

In All The Earth

By Keith E Gatling

Sermon for May 30, 1999

Lessons for Holy Trinity in Year A

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Psalm 8

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

And the psalmist writes:

O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is
your name in all the earth!

Excellent yes. Both then and now. However, well known is another question. How well known was the name of the Lord at the time these words were first put down? Not very. It was known only to the members of a small nation of people in the middle east, and whoever might have come in contact with them. And so I think I'm pretty safe in saying that it was probably not known throughout all the earth.

In a way this made things easy. Because with a small group of people who share the same customs, traditions, and understanding of how things work, there are probably fewer disagreements about how to do things.

Well maybe not. I've seen some of your families. Heck, I've seen *my* family, and I know that despite shared histories and experiences, we don't always agree on how to do things. But it's still probably a lot easier than with a group of randomly selected total strangers.

Oh Lord, our Lord, how excellent is
your name in all the earth!

As I said, excellent, but not well known outside of one little corner of the world. This was about to change. For in Matthew, Jesus says:

Go and make disciples of all the
nations... teaching them to observe all
things that I have commanded you.

God's name, excellent already, was about to be made known throughout more of the earth. And - things were about to get really messy. God's name, and Jesus's name, and

the love God showed for us through Jesus were about to be made known throughout most of the *known* world; through Asia, and Africa, and Europe, and things were about to get really messy.

Things got messier the farther the message got from where it started. They got messier with each new nation and ethnic group that heard it. We don't have a record of how messy things got in the far off locales of Asia and Africa, but we do have a few clues from the letters of Paul of how messy things had gotten even as close to the source as Galatia and Corinth. Places where Paul, himself, had been.

He writes to the church in Corinth:

Be of good comfort. Be of one mind.
Live in peace.

What's going on here? As the gospel spread from a small group of Jews who had seen Jesus in Israel to the wider, non-Jewish world, clashes of values and interpretations took place. There were heated discussions about whether the new gentile Christians had to also follow the rules of Judaism. There were debates about whether certain practices were commanded by Jesus or merely useful traditions that could be changed when situations changed. There were debates about personal piety.

And there were debates about interpretation. The Greco-Roman world had a way of thinking that was much different than that of the Jewish world, and a lot of our Christian theology to this day comes from that influence. Believe it or not, there were debates about *punctuation* that have split the church.

There have been debates about all manner of little things that we would consider stupid. And so Paul writes:

Be of good comfort. Be of one mind.
Live in peace.

But let's not think that those days are happily gone. Grape juice or wine? Infant or adult baptism? Bach or Sandy Patti? Old Lord's Prayer or new? Bishops in the Apostolic succession or not? *LBW, With One Voice, or Now the Feast and Celebration?* And the list goes on.

We know that even now the church is split over what some of us might consider silly, petty issues that are more about personal practice, tradition, and interpretation than they are about any commandments that Jesus might have given us. We know that we are divided over issues that we really won't be able to prove one way or another until we see God face to face, and at that point, one would hope that we wouldn't even care about it anymore.

We know that there are churches where we can't receive communion because we're not in total doctrinal agreement with them, and we know that there are churches who won't even worship with us for the same reason (as if the eleven disciples totally agreed on everything). And if we're honest, we have to admit that sometimes we're part of the problem, insisting that our way is the right way to do things, that our way is the *only* way to do things.

Oh yes, God's name is spread throughout more of the earth because of our activities as Christians. But, unfortunately, with it has been spread our particular capacity for carping and arguing about minute, and often inconsequential, details.

Now, to be fair, there are internal squabbles within all religions, but I'm willing to bet that most of us have heard people say that their problem with Christianity is that it seems to have too many groups that seem to be fighting with each other all the time.

God's name may be spread throughout more of the earth. And it may, by definition, be excellent. But the amount of fighting and arguing and not getting along we do among

ourselves, makes it *seem* less excellent to the rest of the world.

And again Paul says:

Be of good comfort. Be of one mind.
Live in peace.

What does this mean? Especially this "be of one mind" thing? Doesn't that mean that we have to agree on everything as Christians? Or does it maybe mean something different? Something better? Something more freeing?

Perhaps it means that we're to be *united* and not *uniform*. Perhaps it means that we are free to disagree on the small stuff and can chalk up those disagreements to cultural or personal differences, as long as we are of one mind of the important stuff. Perhaps our common understanding of God's love and grace for us through Jesus will help us to understand that not everyone has to think or do things the same way.

And perhaps once we get past this need for uniformity, and get to being united, we can make God's name, already known throughout all the earth, appear more excellent.

Paul closes his letter to the Corinthians by saying, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the unity of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

There it is again. The *unity*, not the uniformity. Let's all work together, not just here at King of Kings, and not just among other Lutherans, but with *all* Christians in the unity that doesn't demand uniformity. In the unity of the Holy Spirit which is able to work in diverse ways to serve the diverse needs of diverse people.

And so I end as Paul did:

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God, and the unity of the
Holy Spirit be with you all."

Amen.