

The Beloved Community

communion meditation

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Matthew 4:12-25

carolyn dipboye

The story is told of a young rabbi, who found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for the prayers and half remained seated, each side shouting at the other that they were breaking with tradition. Despite how much he reasoned and pleaded, the young rabbi could get neither side to budge.

Fortunately, the synagogue's 99-year-old founding rabbi was still alive. In desperation the young rabbi sought him out in a nearby nursing home. He poured out his story, finally pleading, "Please tell me: was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Ah," responded the younger man, "then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"But what we have, the young man anguished, "is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream."

"Ah," said the older man, "*that* was the tradition."

Recounting the story, Barbara Lemmel, a pastor in upstate New York, smilingly (or maybe not so smilingly) observes: "When two or more are gathered, factions lurk in the midst of them" [*Christian Century*, Jan 6-13,1999]. As a result, countless workshops and publications have emerged in the last several decades, offering advice on how to manage congregational conflict. "There are steps to follow, profiles to complete, interviews to take, goals to establish. It's a serious business," she advises.

Is Lemmel correct? Is that the way it is with church? Is the church with its vast assortment of people necessarily fraught with the pain of contemptuous and multiple divisions?

The community of Jesus is made up of an imperfect people. Thirty-seven years ago as we were approaching marriage, Larry and I went to an older, highly respected professor of pastoral care on campus for pre-marriage counseling. I recall a session in which he asked me, "If in your marriage you find you need something from Larry, what will you do?" With all of the maturity my 24 years could muster, I knowingly responded, "I hope that I won't have to ask him, that he will just *know* what I need." It provided the perfect opportunity, and Dr. Haworth jumped on it immediately. Despite our romantic expectations, we are not mind readers, he assured me. We have to *talk* to one another in order to *understand* one another.

Is it possible that our understanding of Christian discipleship is similarly distorted? Many of us start out with a romantic idea of a one-on-one relationship with Jesus, not realizing the extent to which relationship with him entails relationship with his other children and having no idea of the amount of work that relationship will involve. Much on the order of the disillusionment that hits a young couple when the perfection they had anticipated in marriage is not instantaneous, they and we may choose to turn our backs and walk away. In doing so, they and we miss the riches gained in the long term, day-to-day work and growth involved in a loving relationship.

In our mind's eye we see Jesus walking along the seashore, calling first one and then a second pair of brothers to follow. "Immediately," the Gospel writers tell us, they "left their nets and followed him." Tempted to focus on *them*, rather than *him*, we tend to wax long and hard on the depths of their insight and courage. Yet the story which follows is anything but a story of perfect bliss. With their brutal honesty, the Gospels are anything but complimentary, depicting these early followers in their petty jealousies and power struggles, in their struggle and often their failure to understand, and in their efforts to dissuade Jesus from the road he would follow and their fear and abandonment of Jesus as he faces his most difficult hour. Discipleship, you see, has a learning curve; and for the disciples, imperfect, even as we are imperfect, it was very steep.

The community of Jesus is called to live in light of the Kingdom of God. Jesus came announcing the Kingdom of God, and yet the scene into which he stepped had its inequities and prejudices, even as ours does today. The brothers he called to discipleship along the shores of Galilee that day were not aristocrats, philosophers, priests or elite in any way. They were coarse, broad-shouldered, illiterate men, engaged in the unrelenting and filthy task of pulling massive loads of fish from the sea and rushing against time to get them sorted and gutted in time to get them to market. They were Galileans, disdained by Rome and Israel alike. Reputed to be the first to pick up arms and the last to lay them down, they were drained of their very life's blood by the oppressive taxes and fees levied upon them to support the lavish building program of Herod, Rome's puppet king.

And yet Jesus, choosing to initiate his ministry in Galilee, seems to have taken no thought of where he was and called the first people he encountered into his inner circle. Why? Was it that God had preordained these four? Was it evidence of Jesus' lack of management skills? Or does it say something about what a community formed in light of the Kingdom of God will look like?

Those who encountered Jesus in his earthly ministry and those of us who encounter him today are faced with the wide ranging selection of those who follow him. We may look at those gathered around him and find it

reassuring: “If he accepts them—maybe he will accept me.” Or, we may look at them and say, “I’m not going to hang around people like that!”

An accident of geography and timing? Probably not, for Jesus’ choice of those first disciples was just the beginning of a lifetime of putting himself and his community in companionship with those others most liked to exclude. Community lived in the presence of the coming of God takes on a whole new set of values and a wholly new sense of urgency.

On this day when Epiphany coincides with Martin Luther King’s birthday and Ecumenical Relations Sunday, the wide ranging diversity that we celebrate in Christ calls us to be disciples of his open, extended, welcoming, healing community. King spoke of it as the “beloved community.” It has been called the “capstone of King’s thought, “the organizing principle” of all of his thought and activity. Traced from his earliest days to his last book, it spoke of the solidarity of the human family.

In a real sense all life is interrelated. The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich; the betterment of the poor enriches the rich. We are inevitably our brother’s keeper because we are our brother’s brother [*Where Do We Go from Here?*, 181].

To be sure, it is a dream, but it is God’s dream. It is what community lived in light of the coming of God’s dream, God’s Kingdom looks like.

So, how about it? Is the church with its vast assortment of people necessarily fraught with the pain of contemptuous and multiple divisions? With differences and disagreements—yes. With pain—often. But with contempt? Only if we give up working. Only if we give up on the dream—*God’s dream*.