone in the desire to strip away some of the social chatter and to recapture something of the sacred nature of this part of our liturgy in which we honor the Christ in one another, affirm our oneness as members of the Body of Christ and acknowledge our mutual servanthood as followers of him who came not to be served but to serve.