

CALAMITY AND COMMUNITY

Texts on Sunday, April 7, 2024

Psalm 133; John 20: 19-31; Acts 4: 32-35

Well! And you heard it said that communists were bad. That first church could have shared some notes with Karl Marx—the whole group “of one heart and soul,” “not a needy person among them”? What a community! Wanna join?

People drawn to inclusiveness enjoy using this word community. We call churches, synagogues, and masjids communities of faith and we give support to the gay community, the black community, the disabilities community, and more. We respond to the vision of “the beloved community” made beautiful by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. We may recall that in a speech delivered at The Riverside Church on April 4, 1967, King thundered that “we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values” from a “thing-oriented society” to a person-centered society, involving a transformation of the spirit and imagination in each and every citizen. Such community!

Well. How are we doing? As a society, not well. Perhaps some of us overuse the word community to help mask our dismay, even despair, over the fractious and deadly disarray in this nation which once held democracy sacred, however poor in performance. Maybe we’re just too overwhelmed by the news. For over forty years, we Americans have been wandering in the desert of catastrophe capitalism, yet no Moses, no promised land. If we just sit down and say that we have lost our way, perhaps we can admit a simple thing. We don’t know what is needed for unity.

Psalm 133 may have warmed something in us—how very good and pleasant when kindred dwell in unity—but it is not like seeing a familiar face. The unity of the church of those first apostles where the wealth of all was “distributed to each as any had need” appears to us a fantasy. We laugh: How long did that last? In the evening of the Resurrection experiences, according to John, the group is together for fear of persecution, and though they see their risen Lord, unity eludes them. Thomas will not join them.

All these communities emerge in calamity. The Psalms were mostly written during the relentless catastrophe that followed the exiles’ return to Jerusalem around 540 B.C. Their wealth was no longer theirs, their ruler was not theirs, the temple lay in ruin. Calamity. Except this. A new way of coming together was revealed to them, a new meaning for community. Synagogue they called it—to go up together. The psalms were sung into calamity.

We hardly need add color to the catastrophe of the crucified Lord that overshadowed the disciples—and then, in a mystery, found them bound fast in communities for decades to come. In a sense, the Bible is a hundred stories of catastrophe turning into utterly unexpected beloved communities—Jacob at last meeting Esau and Joseph his brothers, the rise of Samuel, Saul's demise, David's prize, Elisha's gifts as Elijah dies, Job's cries to God, Jeremiah's, Ezekiel's command that the dry bones come together, Paul and Silas joined with jailers in jail. If you don't read or know the Bible, might you take my word for it, that in here, beloved community comes from calamity?

Not always, alas. The unexamined needs of humans are too many and too unruly for our kind always to do what's beautiful when privation collapses around them. But far more than mere chance might direct, community rises from ashes. In 2009, Rebecca Solnit published *A Paradise in Hell*, whose subtitle names what the book explores—"the extraordinary communities that arise in disaster." Calamity and community. Put that book on your list; its many stories can kindle a flame. But let's ask, What is the spiritual and psychological connection between calamity and renewed community? What has this to say to us who live in the untied states of America?

When grievous loss befalls you or a society—when all we count on crumbles apart—two roads diverge for the path of life: it is either misery or growth. This is a spiritual law; it governs what is not material, what cannot be tallied or possessed. It governs the matters of the heart. Ecclesiastes has it that "God has put eternity in our mind, yet so that we cannot guess from first to last all that God brings to pass." (3:11 JSB) When this infinite imagination set in our mind is brought short by loss, it is a spiritual law that down one road lies misery. Everyone faces misery sometimes and it has many faces: addiction, denial, willful ignorance, cheating, lying, abuse, religious fanaticism, racism, nationalism, violence. All these have in common a desperate craving to control what is coming with a rudder stuck in the mud of the past.

But sometimes, a soul is served by calamity. Sometimes, rather than fight for the past, the coming of calamity frees a person, even a society, from attachment to what seemed settled and true. People may have trodden paths of misery for a very long time when of a sudden, like the prodigal son starving in the pigs' sty, they come to themselves. They awaken. They grasp that nothing on earth was promised; that nothing on earth can satisfy the eternity God has put in the mind; and nothing on earth can extinguish the eternal flame that burns in them as humble gratitude for the life we are given. A person can come to herself even while all the world is collapsing around her. Sometimes calamity sets the conditions for unity and community.

The ancients did not set their stories down merely to evoke awe in the generations with proofs that God once did marvels. Bible stories prove nothing. The ancients set these stories down because they themselves had come through calamity. From all their old truths, they had been severed and yet somehow delivered into a new spirit of unity and community. For them—for anyone ready to grow—truth is utterly transfigured, no more taking form as words true or false, as laws or threats obeyed or executed. Truth becomes—becomes—an event. From calamity, community: that’s an event; something up till now not perceived—is perceived. And no! the new perception is not the new truth or the new rule to be imposed. No, truth is the event, only the event is truth. This is why John’s story gives to doubting Thomas the peak experience of the Resurrection as event up from calamity: My Lord and my God! This story is set down to draw you toward the possibility of a new event of unconcealment, a new unity. Your own experience of God.

Alas, in vast numbers, our fellow citizens are more in misery now, in the spiritual sense, than at any time in living memory. Is it too simple to observe that the illusions of capitalism and race supremacy have collapsed and sundered old truths and beliefs, and that so much of religion is so saturated in materialism, that misery is the only road those eyes of the flesh can see? However that may be, millions are ready to see violence used to restore the truths of the past and to impose them on all as God’s own truths—banning books and imprisoning teachers for telling the stories of slavery and Jim Crow or sexual orientation; punishing doctors for caring for women; judging and gerrymandering democracy into a corner so that it starve to death. You see this happening. It is how fear and misery respond to the open future, a future where old truths have gone to dust and the relations among classes and races are no longer fixed. It looks like a hard rain is gonna fall.

What is the way now for any who trust that truth comes only as an event of unity, a revealing of what had been hidden, never a whip to wield nor a contraption for control? What is the way for us who will never make the road with violence; who will not despair or choose misery, though things fall apart; who will guard with our lives the precious hope that the only law be love; who pray and stand and act so that that law alone might come again into the heart of the people as the active principle of democracy?

This way of growth and not misery—in the world, this way is weak. It bears no armor and raises no weapon against any. This way does not expect the world will see it as the right way; that binary, right and wrong, is gone. This way is the way of preparation for an unexpected event of community arising from calamity. Is calamity really coming? Go ask the climate.

Yet for any on this way, the future lies open. We grow in our capacity to live without asserting that we “know the truth.” As we accept the astonishing fracture of reality for Americans according to which news and social media they watch, we grow. The game of claiming we’re right, you’re wrong, no longer rewards us as we live in expectation of an event, a revelation of new humanity. For love is the only law, the only event, the only truth.

In the epilogue of *Paradise in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit writes:

“Preparation for disaster must make a society more like that of the disaster utopias [told of in this book] in their brief flowering—more flexible and improvisational, more egalitarian . . . with more room for meaningful roles for all members. . . ” In the margin, I wrote Nice . . . but how? In the next page, she concludes, “But this will never exist whole, stable, and complete. It is always coming into being.” My margin note: Exactly. Truth as event.

When Thomas puts his hand in the side of his Lord, most translations have it that Jesus responds with a question. Have you trusted because you have seen me? The early manuscripts of this gospel do not indicate a question, but only a statement. You have trusted because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to trust.

Could it be more plain that this story was not written because it is “true” or because it happened. It may have, but that would be too small a thing. It was written for you and you and me, for any who hope to trust that no matter what calamity befalls, by your formation in the body of Christ, which is the body of this suffering world, you can pass through fire into the community God alone gives, by the law of love, the event of love, the only truth.

Three times, writes Paul, he besought the Lord to relieve him of an affliction, but God said to him,

‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

2 Cor. 12:8ff

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