

Sermon by the Rector

Sunday, February 8, 2009: The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

The collect, or prayer, for today asks God to give us the "liberty of that abundant life" that Jesus came to proclaim.

Isaiah offers a compelling portrait of this abundance: God has gathered the whole assembly of created beings, a great convocation, and rejoices that "not one is missing". Nothing missing, as in the flock of 100 after the shepherd has brought back the one who strayed. Nothing missing, as in "we're all present and accounted for". Not one missing – not one person or animal or living thing, not one star or tree or stone.

Jesus may have this kind of "nothing is missing" abundance in mind when Peter interrupts his solitary prayer. Jesus rebuffs Peter's entreaty, that they return to Capernaum, where "everybody is looking for" Jesus, and says they must go on to the other towns that await his message and his healing power. Jesus knows his time is short, and wants to make sure he gets to all the towns of Galilee, the places where he's been sent, so he will have gathered a complete assembly for presentation before his Father's throne – no one missing, no one who hasn't heard and seen.

Yet Israel cries out, in response to God's declaration that all are present, "my right is disregarded by the Lord". "My right is disregarded": I don't see myself in that convocation. I'm missing! And by a small leap of imagination, we might hear similar complaints from the lips of persons living in towns just on the other side of the Galilean border in Syria, or Lebanon – towns to whom Jesus understands himself **not** to have been sent.

All of us think, from time to time, that our right has been disregarded . "That's a nice gathering you have – but I'm not a part of it!"

Think of the nations ruled by despots. Perhaps they've heard that the U.S. is a beacon of liberty, a shining city on a hill, the last best hope of earth. They might know that the number of democratically-governed nations has increased in recent decades. But the people of Zimbabwe or of North Korea, to the extent they know of us and of the gospel we preach, must be wondering why they're missing from the assembly, why we haven't made the effort to liberate them as we have sought to liberate others. Believe me, I'm not advocating any invasions. I'm just trying to imagine how Zimbabweans or North Koreans, to the extent they are aware of what's going on beyond their borders, might feel.

Think of homeless persons in DC, including several we know and care for personally here at Grace. Facing anticipated drastic reductions in property tax receipts and other revenue sources, the DC Council has recently made significant reductions in the funding of the “Housing First” program, which aims to get homeless persons into secure and stable living arrangements so they can make progress on physical and mental health, employment, and other important issues. This program has already gotten many formerly homeless persons housed. But many are still in the streets. They must be wondering while they’re not housed, why they’re missing from the “chosen” for whom the District has made secure housing available. Again, I’m not advocating any particular response to current budget constraints, just wondering how some of our neighbors might feel.

Then we come to the issue of our personal lives. In almost every relationship, some piece of us is missing – some part of ourselves not recognized, not valued, by someone whose affection and esteem are important to us. That piece of who we are is on the wrong side of the Galilean border, feeling just outside of the embrace of Jesus’ compassion and healing power. That piece of us stands on the outside looking in – at a person, or a community – and says, “my right is disregarded. Some might think this relationship is complete, but I am missing from it.”

St. Paul’s life manifests this dynamic in ways that are, to me, extraordinarily poignant. He is in some way missing from every community of which he is, at the same time, an integral part. His belief in the Lordship of Jesus Christ has separated him from the Jewish community, though he still considers himself a faithful Jew. Former colleagues disdain and even persecute him. But the new Christian community never quite embraces him either. One senses throughout his letters, and in the book of Acts, that Paul is sometimes feared, sometimes scorned (“his letters are strong”, say some of his detractors, “but his personal presence is weak” – perhaps a physical disability of some sort made him less than imposing in person), but never really loved. He lavishes affection on the Philippians because they sent him a care package when he was in prison, but one senses that he carries on about this display of warmth toward him because it was so rare.

With all this in mind, let us hear with new ears Paul’s declaration today: “To the Jews I have become as one under the law, in order to win those under the law. To the Gentiles I have become as one outside the law, in order to win those outside the law...I have become all things to all people in order, by all means, to win some.” Paul finds Jew and Gentile, slave and free, poor and rich, all within himself, and shows them to the souls he seeks to win for Christ. Put differently: Paul includes within himself all that has excluded him, in order that the community of Christ may one day be complete.

Can we imagine a more efficacious therapy? God challenges and empowers us to do as Paul has done. What person or community has barred me from full inclusion? What Galilean border keeps me from the fullness of Christ's love? From what assemblies am I missing? Find all of these excluding realities inside yourself, God says, and will show you how to find your way into them.

Both Matthew and Mark tell the story of a Syro-Phoenician woman, hailing from an area just across the border with Galilee, who approached Jesus with a request that he heal her afflicted daughter. He tells her, with stunning bluntness, that he cannot take the bread meant for the children and give it to the dogs, i.e., those to whom he was not sent. This nameless woman takes into herself Jesus' rebuke, and having done so, finds a way into his heart. "Yes, Lord," she says, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the Master's table." Jesus, recognizing someone who knows him – can we say this? – better than he yet knows himself, replies: "O woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you have asked." Her daughter is healed instantly. Missing from the circle formed by Jesus' healing power, the Syro-Phoenician woman finds the one who has excluded her inside her own heart, and in doing so, sees the path that leads into the community to which she yearns to belong.

In this black history month we remember, among many others, Frederick Douglass. Born into slavery, Douglass took a vow in this 21st year to find a way to be free, to escape slavery. Reading his autobiography, "My Bondage and My Freedom" (an American masterpiece, which I highly recommend), we feel the power of a man who had found within himself the world which excluded him. A free man, a world of freedom, breathed inside of Douglass, and it showed him the way, much more surely than the maps he consulted, into the life of freedom.

Today, we invoke the spirits of the Syro-Phoenician woman, of Frederick Douglass, of Paul the Apostle. Within ourselves we find the whole world, those who welcome us and those who exclude us, the communities and relationships of which we are a part and those from which some piece of us is missing. Following in the footsteps of these giants of the faith, we find our way across the Galilean border and into our Master's embrace. We will not know full inclusion in our lifetime. We will always feel, in the course of our earthly pilgrimage, that we are missing from something of which we wish to be a part. Paul certainly felt this way to the end of his life, as did Douglass, and if we knew more about the Syro-Phoenician woman we'd probably know the same to be true of her. But they all looked to the great assembly of God's creatures which Isaiah beheld in a mystical vision – the one from which no one is missing, the abundant life Christ has

promised. And they knew themselves to be, as we are, on the way to the fulfillment of that vision, in the world to come if not in this one.