

COMMUNITY
WC Lubenow
Sermon—25 August 2002

I speak in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen

Today's Gospel is about community building. Have you thought of how very curious it is who Jesus chooses to join his community? Last week it was the screaming Canaanite woman and her insane daughter.¹ In today's Gospel, it is St. Peter.² They are the cast-outs, the misfits, the marginal, and the unwanted. And out of these very miscellaneous materials Jesus makes community.

Today's Gospel, of course, is famous because its most central moment is St. Peter's confession. But St. Peter's confession is embedded in an extremely complicated and interesting story about the ways a community is shaped. There is a sense in which we know too much. We know two thousand years of church history, of St. Peter and the Papacy, of the quarrel between Roman Catholics and Protestants about the meaning of this passage in which Jesus says "on this rock I shall build my church." In a sense we know too much because we know how the story turns out. In this we lose something. We lose the sense of excitement and the drama of this story.

The excitement and the drama of today's Gospel lie in the complicated and complex ways in which traditions, contrary and complicated, serve as instruments of community building. What is gripping about this story is that we are presented here with two vivid and compelling traditions. One is a lost tradition; the other is a tradition yet to be born.

Jesus, in today's Gospel, operates in his usual sort of way. He poses questions rather than answers. Jesus asks two questions, and they are riveting questions, as riveting for our own time as well as for the time in which they were asked. "Who do they say I am?" and "who do you say I am?" The disciples and Peter give two answers to these questions. In giving their answers the disciples and Peter attach themselves to two different traditions.

¹ Matthew 15: 21-28

² Matthew 16: 13-20

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The disciples (we do not know which disciples, actually) say John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, “or one of the prophets.” They attach themselves, though Jesus, to the great past of Israel’s prophets. Those prophets called the children of Israel to return to the covenant God had made with Abraham and Moses. The prophets demanded that the children of Israel to return to their original values and to the God that had brought them out of Egypt and out of Babylon. The prophets were stern people, with a stern message. They required the children of Israel to change, to surrender their current values and practices and return to what God had called them to be. It is a point neatly illustrated in today’s Old Testament reading. Isaiah says: “Listen to me. . . . Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you. . . . Look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats.”³ It is a vision of an exhausted natural world which can only be redeemed by restoration of the ancient covenant. The disciples got their ideas from that great body of Hebrew literature, the books of Moses, the history of the children of Israel, the Psalms, and the writings of the prophets. But notice, this prophetic tradition was not one thing. It was not internally coherent and consistent. It pointed in several directions. On this though the prophets were agreed: they preached a gospel of change and freedom. For them change and freedom would come through restoration.

Peter attached himself to quite a different tradition. When Jesus asks Peter who Jesus is, Peter says “you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” What a different Peter this is from the Peter we heard about two weeks ago. In the Gospel two weeks ago, and Dr. McAfoos referred to it in his sermon last week, Peter could not even walk on the water. Today we hear about a Peter who somehow has a vision and an understanding about what the future will be. (Somehow, Peter’s faith failed him when his power is at stake but his faith succeeds when it is about Jesus). For Peter, Jesus is not a figure from the

³ Isaiah 51: 1-6.

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past whose identity can be discerned in ancient writings. For Peter, Jesus is a figure whose significance will be discovered in the future for the future. Notice, there is nothing coherent in the messianic tradition. In fact, messiahs did not close off, they opened up. Messiahs require change; after them nothing is the same. For Peter, Jesus brings freedom, but it is not freedom restored it is freedom yet to be achieved. How and when is uncertain. Peter's faith is not something passive and closed, something receptive. It is open, active, reaching out questing, seeking, searching. His identity, who he is (our identity, who we are), depends on achievement.

It is worth thinking for a moment about how Peter gets his idea about who Jesus is. Notice, Jesus does not tell Peter that Jesus is the Messiah. (And in fact, at the very end, Jesus tells Peter and the disciples not to tell others that Jesus is the Messiah.) And he does not get it from some musty text or from some version of Israel's history. In fact Jesus says "flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." Peter's understanding of Jesus comes not through Jesus but through some sort of imaginative grasp of what Jesus' life means. The very process by which Peter comes to this understanding is itself pregnant with change and ideas about change. It does not shut-off or close down or conclude an issue As the Archbishop of Canterbury-designate, Rowan Williams, has observed, "Revelation decisively advances or extends debate...it poses fresh questions rather than answering old ones." "To recognize [a tradition] as revelatory," he goes on, "is to witness to its generative power."⁴ This is what makes Peter, in a curious sort of way for one who lived in the first century of the common era, modern.

What is the role of Jesus in this story? First, Jesus provokes. By putting the questions he put, Jesus requires his followers to grapple with the central questions of their own identities and Jesus'. Second, Jesus does not direct or control. He does not say that those who called him a prophet are

⁴ Quoted in Rupert Shortt, "Faith, Freedom, and the Future: Rowan Williams's Engagement with Christian Tradition and Modern Thought," Times Literary Supplement, 19 July 2002, p. 12.

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wrong. Nor does he really say that what Peter says about him is correct. Third, Jesus makes no claims for himself. Finally, in these various ways, Jesus allows ambiguity to persist. Jesus is no divine dictator telling his disciples (or us) what to do or what to think. Jesus is a catalyst, urging them (and us) to reconsider what their lives have meant and pointing them (and us) toward different lives.

The central thing we learn from his Gospel is that communities can contain more than one tradition and yet remain united. Some disciples hold to the prophetic tradition. Peter attaches himself to the messianic tradition. Yet they remain united in the figure of Jesus. The second thing we learn from this Gospel is that both traditions are about change. The third thing we learn from this Gospel is that traditions are about liberation and freedom. These are the sorts of lesson which are valuable in thinking about what communities can be.

And all this brings me to a sort of point. Today's Gospel serves as a tool for learning about how we might build communities. After all it is a central feature of modern life that we all seek relationship. We are aware that to some extent or another we live in a world of brokenness. And in this world, while we have breath, the only recourse we have is to repair what is broken in relations. Communities, as Robert Putnam points out in his fashionable book Bowling Alone, are social.⁵ It was a point he made in an earlier book on democracy in Italy.⁶ Communities consist in those voluntary organizations which we subscribe to and which give heft and substance to our lives together. And, as Robert Bellah points out in a once fashionable book, Habits of the Heart, communities consist of feelings and sentiments.⁷ E.M. Forster's novels contain many ideas about lives lived together, but his central point is "Only

⁵ Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

⁶ Robert D. Putnam, Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁷ Robert N. Bellah, et. al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, updated with a new introduction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

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Connect.” Avoid movements, avoid causes, avoid doctrines and dogmas, and find meaning in the relations people can have with each other.

And so we can learn about community, and learn to build and change community. Not in one way, but in several ways. As the man said, “there is more than one way to kill fleas.” Are there some principles for community building? What I have said hitherto is the truth. You can count on it. However, I am reluctant to suggest ideas for community building because, after all, this is work we must do together. It is not for Senior Wardens, or Vestry people, or for Rectors, or for Associate Rectors to do by virtue of their offices. It is for people living and working together. It is a matter for keen interpersonal relations, a matter, as the Maestro put it in the hymn he sang at the offertory last week, of not loving the people we were, or the people we are now, but loving the people we will become. If you are going to take what I say next as some sorts of answers, stop listening and turn to the back of the Book of Common Prayer, to page 867, and amuse yourself by reviewing the Thirty-Nine Articles. Listen only if you will take in what I say as some tentative ideas which are meant for talk and thought.

First, communities are never stable or fixed. They are always changing. The issue is to try to understand what those changes are and what the implications of those changes are.

Have a vision. Keep it simple. Repeat it. Above all, use it. Open the vision to new and different meanings. Invite others to understand it and take it on board. A vision is not a dogma. It is a tool. What is important about a community is not what it has but what it believes.

Third, have a tradition. Use it. Traditions are not passive and inert. They are full of energy because they contain internal inconsistencies and contradictions. Explore those inconsistencies and contradictions to release their energies. As Rowan Williams has pointed out, a tradition “does not mean repeating what have been delivered to you by authoritative guardians of tradition. Its test is

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something to do with its potentiality for authentic comprehensiveness.”⁸ Traditions are not the enemies of change and innovations. They can be engines for change when they are understood. A tradition is not a dogma. It is a tool.

Fourth, learn to live without closure. Life goes on. It doesn't stop. Learn to love ambiguity. As that great Christian agnostic St. Augustine put it, if you think you understand it, it is not God. There is never control, but there is always choice. Mistakes are hardly ever fatal. It is always better to choose than to evade choice and have it made for you. There is never complete information. The ideas we have about that information are always flawed in some way. Don't be afraid. Fear is the enemy of life.

Fifth, organize life around values, not tasks.

And so I return to today's Gospel. It is the Gospel of freedom. It tells the story of the ways in which we can free ourselves from the limitations of our immediate experiences. There is, of course, a paradox here. Our liberation comes through community. It is not an individual thing. Freedom is a matter of our relations, the way we make, and the way we sustain them. Our identity, who we are, and, more importantly, who we will become, depends on the kind of community we form and reform. Jesus does not impose a vision on us. Through community, of which Jesus is a part of our tradition, we discover who we are, and so we become free. All of this is about our yearning for completeness and hope. It exposes our vulnerabilities. But without vulnerability and our consciousness of vulnerability, nothing can happen. To recognize our loneliness and ignorance, and the absence of intimacy opens our consciousnesses to the opportunities and the possibilities for change. It is not an easy way. But it is possible to impose mind, soul, and spirit on life and lives and transcend them because we are guided by the only things which are certain in this world, reason and love.

Christ is Risen. Amen

⁸ Quoted in Shortt, “Faith, Freedom, and the Future,” p. 13.

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7/24/2002 12:40:28 PM/ 63 (74) words: p. 1, beginning
8/8/2002 6:07:22 PM/ 160 (168) words: p. 1, Gospel
8/11/2002 2:38:45 PM/ 1,437 (1,515) words: pp. 1-5, Gospel, some implications
8/12/2002 8:43:27 AM/ 1,567 (1,645) words: p. 5, ending.
8/14/2002 11:48:14 AM/1,926 (2,013) words: pp. 5-6, principles for community building
8/17/2002 9:35:45 AM/ 2,055 (2,146) words: p. 2, Isaiah
8/18/2002 1:40:42 PM/ 2,157 (2,263) words: Peter, interpersonal relations, traditions
8/20/2002 8:01:54 AM/ 2,182 (2,289) words: p. 4, St. Augustine
8/22/2002 8:45:35 AM/ 2,203 (2,310) words: p. 7, ending
8/25/2002 3:46:33 PM/ 2,212 (2,319) words: correction