

**Second Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A
(Jan. 16, 2011)**

The Spider Web

I once read something by a well-known Presbyterian preacher/writer named Fredrick Buechner. He used an image that I found very striking and that I have used frequently. He compared humanity to an enormous spider web: “If you touch it anywhere you set the whole thing trembling. . . . As we move around this world and as we act with kindness, perhaps, or with indifference, or with hostility toward the people we meet, we, too, are setting the great spider web a-tremble. The life that I touch for good or ill will touch another life and that in turn another, until who knows where the trembling will stop or in what far place and time my touch will be felt. Our lives are linked. ‘No man is an island.’” (*The Hungering Dark*, pp. 45-46.)

The famous poem by John Donne that he quotes at the end there, “No man is an island” talks about the bell that tolls when a funeral procession is going to the cemetery. “Ask not for whom the bell tolls,” he says, “It tolls for thee.” It’s simply another expression of what Buechner was saying with his spider web image. We are all connected, linked to one another, interdependent, interrelated in countless ways that we perhaps never think about. Things that happen thousands of miles away can affect us deeply. If the price of oil goes up in the Middle East, you feel it at the gas pump. The stock market in Japan or Malaysia is reflected in New York and London and Paris. The current financial crisis began in the United States but soon spread throughout the whole world

Add to that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan which have affected not just people in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the United States, but people around the world. And beyond that, think of natural disasters like the earthquake in Haiti or floods in Australia and our own country, and I think you begin to get what I am driving at.

I cannot help but think that the tragedy that occurred in Tucson is another instance of the web image. It galvanized the people of Arizona, then the people of the entire United States and people around the world. There were immediate outpourings of prayer and sympathy for the

wounded and for the families of those who died. But along with them there was also an unfortunate attempt to put the blame on individuals who have contributed to a vitriolic atmosphere in this country. I don't believe any particular individual, apart from the perpetrator, was responsible for what happened, but at the same time I do not believe we can separate the lack of civility in public discourse in this country from what happened so tragically. Remember the web. "The life that I or anyone else touches for good or for ill will touch another life and that in turn another, until who knows where the trembling will stop or in what far place and time my touch will be felt. Our lives are linked." Let's remember that as we pray for healing not just in Arizona but in our whole country as well.

The fact of our interconnectedness has spiritual repercussions as well. The fact is, of course, we all share the same human nature, but in a marvelous way that nature has been forever changed since the Son of God took on the same flesh and blood and bone of ours, since God almighty in the person of Jesus Christ has in point of fact shared our joys and sorrows, our sweat, our pain and our pleasure and ultimately our death, that weakest and most vulnerable moment of our lives.

Now it seems to me that we can read the texts of our Liturgy today in the light of this reality and see richer, deeper meaning there.

Isaiah speaks of the servant of God who will not only raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel, but he will be a light to the nations – all the nations – that God's salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. Christianity believes that Jesus is that servant. When John the Baptist points him out he calls him the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world – not just the sins of a particular individual, or the sins of a single nation, but the sins of the world.

Now what does that mean? The world whose sins Jesus has come to take away is a place divided. Sin has created enmity, division, hatred, violence. And we are only too conscious of that today. To save that world Jesus must effect reconciliation. His task is to put back together what had been split asunder by sin – an enormous task which in fact he only began.

He sent his apostles and disciples to continue this mission and through them he sends all of us as well. Paul reminds his dear friends at Corinth that as members of Christ's church it is their responsibility to foster

community, to realize that they are the Body of Christ and there must be no division among them. He even goes so far as to tell them that as long as there are factions they cannot celebrate the Eucharist because divisions in the community contradict what is happening at the Eucharist.

All of this, I think, is wonderfully relevant for us today. On Tuesday we begin a week of prayer for Christian unity. Surely one of the great scandals of our world is the division that exists in Christianity. Our prayer during these days is for reconciliation, a humble acknowledgment, that, as Vatican II told us, the Church of Jesus Christ exists wherever men and women recognize him as the Lord and Savior. We pray for unity, not uniformity. We pray for understanding and respect for all people who profess belief in Jesus Christ. That's where unity must begin. Immediately after Vatican II there was great excitement over the doors that the Council had opened for relationships with non-Catholic groups, and there was much ecumenical activity. This seems to have cooled off a bit, but here and there we still see efforts at bringing people of different churches together, to pray, to work for the poor to be advocates of social reform with our government. The churches of Georgetown will gather for an ecumenical prayer service to celebrate the week of prayer for Christian unity. This will be on Wednesday evening, this Wednesday, at Grace Episcopal Church on Wisconsin Avenue at 6:30 p.m.

Along with that, today and tomorrow churches of all denominations will remember Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and pray that we may all continue together what he struggled for: justice for all, peace and unity and an end to violence.

And while we think in terms of Christian unity, let's not forget our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters. How often do we remember that there are really three holy days in each week, not just one: Friday when the Muslims worship, Saturday when the Jews worship, and Sunday when the Christians worship. We are all part of one great human family. We are all part of that immense web. "The life I touch for good or ill will touch another life and that in turn another, until who knows where the trembling stops or in what far place and time my touch will be felt. Our lives are linked. No man, (no woman, no child) is an island. . . . Ask not for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee."