

That They All May Be One

I must confess I have this weird relationship with the AM Talk Radio camp. Not that they and I are in the same political world, but I find them so fascinating because they have opinions about everything, and announce those opinions loudly and with utter confidence.

Last week, one of them said something that has stuck with me ever since I heard it. It went something like this: “God loves individuals. God is the God of individuals. God does not love the group or the community or the world.

I wondered to myself what God this talking radio guy was referring to. I was pretty sure he wasn't talking about the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Moses or the Father of Jesus. That seemed pretty obvious, because our God is always concerned about the community, the group, the nation, and especially the whole wide world. “God so loved the **world** that he sent his only begotten son...”

God called a people out of slavery in Egypt and gave that community a home. Jesus called together 12 and charged them to form communities of faith.

Communities intended, just as we are intended, to transform the world. And as for those 12 individual apostles, well, we don't even know for sure who the 12 were. The gospels agree on Peter, John, James and Judas the betrayer. But the others? It shifts from gospel to

gospel. Meaning, perhaps, it wasn't about them. It was about the communities they created.

The sense that it is the community that matters is at the heart of today's intimate prayer between Jesus and the Father. We are privileged to eavesdrop. The prayer, that we may all be one, is speaking of the human family being joined to the divine. To quote the scholar: "The vision [of this unity] is of the radical indwelling of God, Jesus and believers that will be the sign of God's new age. [I]t is a communal vision, not a private, individual vision." New Interp. Bible, 796.

Just as Jesus was the focal point of God's love for us during his earthly ministry, so now, the church, the community, loving one another; loving our enemies; forgiving without being asked to forgive; dying rather than inflicting death; the church, the community, with the grace of the Holy Spirit, is the focal point of God's love, here and now.

Perhaps that is why Jesus kept appearing to the group. First to the 7, then to the 11 in the upper room. To the 2 on the way to Emmaus. To the 500.

God's call to us today is what the kids yell to finish up a game of hide and seek. "Ally ally in free!" Which is slang for "All ye, All ye, in Free!" Because Jesus paid the price. What we have been so freely given, now, we are commanded to go, and give it away.

If you're getting squirmy about community and what that means for you, don't. The community God calls us into, that God loves, is not a cookie cutter community. It's not one where we surrender our individual gifts, talents, hopes and dreams.

Perhaps it was uniformity, rather than community, that had the Talk Radio guy so upset. As my dear friend Pua Hopkins used to say: "The thing that makes me nervous about the melting pot is, who's getting melted?"

God's community doesn't wipe out who we are. God's community polishes, perfects, refines and makes each member achieve his and her fullness; all within the family of God, all within the Body of Christ.

This transformation doesn't wait for the next world. Our personal transformations, in communities that are themselves transformed, begins today. And it begins, as the reading from Acts tells us, by shaking up the status quo.

This reading from Acts is a perfect example of God moving and shaking all that we take for granted. The slave girl who wants everyone to know the future (and so take the risk out of living). The pimp-bankers who own her, making money where they shouldn't. The magistrates and the mob, each thinking they are keeping order in their own way. All backed up by the stone prison, where those who won't abide the way things are, are sent.

Into this scene (it is our scene), the Spirit of God is on the loose. The slave girl is freed. The bankers are busted. The mob and the magistrates flummoxed. The stone jail is shaken apart; neither chains nor steel bars can hold back the Spirit of God. And the small band of Paul, Luke and Silas expand the community of the changed, adding to it the jailer and his household. Individuals are set free to become the people of God.

The call to community is as urgent today as it ever was.

This week, I was constantly reminded of those still in the shadows, still excluded, still on the outside. The ones I was reminded of this week, over and over again, are the disabled: the physically challenged, the mentally challenged.

In part, I remembered them because of the reading from Acts. That young possessed girl is someone today likely to be diagnosed with a mental disorder. She was treated like so much chattel. Rented out by owners for profit. Paul, in the name of Jesus, restored her human status. Restored her to the community.

Our community of St. Elizabeth's is in an area of town where the mentally and physically challenged are many. In our Wednesday Bible Study this week, a man joined us, sat quietly for a while, then lectured us on the end of the world, prayed with us, then left. Perhaps he will be back.

The physically disabled are similarly often outcast, shunned and ignored. Having traveled to many developing nations, I learned that to be physically or mentally challenged is often to be an embarrassment, a disgrace, or even a death sentence brought by neglect or starvation.

Yet, in the midst of so much silent suffering, God is there, reaching in to heal, to create unity, to make the broken whole.

Tom Long tells this story: “Years ago, when I was a seminary student, I spent a summer as a pastoral intern. My supervising pastor assigned me the task of visiting several families in the church. One of those families was fairly large; parents and a number of children, the youngest of whom (I’ll call him Robert) was born with cerebal palsy. When I would visit the family, I would often find them at the dinner table, or gathered in their den, laughing, telling stories, enjoying each other; but not Robert.

It was as if the family were bathed in a circle of light – all except for Robert, who stood isolated in the shadows, outside the circle, watching the others.

One day, I happened to be visiting in this home and only Robert’s mother was there. After we chatted for a while, she wanted to tell me about something she experienced only a few days before. She told me that she had been sitting, late in the afternoon, in the very same room

where we were now talking. She was reading or knitting, I can't remember which, and Robert was standing in the darkness of the hallway, watching her from a distance.

She said she felt a strange shift in the room, something that caused her to look up, then down the hallway toward Robert. She told me: 'I saw Jesus with his arm around Robert's shoulder.'

She said she looked away, then back, and there was only Robert. 'For the first time since he was born', she said, 'I saw my son as already healed in the power of God.'

Long, *Preaching from Hope to Memory*, 29.

The African country of Zimbabwe is perhaps the most wretched state in the world today. A government in chaos. Inflation running in the millions of percent. And in the midst of this are severely disabled young men and women. Some born with no legs, twisted arms, paralyzed. In a country where such children are seen as the result of witchcraft, of a curse.

One of these young women commented: "You get so confused. You ask yourself: 'Am I a human being?'" She also reflected: "My step-mom would say: You're just useless! She compared me to an ant. In the end, I thought it was true." *Music By Prudence*, HBO documentary (2010).

These children are left quite often to die. A recent

documentary records how these children would be left to sit in their own waste because a caregiver refused to take them to the bathroom. How they may go unfed for days as punishment for soiling themselves.

Yet, a group of these young people from Zimbabwe, found themselves, by some grace, at a care home for the disabled. And they discovered, by some grace, that while they could not stand or hold or walk, they could each of them sing! And in their singing, found the embrace of a loving God who again broke down the status quo (that said such severely disabled folk could do nothing), who yet again wove a most unlikely group of individuals into a loving, dynamic, alive, community.

Something like Paul and the jailer, or a girl freed from a demon. Something like you and I, like all of us here.

Left to ourselves, we are each of us challenged, we are each of us deformed. It may not be a mental illness, but a blindness of compassion. It may not be a twisted limb, but a willingness to walk by a brother or sister in need.

The unity Jesus prays us to receive is a unity of Spirit where I can one day know, in my heart of hearts, that your needs are my needs, that what injures you, injures me, that what is best for you is very often best for me.

These are the voices we lift to God today: Yours, mine, ours. We sing with the Psalmist today:

- “The Lord is King

- let the earth rejoice,
- let the multitude of the isles
- be glad!
- And as I take my seat, listen for a minute to the beautiful voices of those disabled youngsters of Zimbabwe, as they lift their voices in thanksgiving.
- Perhaps we will discover that they, and we, like Robert, are already healed in the power of God.

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