

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 11, 2020; Proper 23A  
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement  
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud  
*Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14*

We don't know what it was that Euodia and Syntyche did. In our second lesson, Paul seems to be chastising them in a very gentle way. He is urging them to be of the same mind. And I suppose it is not too hard to imagine that two women of the church (even a brand new church just a few decades after the resurrection of Jesus)—it's not hard to imagine that two members of the church might have a disagreement about—well really, about anything, right? About the color of the carpet, or whether to spend money on a new kitchen, or even in the midst of a pandemic, about whether YouTube or Zoom is the best way to reach the people!

Whatever it was that led Paul to include Euodia and Syntyche in his letter to the new church in Philippi, he thought it was important enough that everyone remember that we ought to be of one mind. And, notice, Paul is not suggesting that everyone be of *his* mind. No. They are, all of them, to be of the same mind in the Lord.

It doesn't make any sense. We are, each one of us, individuals, created by God to be ourselves. And yet, Paul wants us to be of the same mind, so that we might receive the peace of God. And then he uses those words that are so familiar that we have almost forgotten what they mean: *And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*

God's peace surpasses our understanding. Isn't that the truth? So how are we to get there? How could Euodia and Syntyche learn to live and work together, to be of the same mind? How can we be of the same mind as Jesus, so that we might have some of that peace that passes all understanding?

Because we need the peace. Hurricanes and wildfires, political discourse that makes the stomach churn, pandemic that frightens and isolates—we humans, created by God to be our brilliant individual selves—we humans cannot find peace on our own. And we need the peace of God—not so that we can fall asleep. We need the peace of God so that we can change the world!

And Paul points us to Jesus. He wanted Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind *in the Lord*. That is, he wanted them to think about what Jesus would say or think or do about whatever it was that led them to be in disagreement. Paul points us to what Jesus has to say.

Which makes this week's Gospel lesson pretty convenient, for me, anyway. Because this weekend, as has been true so many years in the past on beautiful weekends in October, I went to a wedding. Actually, I officiated at a wedding yesterday afternoon. And as usual, I stressed about what to wear. And that may seem odd, because as you know, I do have all the robes I need for any liturgical occasion. But it is the middle of a pandemic. We don't just have to worry about what we wear, we have to worry about what our mask looks like! And because this wedding was safely planned to be a small outdoor gathering, we also had to be dressed for the weather!

Well, it turned out that, as usual, stressing about what to wear was not necessary. The weather was beautiful, and at least the folks who stood closest to me wore masks. So Euodia and Syntyche, if they were there, were of the same mind: our wedding robes fit the occasion. But that, unfortunately, is not what happened in the parable that Jesus tells us this morning.

It helps to know the wedding customs of Jesus' day. When the King invited his guests, their expectation was that they would arrive, and he would offer them a robe to put on when they came in. That was the convention—the host provided the clothing that he wanted everyone to wear.

I feel sorry for this king, because it seems that people don't want to be bothered by his invitation. And we don't know why. Perhaps he wasn't a good king. Perhaps his people were beaten down by his harsh political rhetoric. Or maybe they were cleaning up from hurricanes or maybe illness was keeping them indoors. But for whatever reason, the people the king wanted to invite didn't want to come. So he invited others—people he didn't even know—to come to a big formal party.

And those folks were happy to follow the social convention of the day, if it meant that they could eat the king's food and drink the king's wine. When you go to the palace for a wedding, you put on the robe you are given. That is, you allow yourself to be changed by participating in the celebration. You put on the wedding garment as a sign of your submission to the change.

Weddings change the bride and groom, to be sure. They are sacramental—an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual experience of the grace of God. In a wedding, —that outward taking of hands and exchanging of rings are symbols of the deep and abiding presence of God in the joined lives of the couple.

The presence of God changes the couple. Relationship with God changes us. Knowing God, we want the best for the others whom God loves. If you have been to this church before—even if you have only worshipped with us online—you know what we say about ourselves—we are drawn in by grace and we reach out in love. If we weren't afraid of impressing people with our churchy vocabulary, we could say that we are sacramental people. We feel and understand the grace of God in our inward hearts and show the love of God in real and visible ways in our relationships with others.

Yesterday's celebration was special, as weddings always are. But in this case, it was an especially sacramental celebration, because Jim and Patty have been legally married for 37 years! But 37 years ago, the church to which the couple belonged declined to celebrate the sacrament of their marriage. And for 37 years, this couple has shown in their marriage exactly what God's love looks like—it is faithful, steadfast, and reliable. God has been present, and yet this couple still longed to hear the church proclaim that God is present in their relationship.

And I think of Moses, in today's first lesson. Moses could see and hear God, where the people saw fire, and heard thunder. The people wandered in the wilderness and wondered if God had abandoned them, so they melted down their jewelry and made a calf made of the gold, and pretended that the calf was God. And that didn't change them at all.

Their faithlessness made God angry. And so God prepared to destroy them. But then God heard the plea of Moses to save the people. And God changed his mind. Talk about a sacramental moment! The love and devotion of Moses toward God was such an important relationship that evidently, God did not want to lose it.

Being in the presence of God changes people. And if the experience of the people is to be believed, God likes that. God likes to show up for us. And God likes us to know that God is showing up for us.

Yesterday, I reminded the people gathered to bless this long-married couple that wherever the people of God are gathered, we are the church. And in the name of them, in the name of the church, I prayed the traditional prayers for the couple. Those prayers conclude with this collect: *Grant that the bonds of our common humanity, by which all your children are united one to another, and the living to the dead, may be so transformed by your grace, that your will may be done on earth as it is in heaven; where, O Father, with your Son and the Holy Spirit, you live and reign in perfect unity, now and for ever. Amen.*

That prayer assumes that all of us who took part in the service were willing to be changed—we were willing to put on the wedding robe. That was a prayer for the church gathered, begging that the presence of God will change our lives and gives us that peace that passes understanding.

I am convinced that Jesus doesn't care what we wear to church. The robes that we wear in worship are symbols of our lives in Jesus—and you know how I like a beautifully tailored religious vestment! But it is not about the robe itself. It is about the willingness to put it on. I don't think Jesus cares about whether we change our clothes for church, but I do think that Jesus wants us to change our lives. Jesus wants us to be of one mind in him.

Don't come to a wedding if you are not willing to do what guests at the wedding do. And don't try to know Jesus if you are not willing to have your life changed. We are the church, and we follow Jesus, to change the world from the nightmare it is to the dream that God has for us.

Along with Euodia and Syntyche, with Jim and Patty and wedding couples all over, with all the people who are worshipping this Sunday, online or in person, we worship Jesus, and we are changed. And being one mind in the Lord, we can change the world and know the peace that passes all understanding.