

Jesus is Just Alright with Me – July 12, 2015

By Wayne J. Schneider – Laudemus Te. Benedictus te. Adoramus te.

Jesus is Just Alright with Me Ephesians 1:3-14

In the small town of Weiser, Idaho there is an annual meeting called 'The Grand Old-time Fiddler's Contest.' In the 4th week in June many people arrive suddenly from all over: Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and even Japan. They appear to play, sing and enjoy themselves.

Robert Fulghum, the popular writer, visits this contest and tells us that at the beginning the fiddlers were straight country people. The men did not have long hair, the women were homemakers, and everyone was a churchgoer. As the years went on things changed. Hippies and bikers with tattoos began attending, and they were marvelous fiddlers.

One old-timer was asked his opinion regarding these changes. He replied, "*It doesn't matter to me who they are or what they wear. If they can fiddle, you are all right with me. It's the music that counts.*" That reminds me of the Doobie Brothers song, "*Jesus is Just Alright with Me.*" Fulghum wrote that he played next to a Weiser cop. The cop looked at Fulghum and said, "*You know, sometimes the world seems like a mighty fine place.*"

St. Paul wrote this letter to the churches in Ephesus while he was imprisoned. The reason St. Paul wrote was he had a vision he wanted to cast: in the center of a fractured world the body of Christ, the church, can be a sanctuary, a safe place, a place for wholeness for everyone.

The beginning of St. Paul's letter is a summary of the rest of his letter. All of his points may be found rooted in our text's eleven verses. Someone has entitled these words "Truth as melody."

Just as that fiddler in Weiser, Idaho, what mattered was the music they made together. It simply does not matter who we are or how we dress. We are incorporated into the larger vision of the music.

This vision of St. Paul rang (no pun intended) the bell of the churches, that it became part of the early church's liturgy. If you looked, you would find this vision in their sermons, songs and prayers.

Today's lesson comes in three sections and forms the vision of any genuine Christian Community. The first section is found in verses three through six, a hymn to God. Here we find the "P" word. St. Paul knew that the power these small, harassed churches owned did not come from themselves. He also knew that these churches would never be overpowered when they focused on God in their singing. Only when they lost sight of their vision, relying on their personal power, then they would fail.

So, our worshiping of God is primary. The faith of Israel is seen in their Psalter or prayer book, a vision of praise, thanksgiving all addressed to God. All of this in the center of the pain, the impossibilities of the world, they found the power to keep on keeping on.

St. Paul's hymn now moves from vertical to the horizontal. Please note verses 7-10 for it is here we discover that this is also a hymn to the world. The apostle keeps faith with St. John 3:16 in this section. God does love the world. Heaven reaches earth.

And so, everything is united once and for all. Note again verses nine and ten: *"He has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."* No more dualism: no more top down, no more us and them, now one fellowship of love.

Now, the hymn becomes personal. In verses, 11-14 see the pronouns: we, you, our, and own. Behind bars St. Paul understood that the gospel published a personal word, a word that touched the heart.

Anne Lamott, one of my patron saints, writes in "Traveling Mercies," that following long years of depression, suicide attempts, sexual addiction, and drug abuse, she heard gospel music coming from a small church across her street. The little church building was not fancy, but the music stopped her in her tracks. She heard hymns she had not heard since her childhood.

Week after week she came to listen, standing outside the church doors. It took weeks, but she moved up to the doorway of the church to listen. The choir was composed of five black women and one white man creating wondrous music. The church of about thirty glowed with kindness. She began to show up once a month and always leaving before the sermon. She grew to love many things about the church: their care for each other, their community outreach program, their welcoming of strangers. But, she writes, *"It was the singing that pulled me in and split me wide open."*

She found the courage to walk inside, sit in the back and let the singing surround her. That Music, she said, was breath and food. She writes,

"Something inside me that was stiff and rotting would feel soft and tender. Somehow the singing wore down all the boundaries and distinctions that kept me so isolated. Sitting there, standing with them to sing, sometimes so shaky and sick that I felt like I might tip over, I felt bigger than myself, like I was being taken care of, tricked into coming back to life."

Anytime the churches in Ephesus received a letter from St. Paul it was a time to celebrate. But, when such a letter came from prison I bet they paid even closer attention. The person in charge of the congregation was probably the person who read the letter to the congregation.

There was neither a 'pity party' nor 'my-aren't-we-all happy' found in this letter. The letter is about music from the heart of a saint who was a veteran in "The Way." It is a hymn regarding the world without walls or categories. It was written to touch the hearts of those who are visionless and hopeless.

When we as a church sing this hymn, the world seems like a mighty fine place. It also appears that we can look at the harshness of our world, not with anguish, but with eyes of faith, wonder, and grace. Alleluia. Amen.