

Creating the Beloved Community

Mark 1:14-20

K Karpen, Sunday, January 22, 2006
Second Sunday After Epiphany

[Mark 1:14–20, “Creating the Beloved Community,” K Karpen, Sunday, 1/22/06]

One night last week I was working in the chancel of the sanctuary, straightening things up, working on the sound system. I was glad to be indoors, warm and dry; outside it was pouring, and the wind was blowing. All of a sudden I heard this little pinging sound, that nasty sound raindrops make when the roofs & gutters & leaders & all the tiles & tar whose job it is to keep them outside the building where they belong, don't work.

I looked up, I listened, and I tried to figure out where the leak was. I dashed up the stairs and up the ladder & out the hatch to the roof. I climbed up the scaffolding in the back where the workers have been working on the stonework. And I pinpointed the spot the rain was getting in. That didn't help me so much, since I had nothing to cover the leak with & no roofing knowledge or experience. But it was exciting clinging to the west scaffolding in the wind, pretending I knew what to do. And as I cast about for scraps of old plywood and tarpaper, it suddenly came to me, all in a rush: This is what's wrong with the church!

This is what's wrong with the Christian church. Not that seminaries don't offer courses in rudimentary building maintenance. But that so much energy in the Christian church goes to maintaining a protected, dry, safe environment, where nothing happens that is unexpected or risky or different. And I thought of all the energy we spend, in liberal churches and in conservative churches, keeping out new & different ideas, keeping out new & different people.

I don't mean consciously! That happens, but more rarely. I think most churches have no idea of the things they (we) do to keep people away, to keep new, fresh ideas at bay. No idea. And I think most churches have no idea of what it would take to give up those things—assumptions, patterns, looks, attitudes, structures—to move beyond those things.

But I'd like to think, still, we shall overcome. I've been thinking about that song since last week: “We Shall Overcome,” that statement of audacious faith in the reality of the future. Not “we might overcome,” which has hope but no faith. Not “we should overcome,” that has morality, but not faith. But “shall”—a word of future reality known in the present. That's a faith word.

What we're doing today is thinking about Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of the beloved community. That vision of open, inclusive, conflicted, loving community, full of people we like & people we don't to consider whether Dr. King's vision of a beloved community is relevant to this community of faith or any faith community.

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And if so, what this community might be like if we were to take Dr. King’s vision to heart, to overcome ourselves and create beloved community here & now.

The easy answers are *yes*, and *different*. Yes, it’s relevant. And beloved community is beyond what we have created and maybe beyond our ability to create; and not what most churches want anyway! Why? Because creating beloved community isn’t something that happens inside the church but rather, something that’s nurtured by the church so it can happen out there in the world. Something that is supported by the faith of the church that impacts people who have no interest in the faith of the church. Hhmmm. I’ll come back to that.

What is the church? That’s simple. And complicated. The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, those “called out,” from *kleo*, to call, and *ek*, out of. We get the call part. Today we heard in Mark how Simon Peter and Andrew were called by Jesus, with a few simple words, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And then James and John, who leave their boats & their father Zebedee & their co-workers & their community, and follow Jesus.

They are called, all right, but they’re not called in to some church—they are called out. Called out of their communities, their families, their workplaces. If they made community, it was community on the road. It was community on the run. Dangerous community. Risky community, full of people they liked and people they didn’t. Full of people who thought like them, talked like them, looked like them, and people who didn’t. Messy, iffy, beloved community.

This church is a great community. It really is. It’s always changing. Sometimes we blow it and miss opportunities. Sometimes we get it right. By and large, it’s a community that remembers not to get too focused in on itself. That stays porous, accessible, available to dozens of people who find something here and who help us create the community in the midst of a city that can be cold and indifferent.

I love that! And it doesn’t have that much to do with the Gospel. It doesn’t have much to do with the beloved community. I love it! And it doesn’t have that much to do with being the church. The church is those who are called out. The church is those whom Christ calls to work on the road. To walk & work on the road with people we don’t like. To create beloved community with people we don’t like.

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Here’s what happens in here, I hope. You are here, and you figure while you’re here you might as well pay attention to the possibility that God is calling you to something. God is calling you out of yourself.

You are here, and while you’re here you are surrounded by other people who might not think you are crazy if you share with them that you think you might be called to something. You are here, and I’m here, and Emily’s here, and John & Elsa & Karen are here to kind of coach you, to kind of cheer you on in your calling, in your task of love, whatever it may be. Not to do your ministry for you—that’s not why you pay us the big bucks. We’re your cheerleaders.

The work of the Gospel doesn’t happen in here. It just doesn’t. God never called anyone just to come to church. Jesus never called anyone just to sit in a pew. “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” “Watch me!” he said. “I’ll show you how.” he said.

Fish for people. Where are those people? Not just in here. I hate to tell you—there are people who won’t set foot in this place, no matter what you do. I know it’s nice, but they’re just not coming here, period. Does that mean you ignore them? No. Does that mean God doesn’t care about them? No. Does that mean you go love them? Yes.

Think of people. I know where you live. I know where you work. I know where you go to school. I know your families. There are people you need to go love. There are people you don’t like that you need to go love. Like Jonah. If you can think of someone right now, call. Go to it. You have my permission. That’s where beloved community happens. That’s where the work of the Gospel happens—out there.

If you have to think of the church as a building, think of it as a greenhouse. Come here to be nurtured, to connect, to be watered & fed. But don’t stay here. Go out to grow & bring grace and beauty.

We shall overcome ourselves. God is calling us out of ourselves. Out of the idea that I am the subject of this story we call life.