

## Crossing Barriers

The Sixth Sunday of Easter. Acts 16:9-15. Psalm 67. Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5. John 14:23-29. May 1, 2016. The Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Episcopal Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

I used to serve a parish in Nebraska City, Nebraska, an early settlement on the west bank of the Missouri River during the westward expansion of the United States. At the back of St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Nebraska City is a tall stained glass window of unusual design, quite well known throughout the region. A very traditional-looking figure of St. Paul faces two strikingly unusual subjects for church windows: a Native American in full ceremonial dress—war bonnet, weapons, the works—standing shoulder to shoulder with a bearded fellow of European descent in broad brimmed hat, shirt, trousers, and tall boots—almost certainly meant to be a teamster, that is, a wagon driver. These three figures are nearly life size. Between St. Paul and the other two figures flows a little stream, hardly more than the sort of ditch you'd find in a farmyard. Under the picture are the words, "Come over and help us."

The words interpret the design. The text is from the sixteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. We heard it this morning: "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Except the picture represents the Episcopal Church responding to the call of Episcopal settlers in Nebraska Territory—long before it was a state—to establish an official congregation there. Everybody who has seen the

wide valley of the Missouri River, which the Missouri often filled nearly bank to bank in the days before flood control, grins and chuckles over the teensy ditch that represents the Missouri in the window.

I faced that window whenever I stood at the altar to preside at the Holy Eucharist or when I stood in the pulpit to preach. It occurred to me often to wonder at the idealized picture of Christian missionary outreach the window portrayed. Yes, the Episcopal Church was invited to move westward into Nebraska and it had to cross “the wide Missouri” to answer that call. But the natives of the land were not issuing the call, nor were the ordinary folks—the teamsters, the farmers, and most of the other settlers who in those days set out by wagon for points west from Nebraska City (Omaha did not become important till the railroad came).

The Episcopal Church mostly showed up when there were enough members of the merchant and professional classes to form a parish, because those were the groups (as today) from which the Episcopal Church drew most of its membership. Oh, there were exceptions; for example, the Episcopal church conducted quite a strong mission to the Sioux, now called Dakota (or Lakota or Nakota, depending on the dialect). But that was to the north of Nebraska.

It’s easy to form either too grandiose or too cynical a notion of what Christian mission is. I suggest, like a good Anglican, a middle way: the mission of the Christian church is to cross barriers to help people in the peace of

Christ. Whether it's the Hellespont between Asia Minor and Macedonia, the Missouri River between Iowa or Missouri and Nebraska, or some street that no one who wants to be safe or respectable dares to cross because it's dangerous over there, there's always some barrier that says "Holy Spirit, stay out; we have our own spirits over here."

But the Holy Spirit blows where it will, and we are the fleet whose sails are trimmed to its pressure. We are meant to go in peace and wage peace wherever we go, in the sense of today's reading from the Gospel according to John. Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (John 14:27)

Peace here encompasses notions of wholeness, balance, and concord: harmony between the ways of God and the ways of God's creation, based on a faithful human response to God's self-giving love as revealed in Jesus Christ. That is what the church should be exporting, so to speak. That the church has not always done a first-class job of this is not the Holy Spirit's fault. Paul, who did an unusually good job of spreading the peace of Christ, actually does merit his portrayal as the missionary *par excellence* in that stained glass window.

But we don't have to be perfect; we just have to participate. We don't have to be grandiose; we just have to be available. Available to wage peace, or as Holy Scripture puts it, to "seek peace and pursue it." (Psalm 34:14; 1 Peter 3:11) Whether it's crossing a river or crossing the aisle,

going to a different continent or going to your neighbor across the street—or even if it’s just reaching out to your sibling or your spouse or your friend who is fuming or weeping or lost in a bad idea at the other end of the living room couch—every Christian has, one way or another, the reconciling, healing, encouraging, upbuilding and rejoicing mission of the church.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is, at the heart of it, the gift of mission. We are all called, all sent, all empowered. Will we go? Will we answer God’s call, in whatever form God chooses to issue that call? What little ditch of doubt, fear or confusion is holding you up? Holding me up? Holding up the work of the Holy Spirit? Pray, brothers and sisters, for the wisdom to know the direction of the wind and the courage to set sail accordingly.

❖ Lightly modified from the sermon preached on the same readings at the churches of the Shared Ministry on May 5, 2013.