



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“HOSTILITY AND HOPE”¹

Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-44

*This sermon was preached by Rev. James T. Rogers on Sunday, July 19, 2015
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Last week our high school youth mission team returned from Belize, Central America. The mission trip was an amazing experience. We worked hard building a security fence for The King’s Children’s Home in the capital city of Belmopan. If you ever need any concrete work done I will be happy to recommend a few of our youth. We also led a Christian education program for the children living at the home and spent time building relationships with them. Some of the highlights included one of our high school youth sharing his testimony at our evening meeting, one of our chaperones fixing the lawnmower so the grass could be cut and the children could play soccer, and a cave tubing trip down a nearby river. Above all, we were struck by the love and hospitality offered to our group at The King’s Children’s Home. Children ran to greet us with smiles when we arrived. People often told me, “We are so glad you are here.” The Belizean chef even prepared our group a dinner of fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, and mashed potatoes. When I shared with one of the children that I was worried about my son who had two ear infections, he replied, “God will take good care of your son.” Despite our many differences of nationality, culture, skin color, and age, we did not feel like strangers. Several days into the trip, two of our youth were already asking about how they could return next year. Love and hospitality had been offered. Friendships had been formed. It was difficult for some members of our mission team to say goodbye. On the way home, however, we experienced a different type of hospitality. As we were rushing to make the plane to Charleston, our airline left one third of our mission team behind, generously offering us a bonus night in Miami.

By spending time at The King’s Children’s Home our mission team was able to quickly and easily establish relationships with members of the Christian community in a different country. However, the tragic shooting at Emanuel AME made me realize our lack of relationships with some of the other Christian churches in our own town, especially those predominately African American congregations. In many ways other Christians within our own community are strangers to us and we are strangers to them.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul reminds the Gentile Christians that at one time they were without Christ, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, without hope, and without God. I grieve the fact that at times we the Christian church have lived as if we were still strangers to God and therefore to one another. There are times that we live as if Christ has not come and reconciled us to God and one another.

During our middle school youth mission trip to Atlanta, we visited a church with a beautiful campus, which included a historic sanctuary and a large Christian education building. As we were leaving and looking for a spot to eat our lunch, we noticed that the church’s park and playground area was surrounded by a high fence and the gate was secured with a chain and lock. The fence, chain, and lock sent a powerful message to us and the neighborhood. It made me wonder: what messages is our congregation sending to our community through our church facilities and how might we make our church a more welcoming place?

Our church is blessed to be a part of Charleston-Atlantic Presbytery which includes almost fifty congregations from the lowcountry up to Orangeburg. This presbytery is geographically and racially diverse and hosts retreats for our middle school and high school youth each fall and spring. Not only do these retreats enable our youth to grow spiritually, but they also give them a chance to develop relationships with a variety of Presbyterians. Once when I was promoting a presbytery wide youth retreat, I received a call from a parent

¹ I am greatly indebted to Jill Duffield, Editor of The Presbyterian Outlook. Her reflections in the July 13, 2015 edition of *The Presbyterian Outlook Weekly Lectionary Reflections Email* guided the writing of this sermon.

who asked if we could just do youth events with other downtown churches. My heart sank. There are times that we live as if Christ has not come and reconciled us to God and one another.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians compels us to ask some tough but really important questions. In what ways are we as a church hostile or welcoming...to others within our community...to other members of our Presbytery...to someone in financial distress seeking assistance from the church? In what ways are we as a church hostile or welcoming...to parents whose children become restless during worship...to someone who does not look like the majority of our congregation...to someone whose theology is more conservative or more liberal than our own? And maybe the toughest question of all: in what ways are we as a church hostile or welcoming...to the carriage tour operators who hold up traffic and make us late to church?

At times we have lived as strangers to God which leads us to treat others as strangers as well. But Paul has good news for us. At one time we were without Christ, but now he has broken down the dividing wall. At one time we were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, but now we are members of the household of God. At one time we were strangers to the covenants of promise, but now we are citizens with the saints. At one time we were without hope, but now Christ is our peace. At one time we were without God in the world, but now we have been reconciled into one body through the cross. At one time we were far off, but now we have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Did you hear the good news? Christ has broken down the dividing wall. His blood has broken down the hostility between us. No longer are we strangers and aliens. Jesus Christ has put to death hostility. Often the world acts as if this is not the case, but we have seen it with our own eyes. Jesus Christ has put to death hostility. Family members of the nine murdered at Emanuel AME have spoken words of forgiveness. A group of American Muslims has raised almost \$100,000 to help African American Christian churches impacted by a number of arsons across the south last month. People from different faith traditions have joined together to address multiple social justice issues in our community through the Charleston Area Justice Ministry. Jesus Christ has put to death hostility.

Each year our eighth grade confirmation class nominates adults to serve as their guides, and the class always selects a diverse group of leaders, who are approved by our Christian Education committee. This past year two of our confirmation guides chose to speak at our church's Family Conversations hosted by our session following the actions of the 2014 Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly. Both confirmation guides spoke very passionately about a divisive topic within our church, but from two different points of view. Their strikingly differently perspectives could have led to hostility between them that would have negatively impacted the class. But instead they were loving and respectful to one another. It could not have been clearer what was at work: Jesus Christ has put to death hostility.

So we have hope because of what Christ has done on the cross. We are not the source of this hope. God's reconciling power is the source of our hope. Because of God's work in Jesus we are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.

But even though we are part of the same household, we the Christian community sometimes do not know one another. This is what many of us realized as we struggled to reach out to and care for our brothers and sisters in Christ of Emanuel AME. Differences of denomination and race had separated us within the household of faith. In the wake of the tragedy our lack of relationship with one another became painfully evident. On the Sunday morning following the shooting, our church gathered together to sing, to pray, to read Scripture, and to discuss how we could respond. Many of the suggestions involved creating better relationships within the community of faith: invite other churches to do things together, bring churches together on Wednesday nights, truly build the community, encourage members of First (Scots) to visit predominately black churches and invite their members to come to First (Scots), hold joint services, serve a meal at Emanuel AME, hold a joint vacation Bible school with an African American Presbyterian Church, worship with Emanuel AME, swap Sunday School classes, sponsor a large picnic for local churches in honor of God and the victims, invite the pastors of local AME churches to speak at First (Scots), share our pastors,

choirs, and small groups, have a joint youth event, and partner a predominately white church with a predominately black church and have half of each congregation attend the other church's Bible study and worship service on a special Sunday. Can you imagine what would happen if we did some of this stuff? Relationships would be established. The household of faith would be transformed. And I am certain that we would be better able to care for our brothers and sisters in Christ, especially during times of great tragedy.

Our Gospel lesson is a familiar passage. Jesus is teaching the crowds, who have come seeking his presence, however it has gotten late and the people are hungry. While the disciples want Jesus to send the crowd away to get food, Jesus tells them to go and see what is already among them. Jesus blesses the offering of five loaves and two fish, the people sit down and share a meal, five thousand men eat and are filled, and there are leftovers! Jesus took what the disciples had on hand and through his blessing, a miracle happened.

Much like those first disciples, we have been given resources by God that can be blessed by Jesus to enable relationships within the household of faith to be nurtured and grown. We bring our small offering and God does amazing things. It is happening already.

It is happening through the Hands of Christ ministry, where a racially diverse group of Presbyterians come together to give out school clothing and supplies to needy children in our community. The Charleston Hands of Christ ministry was started in 2002 when a predominately black church and predominately white church partnered together to address the needs of local school children. Not only have children received the supplies that they need and the love of Christ, but interracial friendships within the household of faith have been formed.

It is happening through the Charleston Area Justice Ministry, where Christians of various denominations and races, have partnered together with other religious groups to address social justice issues.

It happened last month when the Presbyterian Men of Zion Olivet Presbyterian Church, a predominately black church in our presbytery, invited the First (Scots) Men's Group to join them for their monthly meeting and breakfast and men from our church attended.

And it happened a few weeks ago when a member of our high school youth group brought his friend, Tevin, by my office to visit. Tevin just happened to be the president of the youth group of St. James Presbyterian Church, which is a predominately black congregation on James Island. Tevin shared that his church often hosts joint youth events for churches in the community and he promised to send our youth an invitation as well.

Where else is this happening? I am sure that many of you have your own stories of the ways that God is enabling relationships within the Christian community to be nurtured and grown. Relationships that cross our human divisions of denomination, race, and age. Relationships that are a visible testimony that Jesus Christ has put to death hostility. When you see it happening, jump in and be a part of it. Or take the list of ideas from our brainstorming session last month, gather the resources that God has given you and start something new. But whatever you choose to do, do not forget to ask God's blessing upon it. And watch how God grows the Christian community into a dwelling place for God.

The hospitality and love that our mission team was offered by the Christian community in Belize could not have been any more generous. Through the power of Jesus Christ our human divisions of nationality, culture, skin color, and age were crossed. We were not strangers, but members of the household of God. May our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ in our own community also be a testimony to this truth.