

WHEN ONE WORKS

Texts on Sunday, June 9, 2013

Deuteronomy 14: 22-29; Acts 4: 32-37

A long long time ago, I stayed two months with a commune in Copenhagen whose members aspired to hold all things in common and to decide all matters together, much like the practice in the earliest church, according to Acts 4. At the commune, holding things in common meant that one morning, my belt and jeans showed up on someone else's body. That was nothing important. After a while, however, I noticed that access to the best clothes and money and critical decisions was retained by the three members who had the greatest personal appeal and energy. Political intentions notwithstanding, only these three had real power, yet no one was bold to disturb the communitarian experiment with serious political reflection. Being one did not work there and the commune soon broke up.

A few years later, I served as communications coordinator for a liberal non-profit organization whose membership aimed to decide everything by consensus. Far from strengthening the voice of the people, however, the pretense of arriving at consensus actually shut speech down. Emotionally needy members sucked all the time and oxygen out of a meeting, but no means existed for the body to hold them to account. No vote could say "Stop!" More-balanced members ceased discussing things altogether, hoping to get the meetings over with. The principle of majority rule would have better served the value of free speech; as it was, unity eluded them. "One" did not work.

In those days, I had some acquaintance with another commune which was quite successful with consensus decision-making. They were a wooden toy-manufacturing collective. They had orders to fill, tools and raw materials to buy, homes to build and mouths to feed. There, consensus, which aims to elicit and honor the wisdom of each individual, was not a political game, but a risk of deep mutual inter-dependence. There, "one" worked.

What makes for unity? In Deuteronomy, the Jews are certainly feeling it. Their tithes were not given to a council of elders to use on behalf of the whole. No, they ate them up entirely during one week of celebrations all together. The spirit of "one" was working, and not just for the successful. The tithes made it possible for all the people, no matter how their lives were ravaged by disaster, disease, or domination, to come together as one: the *resident aliens*—today, that is immigrants, never mind their documents; *orphans*—today, that is anyone who had no parent when love and guidance was needed most; *widows*—today, that is anyone cut off from social and economic lifelines. All people rejoicing together with you and your household—that's who was expected for dinner in the community conceived in

the hearts of the faithful, and paid for by their tithes. One was working!

The church described in Acts 4 was “of one heart and soul,” and its people surrendered all their possessions to the community, so that there was not a needy person among them. Once more, we see real unity in community. Now, such a high pitch of sharing finds no emphasis in the rest of the New Testament or in the literature of the early centuries of the church, so we may assume that communitarian principles did not remain long in effect. But that fact does not diminish our dreams of becoming a “beloved community.” How often we say it, yet how seldom serious we are about the practices that can prepare people for more unity in community. When does one work?

Consider another example of highly effective, voluntary unity: the individuals who engaged in nonviolent resistance to violent racist oppression both in India and in the American South during the last century. They needed to be “all in,” totally committed to the group—even to a vision of “the group” that embraced the violent enemy. Like Dr. King, Rev. James Lawson awakened to the possibility of a wholly new kind of freedom when he studied Gandhi’s practice of *ahimsa* (meaning: no violence) that ultimately burst India free from empire. Gandhi had trained the resisters for his army of non-violence. A generation later, so would Lawson, for nonviolence does not work just as an ideal that gets your thoughts racing. It is not a belief held in the mind. Nonviolence is a habit of the heart, it is the strength to love. The resister had to prepare herself to feel after the meaning of the human world in a way the ordinary ego cannot feel it; not as countless separate persons pursuing their separate interests, occasionally connecting; but rather, contrary to all appearance, to sense the world comprising totally connected beings.

Gandhi trained his army to see that the policeman whose stick crashed in your head was following his required path, his *dharma*, just as the resister also followed hers in receiving that violence without violence. Lawson recruited his army from large numbers excited by the civil rights movement. He winnowed out the many who could not pass the emotionally trying tests he administered, and chose those able to prepare to undergo suffering for the sake of all. Lawson had them sign pledge cards! They pledged to subsume their feelings and their ordinary desire for safety and to submit their bodies for the cause. No longer I, me, me, I—for one person’s inward discipline to *not* react to violence was soon to be linked in a chain of life to every other person during a demonstration. One man’s lack of self-control could cause bullets and blood to explode on all the others. Oh, Montgomery and Birmingham, oh, Little Rock and Selma and Greenville—how one worked! Not just to free the oppressed, but even to free the oppressor.

There is a lesson to be read from these various communities we have been thinking about, whether from the Bible or from modern times. Two

of the communities failed. Members had nothing much at stake; they did not treat power seriously, could not make decisions well, and fell apart. "One" does not work when members take part or take off according to their own feelings and schedules. Unity fails when members are not willing to suffer together for the ideal under which they are gathered.

In the four examples where unity bloomed and gave much fruit, the members had a great deal at stake, and were held together by a great ideal for which they were willing to suffer. When Deuteronomy was written, a violent empire threatened tiny Judah and her beautiful city Jerusalem. The authors re-conceived the tradition of the tithe to draw the whole community together in bonds of love and the people received this as the word of God. The earliest church likewise came together under forces of oppression through bonds of fierce love united in testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Their free gifts of land and valuables symbolized their total gift of themselves, both to enjoy and to suffer with the body of Christ. In workers' collectives, the commitment to democracy far exceeds that found in society at large. Members engage real risks with one another, coupled with precious benefits of care and intention. This is love, anchored far deeper than emotions can ever be. Finally, as we have already said, the nonviolent resisters of the civil rights movement were all in, whether for suffering or for joy; whether they lived or whether they died.

Can the members of a church have a great deal at stake? Can a congregation teach a faith that lives deeper than the American habit of taking part only to the degree you like, or quitting when it's tough? Some answers to those questions are already written on the urban landscape of America, for tens of thousands of churches have closed their doors permanently in recent decades. They did not matter enough for their people to set their stake in the congregation. This is not necessarily awful. We can freely imagine that where God is doing a new thing, old conceptions of what church is for are just not part of God's plan. But finally, the question comes down to *my* church: Does my church matter to me enough for me to go all in, to learn to enjoy the benefits of beloved community more deeply, and to be willing to suffer with and for the body? Does my church matter in God's new thing?

How are you going to answer? You can say Yes with your mind or your mouth, but we have seen what happens to communities where the mind and the mouth rattle on with pretenses while the heart is already taking leave of the place. The only way to answer the question, *Does this church matter?* in the affirmative is by putting a big stake in the ground. "One" only works when members are willing to suffer together for the sake of the gospel. Now, in America, the government, thank God, is not interested in making us suffer for our faith. In America, the bumper sticker elicits gallows laughter: "If being

Christian was against the law, could they find any evidence against you?" So what is at stake?

There is one way to have a big stake in Riverside that can build up the beloved community. It's through your money. It matters to give up money in an amount that changes your life. It mattered to the Jews. It mattered to the early church. It matters to workers' collectives. Now, it may seem that nonviolent resisters had a stake in their community quite different from a money stake—their living bodies. However, there is a profound connection between your money and your life. In times when violence is not at the door, your money is a form of your body and your life. Money is crystallized time. It is a condensation of our personality, for regardless whether we hate our job or love it, those working hours were ours alone. Now that they are past, money remains as a sign of the labors and the time that earned that money. It is no wonder we are careful with money; it is related to our body.

But just as we must learn to use our body to serve others, and finally give it over to death, so must we always be learning of money not just how to use it wisely for our own ends, but how to let it go freely, to serve others not at our direction, and to build up a body gathered under the great ideal of love and able to pass its gospel to a new generation.

Are you all in? Are you ready to find out why Riverside Church must exist in this city and in this nation now and for generations to come? Say Yes, yet not with your lips alone. Start tithing now. Yes, 10%. Calculate it after taxes or calculate before—that makes no difference; or start stepping toward the tithe now. Yet however you do it, do not first pay your expenses and then give from the last fruits. Become a first-fruits giver, like them of old, so that your whole way of living shifts day by day to fit your new frame of giving.

Enter into this mystery. Like the nonviolent resisters who dreamed a dream for a whole world that did not exist, but who could never have seen the dream if their gift was not on the line, you can only see the Riverside that must be if you are all in. For those who hang back, the church will only be a source of grumbling and a sore of blame. But if you hope with all your heart and soul and strength that God can make God's will known on earth as it is in heaven through your church, taking part in God's new thing, then you will be able to see it. Giving liberally is not optional—for those who wish to see God's word live. I am with you for a little while longer, but I tell you, I am all in, with much at stake, for like you, I want to see the day when one works.

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*The Riverside Church
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