

Community
Christ Church
February 12, 2012
2Kings 5:1 - 14; Psalm 30; 1 Corinthians 9:24 - 27; Mark 1:40 - 45
Dr. Carol S. Franklin

Today (at the 10:30 service) we are baptizing a baby. I love baptisms because they are an affirmation of life and of community. As we repeat the baptismal covenant we are linked to a rich heritage of faith and to generations long gone and generations yet to be born. Who knew such wonder awaited us when we walked into church this day? For most of us our thoughts were likely full of the here and now, busy reflecting on our own lives, our own happiness and small discontents - content to be of the world and of the living. But all of that changes for us today and we will never be the same for through the water of baptism we become one people, God's people - part of a tangible community of believers all made in God's image.

As I prepared some thoughts for the day it was at first hard for me to reconcile the joy of baptism with our lessons. A couple of weeks ago Rev. Greer preached about how each of the scriptures during epiphany have been little epiphanies in themselves helping us to learn who Jesus is. For me the epiphany on this Sixth Sunday of Epiphany was one common theme - community. Through baptism we find inclusion in community. In both the Old Testament and the Gospel we find people forced into in the shadows and the outskirts of community. Then as He reaches out and touches the other we learn that Jesus Christ brings renewal of community.

The shadows that our lessons bring into our midst focus our attention squarely on the other. Though leprosy is not common among us, there are other forces at work in the world that isolate and foster that sense of otherness that makes some outcasts. There have been and are countless examples of people being separated from community, treated as untouchable or at least as 2nd class citizens. Many are the shadows in which lurk things we can't or won't deal with, artifacts of history that we seek to ignore and things that frighten us

There is a saying that Byrdie repeats to any listening ear - you can't tell where you're going, if you don't know where you've been. With these words she is affirming the

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importance of embracing and understanding our past if we have any hope of creating a different and better future. That means we've got to be willing to look into those shadows and to confront ourselves. That lesson was brought home to me as I walked through the holocaust museum in Jerusalem and looked in the shadows created when a people are isolated and demonized because they are seen as different. Millions brutalized and millions killed among them 1.5 million children under the age of 16 swept away from the arms of those who loved them. And it is reaffirmed on this second Sunday of Black History month as I reflect upon the sojourn of people of African descent in America who because of the color of their skin were considered to be and treated as less than human, relegated to the shadows by slavery and bigotry, segregation and discrimination.

Whether it be the Ghettos of Warsaw or L.A., the tragedy of Darfur, the killing fields of Rwanda, or the forced removal of Native Americans on the Trail of Tears, it is in those shadows that the unthinkable happens. When we allow our political rhetoric and social discourse to isolate, marginalize and even demonize others that is when the cross of Christ can become a symbol of hatred as it burns in someone's front yard. Today there are those who deny the holocaust every happened and there are countless others who continue to embrace an ideology that espouses hatred for and violence to those who are different because of skin color or creed or culture or gender or sexual orientation. If you don't know the history, you are doomed to repeat it.

Last Sunday Peter encouraged us to think about what we have in common and what it means to follow the witness of Christ. When we pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done." In the Lord's Prayer we are supplicants asking God to choose to act on our behalf. Just as Naaman and that leper and all those on the outside looking in we are all seekers wondering what decision God will make for each of us. We may not be asking for our skin back as does the leper, but we are asking for our lives to be redeemed and renewed. And in Jesus we find God's response - the end of isolation

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and a return to community. If we are to follow the witness of Christ we are called to speak out, reach out and carry the light of Jesus where there has been no light, making a way out of the darkness.

There is a famous quote or poem that has several different iterations but has its origins in a sermon or speech by Martin Niemoller a German pastor sometime in the late 1940s or earlier 1950s that poignantly details what happens when a community fails to speak out.

First the Nazis came...

First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out —
because I was not a communist;

Then they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out —
because I was not a socialist;

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out —
because I was not a trade unionist;

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out —
because I was not a Jew;

Then they came for me —
and there was no one left to speak out for me.

Silence, silence will be the death of us all. Like Martin Niemoller who in another sermon said that “We must openly declare that we are not innocent of the Nazi murders.” we must acknowledge that we are not innocent of the evils done to others in our name or the acts that isolate or belittle others within our community, be it our neighborhood, our city, our state, our nation or the world. We are called to reach beyond boundaries and breach the shadows beyond which the Trail of Tears and that peculiar institution can reside and like Jesus proclaim that singular truth that we are

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all God's children. We are called to create a community in which there is no us and them, just we the people living together in peace.

This Sunday's epiphany is not about leprosy or about what separates us one from another, it's about community. It's about renewing and remaking community and reaffirming that we are all one people made in the image of God. I don't know if you've seen that commercial on the USA cable channel where the channel's stars as well as just plain folks assert "I won't stand for" - hatred or bigotry, violence or abuse, or any number of evils that have been visited upon the other. I think if Jesus were alive today he would be among those "characters united," as the USA channel tagline goes, against the shadows and for a community big enough to encompass all people. His whole life, His very reason for coming into and being in the world was about breaching barriers and loving the unlovable and touching the untouchable.

Last Sunday Peter reminded us that we have an obligation to do the things of the gospel, to practice compassion for others and self, and to follow Jesus. Every time we baptize someone or repeat that baptismal covenant we affirm our place in that community of "characters united" that won't stand for others being marginalized, stigmatized or relegated to the shadows in which evil can thrive. We are the body of Christ in the world and it is up to us to love and to heal and finally to help make that world and the people in it whole again. Amen.