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Epiphany 2C

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St. Thomas's Church

Paul writes his letter to the Corinthians, after he receives word that church in Corinth was having serious problems. It is important to note that the church of Corinth had similar problems as the church has today... Corinth was an important city in Paul's day. It was a center for Greek culture and a busy commercial city with a cosmopolitan feel that brought together people and customs from different parts of the world. Pagan religious rites and ceremonies were practiced. Materialism and immorality were accepted norms. Corinth was generally known as a city that was pleasure-seeking. So, Paul's letter to the church at Corinth was written to express his concern regarding their split and divided church. He learned that all of these things were causing the church not to be to be unified, to not be one community.

Even with all of those things going on the Corinthians were full of the gifts of the spirit and waiting for the spirit to activate them. The problem was that the gifts were being used individually and not necessarily corporately. Some people were using their gifts to lord it over people who were believed to have lesser gifts. The gifts of the spirit were being used to oppress others. With, all of these things going on, the question became... how the Corinthians would truly recognize and appropriately use the gifts that the spirit was giving them and their community.

Throughout the passage Paul teaches the Corinthians how to discern and use various gifts and how to also value individuals. Each gift of the spirit is for the body as a whole (the church). That means if a gift cannot be shared for the greater good it is not a gift from the spirit. It also implies that any attempt to rank individuals according to their possession of "better" gifts would be at odds with each gift's common purpose for the good of all.

These spiritual gifts can be thought of as gifts, of service, and work. Spiritual gifts that are freely given, with unearned favor. It is important to understand that spiritual gifts are not given to us as a badge of righteousness. They are a gift

given to us in spite of ourselves or because of ourselves we are given them through grace.

As I was pondering this sermon, I began wondering what a community that embraced their gifts and the diversity of each other might look like. I realized that what we should be striving for is the “Beloved Community” that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned. His vision grew from his leadership in the civil rights movement. It grew from his commitment not to rely on force to combat force but rather to confront aggression non-violently. His vision was about how God’s glorious creation of humanity could all live into their glory. Dr. King’s belief was that the Beloved Community was the embodiment of God’s Kingdom here on earth. It was a community that was possible, not only a dream, although certainly it was a dream. In Dr. King’s beloved community there would be no tolerance for dehumanizing people. There would be no tolerance for homelessness, racism, or poverty. Dr. King had the conviction that love could win over hate and fear. It was more than a vision. It’s what God is calling us to do. King said and I quote

“The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that

will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men."

Dr. King believed that when we come together great things can happen. King's vision of society is one we are continuously working towards, a way of bringing God's realm on Earth. The God of creation calls us into community. God calls us to transform opponents into friends. Each one of us is made in the image and likeness of God. As Christians, we are called to see and know what is happening in our church, communities and the larger world.

My own vision of the beloved community comes from the work I do. I am blessed to work as a chaplain at an adult special need's day program. There are approximately seventy-five special needs participants that attend our day program. Once a week we have a group where we talk about how God is working in our lives. At the end of every group we pray for our families, friends and support staff. I made a prayer jar out of a container that once held cheese puffs. The jar has a label on it that simply says "prayers." The label is big with bold writing. Even if participants are unable to read, they know what our prayer jar looks like. The prayer jar is sacred because it has been blessed to hold participants' and staff's intentions.

Because of our practice of praying for each other, I have even had participants ask if they could pray for me. We pray for each other, we pray for our families, we pray for staff, and we pray for the care givers that help our participants get dressed and ready to meet the world. We pray for our community. Each day is a day full of love and as Day of Reconciliation and redemption for the participants and staff.

As staff we are must call out behaviors that are unkind or mean. And because we do that, forgiveness is the norm. We don't ignore bad behavior from anyone, no matter their status or ability. There are times when we get tired of affording grace and yet it is what we know is needed. What is also amazing is that the participants afford each other and us the same grace. They understand that we all have difficult days and emotion and even when they get angry at one another or us as staff, they don't tolerate unkind words or actions. They call us to community.

We may not do it perfectly, but we continue to strive for God's realm even if we face road blocks and detours. This is where we delight in God and God delights in us. It's when our hearts and actions align with God's. Each day is an opportunity to bring about God's realm on earth. This is the closest I have gotten to Dr. Martin Luther King's vision of the beloved community. It is not about always getting it

right, it is about attempting to get it right with others. That is why community is so important. We try, and in continuing to try we are doing exactly what we are called to do in community. Community is not about perfection. Community is the attempt to bring justice into being. It is crucial to know we may never get it perfect and God is pleased in our work towards reconciliation and redemption. I don't only work for things at work but also in and out of the church.

As deacon as a chaplain, as a Christian I am called to remind the church that it does not exist outside of, or in a different realm from – the world. I hope to make the connection explicit. The world is sacred. People are sacred. Peoples' lives are sacred. We all have a God-spark within us that connects to God's all of God's creation and our human family. I am charged with helping realize their spiritual gifts and helping people to find activities outside the church. I believe that as a deacon, it is part of my charge to bring the chaos of the world into the realm of the sacred. I am charged by the Bishop to remind the church that the entire world is sacred – that it reflects the glory of creation and of the gifts of the spirit...

Paul's goal is not a tidy community but a loving one. Church is not tidy, life is not tidy people are not tidy. People will and do disagree, and issues will arise that are divisive. We all know when you get a group of people together there will always

be issues...King's vision of the Beloved community is that of a community in motion a community that is prophetic and bringing the future into being. That is what the church is, an evolving community always moving forward in bold new ways. As I said earlier in my sermon, if a spiritual gift can't be shared with others it is not a gift. We have all been given gifts to share. The charge is to figure out how we combine our gifts to make the body, the church, the community and the world a better place.

May we always strive to be a Beloved Community...