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Rye Presbyterian Church
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Brothers and Sisters

Texts: John 10:11-18; I John 3:16-24; Acts 4:5-12

On Easter Sunday we announce the fact. Then, during the following fifty days of Eastertide we take time to think about what the fact really means. For it is one thing to say that everything has changed, and that there is a new power in our lives because of the Resurrection, but it is still important to say exactly how things have changed, and where that new power is working. It is hard to tell what is new or is supposed to be new until you have seen what it really looks like.

The New Testament works hard at trying to show what the power of the Resurrection looks like. It does it in two crucial ways: first, it shows how the alienation and estrangement of men and women from God is overcome, and how there is a new, brilliant familiarity; indeed, as Thomas Aquinas was later to put it, how there is a friendship between God and his human creation. In the risen Christ, we have direct access to God, and God to us. Sin and evil and death are no longer the great obstacles preventing and obscuring the knowledge of God that gives light to our lives. The second way that the New Testament tries to show the power of the Resurrection is where it shows how the alienation and estrangement of women and men from each other is overcome.

The examples of this human reconciliation are numerous; they are all striking. For example, The Book of Acts talks about how, in the community of the early church, believers held all things in common, and how none were in want, despite having people in want being the normal way of communities in the world. It also goes on, as it does in this morning's lesson, to

point out that people were healed, and good deeds done to people who were sick, because of the power of Christ, the one who gives salvation to mortals. Even though he is rejected by his own community, he is now the cornerstone of a new one. And this is a community, as the first letter of John points out, where people are to take to heart the idea that if you are rich in the world's goods that you need to help those who are in need, and where you have to love, "not in word or speech," he says, but "in truth and action." To love that way is indeed, the result of the power of the Resurrection. St. Paul, for his part, sees this new community in the way that the traditional enmity between Jews and non-Jews is overcome, and how the church, the body of Christ incorporates both. As he boldly says, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." In the power of the Resurrection, *all* the old enmities and divisions that defined humanity are overcome, and a new day of fellowship has dawned. In short, the New Testament is at some pains to show how, because of the Resurrection, there is now a single, cohesive community, a single flock, led by a common shepherd, a shepherd who put the community together by laying down his life for them, even as they are now expected to be willing to lay down their lives for each other. In the power of the Resurrection what the psalmist had prophesied, "How blessed it is when brothers dwell in unity!" has come true.

It is as a community of *kindred*, of brothers and sisters that the New Testament sees this community. It is not one where individuals are simply altruistic, giving of themselves and their resources in great measure because it is, in principle, right to do so. They give because they see themselves are related, as connected to each other. It is because they are brought into a new relation with each other, it is because they have a common Father by virtue of being brothers and sisters of God the Son, that they are brothers and sisters to each other. To give to and to share

with a brother and sister is not mere principled giving, it is not philanthropy; it is to give as to someone who vitally shares our life, it is to give because their need is our need, their hunger is our hunger.

Now, that is a great triumph. It takes a great power to make men and women part of a common flock, and brothers and sisters *like that*. The Bible knows how great a triumph it is, because it has also always realistically known that the course of relations between brothers and sisters is not always smooth. If to be a brother and sister is, on the one hand, a closer relation than other relations, it is also a relation that can be hostile and explosive in a way that others rarely are. The Bible provides plenty of examples of this side of kinship, too. The first brothers did not end their relation well at all, as Cain slew Abel. Esau and Jacob struggled in the womb, and in the end Jacob rather unscrupulously got Esau to sell him his birthright and then tricked their father Isaac into giving him Esau's blessing. Joseph's brothers found him insufferable and threw him into a well, finally selling him into slavery in Egypt. And all that is simply in the first book of the Bible! So, it is a great triumph when even this kind of enmity is overcome, and we are one flock, one community of brothers and sisters, bound in common love that is no longer jealous, but vitally generous.

Yet, while the New Testament goes to great efforts to show where the power of the Resurrection lies in overcoming enmities, it can also be pretty clear where the power of the Resurrection is still needed, and where we who have been born anew because of the Resurrection haven't always been one flock. Consider, simply the example of the prodigal son. That is a story of great reconciliation, as the prodigal son leaves home defying all that his father stood for, and then returns in disgrace. Yet, as Jesus tells it, the father welcomes him back with open arms and even a party. That is a story the church could always tell about how the power of the

Resurrection overcomes the enmity between humans and God. But in that story, there is the older brother lurking in the background, the one who bitterly resents the attention the father pays to the younger, prodigal brother. One has every good reason to think that when the early church retold this parable of Jesus that they knew somewhere along the line that brotherhood still remained to be achieved, and that the power of the Resurrection needed to extend further than it had.

This is not just a guess about the early church. This was their experience, for as they celebrated the power of the Resurrection in the unity of the church, they also knew full well that there were still tensions within that community, and arguments between the sheep of the flock. Above all, these were arguments between the Jews and the Gentiles in the early church. Indeed, it is most likely that the story about the prodigal son and his brother and their father is a story about how the Gentiles are received by God despite their not having lived by the Law that God gave, and how it didn't always sit well with the Jews, the older brothers who had lived by it. It is also surely the case that although Paul could confidently say that now in Christ Jesus, there is neither Jew nor Greek, in telling his audience that, he was trying to get them to pay attention to a fact that they had not yet fully grasped. That they had not grasped it was the reason he was writing. He knew full well that there was antagonism between Christian Jews and the late arriving, adopted, and ingrafted Gentiles in the congregations to whom he wrote his letters. Having the two brothers in the same flock at all was the result of the power of the Resurrection, Paul believed; they just hadn't settled down into that reality yet, and he was working hard at getting them to realize that, and for all to be guided by the one shepherd.

Now, let me be frank. The reason that I bring this particular instance up is not by way of illustrating a larger or more general point about kinship. This instance *is* the point I want to make, for the relation between Jews and Gentiles is one where the power of the Resurrection still

remains to be realized. And the reason I bring *that* point up is in recognition of the fact that Tuesday is, on the Presbyterian calendar, Holocaust Remembrance Day, although on the Jewish calendar it was some ten days ago. To have to remember the Holocaust is to have to face the deep and disturbing thought that the fact of brotherhood has not yet been achieved; it is to face the fact, quite the contrary, that we have been persecutors and murderers of our brothers and sisters.

To be sure, the Christian church did not kill six million Jews in the last century. A madman and his sociopathic cronies were the ones who initiated and carried out that deadly plan. But a couple of thousand years of anti-Jewish rhetoric and a couple of thousand years of bad treatment of Jews, supposedly as payback for what they did to Jesus, made it possible for that madman to have his way as long as he did. The church for the most part did nothing to stop even what little they knew to be going on. So we as adopted children in the family bullied the older brother for a long time, and it is not particularly surprising that as a result what happened did happen. In the years since the awful discovery of what went on at places like Auschwitz and Bergen Belson, things have perhaps gotten better. One doesn't hear a lot of overt anti-Semitism in polite company anymore, whereas it used to be assumed openly in polite company. It was assumed that they could not belong to "our" clubs and nobody stood up against the idea. Now, many churches have recognized that something had gone wrong with us, really wrong, and therefore have gone to great lengths to repudiate any form of anti-Semitism. But even today it is still not dead. As a silent prejudice, anti-Semitism still exists and it exists very close to us. Recently a distressed mother within this congregation told me of incidences of anti-Semitism at Rye High School, of incidences there of open Jew baiting plain and simple. Kids get that from somewhere.

Now, of course, it is wrong, deadly wrong, to be a persecutor or murderer of *anybody*. We can't do it to enemies. But with respect to the Jews, we Christians have to realize that there is something even deeper and more problematic here than just our general treatment of others. For the fact is, that, given what we believe, the Jews are our brothers and sisters; we were adopted into the family into which they were born. For that reason alone, we have to realize that we would not be who we are without them, and profoundly so. How so? Well, as St. Augustine pointed out a long time ago, the evidence that what we say is true, namely, that God acts in the world and in people God chooses, is their existence; our existence as God's people is simply a continuation of that. To attack them is to attack the people from which our Lord came, and to attack the prophets which declared that he would come. Augustine, in quoting Psalm 59, which says, "Slay them not, lest my people forget," pointed out very clearly that our memories, our self understanding, our rootedness, is in the soil of their scriptures and history. To attack them is to cut off our own roots and to lose a source of our own nourishment. Moreover, to attack them is to suggest that God is not faithful to his people, and that from time to time God changes his mind, which given our behavior from time to time is not something we want to trumpet about very loudly.

Above all, to attack them, they whom God chose, and to whom God is faithful, is also in the first instance an offense against God. For what we as Christians know about God and about what God wants, is known by how we see that God chooses them, and then chooses us. To see them as anything other than brothers and sisters is to fail to see ourselves as God's children, and to offend against God's own choices.

The power of the Resurrection is the power to overcome enmity, even the enmity between brothers, and to make a common flock with one shepherd. Undoubtedly, it is the case

for both Christians and Jews that realizing that unity through and through is still a long way off. Jews may well think that the idea itself is a Christian invention into which they have unwillingly been pulled. Christians may well wonder, as Paul did in the first century, why all of Judaism has not embraced the messiah. Paul gave the answer that whatever God had in mind, for it was in God's mind, that at least this gave the Gentiles time to be grafted onto the vine. We should be grateful for that, instead of speculating about what was going on in their heads. But he was convinced, too, that someday the great divide between Jew and Gentile would be finally and fully overcome.

There is a long way to go in realizing a common destiny for Christians and Jews. But if the power of the Resurrection still remains to be fully played out, it can nevertheless still be present today in the simple fact of our *seeing* in the Jews our brothers and sisters, and not our enemies, or a scapegoat people to be mistreated at will. The power of the Resurrection really is dawning upon us when we teach our children who all of their family really is and when we therefore teach them to respect and honor the Jews, and to go beyond tolerance or simply being nice. The power of the Resurrection can be present if we, like our good shepherd, are willing to do something good for our brethren, no matter how opposed the rest of the world is to such behavior. To do so, to stand up against anti-Semitism and to do so forcefully, is, indeed, to love not just "in word or speech," but "in deed and truth." Loving like that is the power of the Resurrection.