Sermon on Proper 16 Year B 2015
(2 Sam 7:1-14a; Eph 2:11-22)

Sometimes the gospel is difficult to hear because it asks us to put aside our preconceived understandings and clear the decks for a redefinition. That’s all well and good when we’re talking about secondary matters e.g. “I’m re-thinking my relationship with double-fudge ice cream” or “I’ve come to see that ketchup chips probably weren’t a good idea in the first place.”

It’s even well and good when we’re talking about important matters, though here it’s already getting more difficult e.g. “I used to vote for the conservatives but now I’m voting for the marijuana party” or “vice versa” “My doctor has convinced me that after two heart attacks I shouldn’t eat double cheeseburgers for supper every night.”

But then we come to ultimate matters, matters that define life as we know it; matters that define our purpose and our legacy; then things get very difficult indeed.

I received an email this week from somebody outside the parish in which they asked about Jesus’ infamous words in Luke where Jesus says that unless you hate the members of your own family, indeed your very life, you can’t be his follower.

In the ensuing shock and the inevitable “but, but…” Jesus has created enough wiggle room to allow the question, “what’s really going on here?” to bubble to the surface; he’s created enough room so that we may sense and notice the Holy Spirit trying to get our attention.

As I tried to explain to the questioner; sometimes you have to say something in hyperbole, in exaggeration to help people really get the message that life, as defined by the world system we’re in, with it’s loyalties based on blood, it’s inequality and shortsightedness, is not quality of life that God desires for our race.

Something like this is going on with famous interaction between Nathan and David and then in the instructions of the writer of the letter to the Ephesians which may have been Paul or one of his followers.

David has become King not of his own doing but because God selected him. At first David has been very good about cooperating with God’s way of doing things.

He waits for God’s coronation, he doesn’t try to engineer his own; he could have killed Saul on several occasions but refuses to.

Like Prince Charles, he probably wonders if he’ll ever be king but he continues to wait for God to bring it about.

Now, however, that he *is* king, he acts differently; he has determined his capital, the newly captured stronghold of the Jebusites, renamed Jerusalem; he’s moved the Ark of the Covenant back from its exile in Philistine hands and next on the agenda is a proper temple.

David is embarrassed by the fact that he lives in something featured in “Homes of Hollywood,” while God’s sanctuary is more like a tent. Of course God’s sanctuary has always, till now, been portable, moving around with the Israelites on their journey to the promised land and once there throughout it.

But now, David thinks, some more stability, some more certainty is in order; something more befitting the grandness of Yahweh.

Nathan, a court prophet, a close adviser of David, here making his first appearance in Israel’s story, says, “you betcha! Sounds like a plan, God’s obviously blessed you, go for it!”

Most prophets in Israel’s history have been outsiders; it makes sense; it’s hard to bite the hand that feeds you. This is why, as many have pointed out, it’s hard for priests and pastors to be prophets.

For those of us in leadership positions, it’s always important to be able to listen to those who disagree as well as learning, like Nathan, that it’s not antithetical to be both on the payroll and a prophet!

I love Nathan because he’s an example of the difficulties I pointed out in my opening illustration: it is possible to develop the capacity to hear really mind-bending things and, if they’re true, change our minds.

It’s possible to move from just trying to please people around you to understanding that God and therefore your life is more fraught with possibilities, both dangerous and powerful than previously imagined!

I imagine Nathan having a rough night, maybe a nasty dream or two in which he took God to be saying, “um, did you think that possibly I might have something to say about *my* sanctuary?!”

“You folks don’t want me on the loose; you want a nice safe religion in which you’ve defined the parameters of my presence and my actions; but, hey, here’s a thought: it’s not your job to control me!”

Of course this imagined dialogue can make God out to be free-thinking 1960’s hippie when in reality God isn’t looking to be unconstrained because he feels like it.

It’s about the truth: God is God and God, as Creator gets to define the relationship with what is created.

And the powerful thing, the world changing thing that we begin to see in this story and that is more fully fleshed out in our second reading is that God *is* committed to building a house for God’s self! But not in that free-thinking Jackson Pollock kind of way but in a way that amazingly, lovingly, includes all of us!

There’s a little hint in the Hebrew word used here, the word *beth*, the Hebrew word for house (as in Bethel or Bethlehem). The word means both a house made of brick or stone or cedar etc. and a house made of people, a household. The Doerksen household is a *beth* in the same way that the structure at my address is a *beth*.

What God reveals to Nathan and then to David is that the priority for God’s sanctuary is a *beth*, a house as household.

Yes, God will allow a physical temple to be built but not before making it clear to David that this isn’t the priority, the priority is the lineage that will come from him, a kingdom, a household that will last forever.

Even this, of course, doesn’t seem to have happened; David’s line as a series of Kings ended in 587 B.C. After that time no Davidic king ever sat on the throne of Jerusalem.

But that’s because if it would have continued Israel would have got the wrong idea; they would have continued to box God into too small a place. It was always God’s intention in the incredibly powerful words of our second reading to create a new human being, a fresh start for everyone.

We’ve heard those words a thousand times, a teacher says to us, you got a bad mark this semester, but this term you’ve got a fresh start.

You sit with your partner after a long and grueling argument and one of you says, “let’s wipe the slate clean and start over.”

But how do we comprehend them when, like my opening illustration regarding Jesus’ words about “hating our lives,” here, “fresh start” means something we can’t possibly understand?

How can Paul scribble off a few sentences and expect that we’ll hear what they mean; however encouraging their sound?

What can he possibly mean by “new human being?” I still feel like a regular human being; at least most of the time!

And yet Paul has an objective criterion: the new community that is before him, made up of a heretofore impossibility: Jews and Gentiles worshipping the Messiah together; men and women as equals; slaves and slave-owners sharing meals and being baptized in the same water and drinking the Eucharist wine from the same cup!

Something new has and is happening!

God understands that building this worldwide household for the divine presence is not an easy to understand or easy to live reality

And that’s why it’s so important that God gives us the space to learn it with each other. Notice how Paul puts it: “Now he’s using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day, a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.”

We notice that it’s a process that feels quite natural yet it’s new, a fresh start; we notice that it involves all of us; nobody is a square peg trying to fit into a round hole; in Jesus we’re all the perfect shape!

The great grand news is that God is doing this! God is working with us to build a household; it doesn’t depend, first of all, on any capacity that we may or may not have.

More and more scientists, anthropologists and psychologists agree on something quite important here; we come to comprehend by beginning to practice something as much as we begin to practice something by first understanding it.

practicing common prayer together, receiving God’s gifts together, beginning to practice the Christian faith together in our serving and giving is as important to “being this fresh start” as trying to understand it and then do it!

All of this works of course because the shift has already been made *in* God! Christ is the new place of God’s presence, the new temple, the head of our household and yet brother; we all share in this through the sacraments!

Which is why committing to a church community, warts and all, is the great act of solidarity with Jesus. If we want to change the world and be involved in bringing justice to all we join God’s household and find that in that act of commitment we are making a foundational commitment for the good of the world!

We are, in that commitment acting as prophets; we might not immediately see the benefit of our decision; indeed we’ll most likely fiercely resist some of the things Christ’s Spirit says to us because like my opening illustration, he’s serious about getting to define what’s ultimately important for us.

But at the same time we’ll be involved in that gradual building up of something that opens up a wider vision of justice, of spirituality, even of love; and we’ll find that we ourselves get a fresh start from our sins and mistakes, fully accepted in God’s household.