

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement
Florissant, Missouri
Proper 11 -- Year B
July 17-18, 2021
Jeremiah 23:1-6; Ephesians 2:11-22
St. Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt "used," when someone simply used you to achieve some more self-serving end?...a time when this person befriended you, seemed genuinely to care about you, and then asked you, almost innocently, if you would write a letter-of-recommendation on their behalf, if you would introduce them to that good-looking friend of yours, if you would cover for them while they took some time off of work, if you would lend them some money until they got that insurance settlement, if you would look after their house and care for their pets while they were out-of-town? And, you no sooner accommodate that person -- do what they ask -- and that person completely disappears from your life,...and you feel used. You were nothing more than a means to an end.

In today's Second Lesson from Ephesians Paul makes the most extraordinary claim that any good, devout, Pharisaic Jew could possibly make, and I'll bet it blew right past you when *Greg/Jennifer/Dave* read it. Paul is speaking of Jesus, the Christ, God's Messiah, and then Paul declares that "He [Jesus] is our Shalom." Now, the English there is "peace," and Paul is writing in Greek, which is "Eiréne," but Paul is using the word that sums up the yearnings, the hopes and aspirations, of all faithful, devout Jewish people for all time: "Shalom." Indeed, "Shalom" remains the standard greeting, when faithful, devout Jewish people greet each other at their homes, on the street, or in the synagogue: "Shalom!" "Shalom Aleichem!" "Aleichem Shalom!"

Now, let's back up a moment, because I never cease to marvel as to how many good folks seem to think of the Christian Faith as the means to an end -- and how often we in the Church

can even present the Faith in that way, as if to say, "Here's the goal,... and the Christian Faith is how to get there....Here's what you want or need,...and you can use Jesus to make it happen." Want to go to heaven? Jesus will take you there. Want to feel forgiven? Jesus can make that happen. Want to fix a broken relationship? Give Jesus a try. Want to get your finances in order? Talk to Jesus. Want to stay sober? Jesus can help. Career going nowhere? Jesus really cares. Your life a mess? Turn it over to Jesus. Now, make no mistake. There's good counsel in all of that. But, look closely at what that does. It uses Jesus. It turns Jesus into a means to an end. What we are saying, in effect, is "Use Jesus to get what you want or need." And, yet, if that's what our culture hears -- or even our friends and acquaintances hear us saying -- is it any surprise that they respond with "Well, maybe that works for you, but it's not going to work for me"?

Paul declares, "He [Jesus]...He is our Shalom!" Yes, Shalom means "peace" in all of its fullness,...but so much more! As Dr. Martin Luther King once famously said, "Peace is not just the absence of conflict but the presence of justice and brotherhood." That begins to approach what our Jewish brothers and sisters mean by Shalom.

I once did a family retreat for Atonement down at Trout Lodge, where we spent the entire weekend on what that one word, "Shalom," means within Judaism, within the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, and we discovered that "Shalom" is indeed more than "the absence of conflict." It is also total harmony in our relationships with God and with the whole human family. "Shalom" is forgiveness, healing, restoration, reconciliation, wholeness, and health. Shalom is life where everyone has what he or she needs, plus enough to share. Shalom is equity in our dealings with each other. Shalom is friendship, contentment, and life in community. Shalom is knowing the truth

and living according to it. This, then, is the aspiration and the hope of our Jewish friends and neighbors, when they greet each other with "Shalom. Shalom Aleichem." (Shalom be upon you.) To which they then reply, "Aleichem Shalom." (And, upon you, Shalom.) And, if you pick up echoes of our own liturgy in all that, well, maybe that is no accident: "Shalom Aleichem! Aleichem Shalom!"

For, even as Paul assures us that Jesus is our "Shalom," Paul wants us to know where and how that happened, namely, at the Cross. At the Cross, Jesus broke down the barriers that divide. At the Cross, Jesus put hostility to death. At the Cross, Jesus created one new humanity. At the Cross, Jesus effected reconciliation with God and with each other. At the Cross, Jesus provided full access to the Father through the Spirit and opened the door to God's Shalom. "Shalom aleichem," Paul declares, and we reply, "Aleichem Shalom," for we are reconciled to God and to each other through the blood of the Cross.

Yet, we continue to live in a culture where it is normative to "use" others to get what we want or need. And, at the same time, we hate it, when we feel as though we have simply been used by others. Which should cause us to look again at Paul's declaration that Jesus is our Shalom. Jesus isn't just the means to obtain all those other blessings that add up to Shalom. Jesus Himself "is" our Shalom. Jesus isn't just the means to an end. He Himself is the end. Jesus isn't the means to achieve a goal. He Himself is the goal. When we have Jesus, Paul implies, we have all the blessings that make for Shalom. Jesus didn't come to be "used" by us. He came to be embraced by us. Which may be why Jesus promises that whenever two or three gather in His Name, there He is in the midst of us. Which may be why, at the very pinnacle of our weekend worship, as we approach the Lord's altar, what Jesus gives us is....Himself.

Which may be why such a rich hymnody arose out of the African-American experience of slavery in this country. Even as these beloved children of God, denied every blessing that we might take for granted, would gather around a campfire on a chilly evening after a long day of grueling work, they would sing, "Give me Jesus; Give me Jesus;...you can have all the rest, give me Jesus." May that be our hope and aspiration, as well: "You can have all the rest,...give me Jesus," for He -- and He alone -- is our "Shalom."

"Shalom aleichem!" And, all God's people reply:
"Aleichem Shalom."

Amen