

The Fifth Sunday of Easter
Revised Common Lectionary, Year C

May 6th, 2007

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Beyond the Tribal Church
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector

We gathered yesterday as we do each year as a Diocese to discuss mission and ministry – those often too “churchy” words that say something about who we *are* and what we *do* as a Christian community. But this year was different. It was not the traditional “Ministry Day” we’d grown accustomed, but a “Visioning Day,” which, if truth be told, generated tension in the days that led up to it.

Like good Bay Area folk, many were asking, “What will *I* get out of it?” The even more enlightened and engaged would ask, “What will *my* parish get out of it?” But Bishop Marc once again proved in his unflappable way unmoved by the tension, and he and the design team walked unperturbed through the questions. And, yesterday, hundreds gathered at Grace Cathedral to open in prayer, song, and to reflect on what it means to be the Beloved Community.

The Beloved Community. A term that was popularized and plowed into the rich, loamy soil of the Civil Rights movement and has born other titles in other cultures, like *ubuntu* in South Africa.

In our particularizing culture, where the individual is the primary constituent, “beloved community” says something to us as Marinites, and, particularly, to us as the People of God.

It was Martin Luther King, of course, who was most singularly responsible for giving the notion of “Beloved Community” new legs in a time of tumult. He wrote this passage, which we heard during worship yesterday at Grace Cathedral:

*Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation. . .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 opposers into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloomy 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 [women and] men.**

Race, tribe, class, and nation. They are old notions, aren’t they? The contemporary notion of nation goes back at least six hundred years. Class even back further. And tribe and race. . .well they’re as ancient as the hills.

* *Facing the Challenge of a New Age* by The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Circling back for a moment, what can you hear in the question “What will *I* get out of it?” It’s a question born of choice. A question, quite frankly, born to some degree of privilege. And a question that has roots in class. Because choice is a class privilege, quite frankly. We all know it, and we all know our limitations within our respective classes. It operates most of the time subconsciously, delineating the have’s from the have not’s and everyone in the middle. In its most insidious forms, it places unrealistic demands on our lives and on the lives of our children and robs us of our joy.

And then there’s “What will *my* parish get out of it?” Guess what that one’s about: tribe of course. When was the last time you thought of Church of Our Saviour as a tribe? Or the Episcopal Church, for that matter? We are a tribe. And like all good tribes from time to time, The Episcopal Church tribe has been having a dust up recently over who gets to be chief, and who gets to declare the tribal boundaries and rules, right?

It also means we struggle to reflect the changing demographics around us. We are a predominantly Anglo and European American Church in this country. It means we have particular ways of seeing the world, and particular ways of interacting with each other. We love great music here. Most of us live at or above a particular socio-economic level. Most of us value education and the choices and privileges it brings. Many of us are leaders in our respective fields or places of work. This is not necessarily an indictment. Just a simple statement of fact. There is nothing more natural in the world than tribes built around like affiliation, customs, rituals, values, and worldviews.

Peter belongs to a tribe. In the Book of Acts today, that rough-and-tumble continuation of the Gospel of Luke, Peter has just gotten back from a long trip. Some of you might remember we left him in a rather peculiar way after he raised Tabitha from the dead. He was in Joppa, staying at the home of a tanner.

Now, Peter, in addition to being an apostle of Jesus, was supposed to be a good Jew – at least for the most part. Jesus had stretched the rules at time, but at the end of the day, most of Jesus’ followers initially were good and faithful members of their family and tribal religious tradition. So like any good first-century Jew, Peter was supposed to follow particular laws and rules about cleanliness. The author of Luke-Acts doesn’t tell us much about what happens, but Peter must have found living for a few days with a tanner unsettling. Tanners were not clean, and probably violated all kinds of purity laws that were tribal customs for Peter – good, wholesome traditions that would have seemed second-nature to him, as he would have lived by them since before he could remember.

But there he was, outside the protective envelope of his tribal customs residing with someone who worked and lived radically differently than he did. And, of course, the story gets more interesting as he is next summoned to enter the home of a centurion, no less. A Roman. One of the oppressors, representing the occupying power in Israel. Do you start to get the picture? Peter’s tribal worldview has been stirred. . .if not shaken to the very foundations.

And much to his surprise, he encounters God in a vision in these places, and discovers the power of the Risen Christ amongst the Gentiles. Those others. Those outside the tribe.

Now Peter, had he been a sensible fellow, should have gone quietly back to Jerusalem, kept all this to himself, done the proprietary thing of attending to his customary cleanliness as a good Jew. But Peter, as we all know, is far from sensible, and so he returns to the heart of his homeland and declares what he has witnessed to the other apostles.

And their world is blown wide open.

That's Good News for us actually. Had the apostles not encountered and taken the message of the Risen Christ to the Gentiles, to those beyond their tribal boundaries, most of us would likely not be sitting here this morning. Christianity would likely have remained a quiet backwater sect of Judaism, and might have risked evaporating into the Diaspora.

But there Peter was. Jesus, to some degree in his teaching and ministry, and even more so through the Resurrection, had crossed the Rubicon of the tribal boundary. He had collapsed boundaries all over the place: the boundaries between life and death, death and life, between sacred and profane, between the divine and human, between enemies and friends, between insiders and outsiders, between rich and poor, between male and female, between individual and community, between God and the Earth. Peter and the apostles' eyes are opened to the new life of the Beloved Community, built on the foundations of Christ, calling them to love one another in a new way.

Tribal identity might still matter. I can easily imagine Peter and the apostles still practicing their tribal customs. But that tribal identity is now held with humility. God is greater than our tribe. Greater than the walls of the Church of Our Saviour. Greater than our imaginations dare allow. Christ reaching out to people everywhere with salvation, even (and this is Good News) before the Church gets its act together. For Peter, his companions, and for all of us Christians across the centuries who have taken baby steps into Jesus' command to build the Beloved Community – we might be in wonder at the infinite breadth of God's grace in Christ Jesus. A grace that collapses all the human boundaries and pushes us into a bold image of God's Reign, of a new community, drawing all Creation together. . . a Beloved Community. . . descending from heaven and planted in our midst, among us, and within us, only waiting for us to help reveal it.

Amen.