

Together in Christ
Pacifica Synod Assembly Sermon
Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson
May 7, 2010

Acts 11:1-18

Revelation 21: 1-6

John 13: 31-35

Grace to you and peace in Jesus' name. Amen.

Together ... together ... is "together" a word you would use to describe the whole ELCA? The Pacifica Synod? Your congregation? Our society? Your life? Evidence abounds that our reality is hardly one of togetherness. In fact, words like contentious, fractious, tumultuous, anxious, polarized, mean-spirited, conflicted, and chaotic are used more often as descriptors of our lives and ministries than is "together."

And when life becomes chaotic, conflicted, and contentious, it is only human to seek stability, or as systems theorists describe it, "homeostasis." In such a context, what comes to mind when you hear "together in Christ?" Maybe you become nostalgic for a time when it seemed there was more unity in the church. Ah, but beware of nostalgia. Listen to Christopher Lasch writing on nostalgia, "Functionally, nostalgia provides a temporary buffer against cultural upheaval and the dislocating effect of social change. The nostalgic perspective 'freezes the past' and so avoids confrontation with the changing realities of the present. While memory embraces the past in order to understand and inform the present, nostalgia dwells in an idealized past by definition unattainable and disparages the present."¹

If not making you nostalgic, perhaps "together in Christ" means for you the absence of tension in the church, a spirit of, "Can't we just all get along and not bring up *those issues* that create conflict?" Maybe your image of a synod assembly that is truly "together in Christ" would have no resolutions, no red cards or green cards, no votes with winners and losers. Beware, however attractive such an image might be for in fact, it would lead to the church becoming enclaves of the like-minded and it would be a long, long, long (Did I say long?) way from the church we read about in today's lessons.

Each of our three readings comes out of a time of great conflict, tension equal to or greater than we have been experiencing in the ELCA in recent months and years. Yet God does not urge God's people to try to recreate their glorious past, nor does God encourage the people to turn inward, withdrawing into themselves or forming enclaves of the like-minded. Rather, God gives a vision. Wow! So have you seen any visions from God lately?

Why do visions from God seem so unimaginable to many of us? Could it be because we prefer to look to the future through the lens of goals and strategies, missional vision

¹ Paraphrased in Penny Long Marler, "Lost in the Fifties: The Changing Family and the Nostalgic Church" *Work, Family and Religion in Contemporary Society*, Nancy Tatom Ammerman and Wade Clark Roof, eds. (Routledge: New York, NY, 1995) 26. See also Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1991) pp. 82-83.

statements, time lines, and bottom lines? But is such the stuff of visions from God? We can become so immersed in the realities—the struggles of the moment—that we see life as:

- a problem to be solved
- change to be managed
- conflicts to be resolved

rather than a vision from God to be lived.

Visions from God are visual. They are seen. Visions from God are aural. God speaks through visions so they also are heard. But visions from God are to be lived—they are missional. Visions of God’s promised future are lived. And they transform our lives, our ministries, our realities, and, yes, even our togetherness in Christ.

Peter was getting some mighty angry e-mails. Bloggers were having a field day. Why the complaints about him could even be sent on Twitter. “Peter, why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” You can just sense the controversy, can’t you? “Peter, don’t you remember what the law of God says about circumcision? Who do you think you are to disregard what we faithful Jewish followers of Jesus know is necessary for unity: that Gentile believers must be circumcised just like us.”

“Peter, you are causing such disruption! How will we as a young church even have a chance to thrive in mission?”

Peter’s critics seemed to be saying, “Peter, you have made such a mess of our ministry that we will just need to clean it up ourselves.” So they began to clean up Peter’s mess by sorting—sorting the clean from the unclean, sorting the pure from the impure, sorting the circumcised from the uncircumcised, much like sorting laundry.

When Peter was praying in the city of Joppa, he saw a vision in a trance, a vision from God. It was a vision of dirty laundry: a large sheet lowered down from heaven filled with unclean animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. Visions from God are visual—seen—and they are aural—heard. A voice said, “Get up, Peter, kill, and eat.” Lest you think visions from God are not disruptive of your tidy lives and our ordered way of maintaining unity and doing ministry, think again. Peter’s response was perfectly understandable, “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.”²

Beware, good people of the Pacifica Synod of the ELCA, for when God sends a vision, God is persistent, for God intends the vision to transform our reality. God gives a vision not for our dreaming, but for our living.

It is possible either to become so skeptical or analytical about visions that we miss hearing God’s word spoken to us in the vision. We can miss God’s word of promise and God’s word of command.

The word of the Lord came to Peter saying, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”³ It is God’s work (not ours!) to make things clean. We know that from the biblical story of cleansing lepers. It is what God did through Elijah and Elisha. It is what Jesus did—not just cleansing lepers of their disease but cleansing lepers of the exclusion of social stigma that kept them isolated and marginalized. Oh my, do we need a clear vision from God for our commitment to those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS?

² *NRSV* Acts 11:8

³ *NRSV* Acts 11:9

Jesus being about God's work of cleansing is precisely what caused the stir that became the controversy that led to Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus cleansing sinners of every stripe, washing away religious and cultural barriers that excluded women and silenced children, Jesus going into the stench of death in Lazarus' tomb. Lazarus came out with Jesus' commanding, "Unbind him. Let him go." Finally, Jesus did it for us on the cross, cleansing all creation, all history of sin's power that separates and divides humankind from God and from one another.

Now the risen Christ sends the Holy Spirit to be poured out more widely than ever imagined, so even the Gentiles are gathered into the community of Christ's body, the church, without having to be circumcised as the law required. Wow! Now there is a vision from God that changes reality—a vision that moves a community of Jesus' followers from being preoccupied with defining and deciding who is welcome and on what terms they are to be accepted to Peter asking, "Who was I to hinder God?"

What if that became a missional question that every member and every congregation in the Pacifica Synod pledged to ask and struggle with between now and your 2011 Synod Assembly? Who am I/are we to hinder God? Then take the question deeper: What of my actions and attitudes hinders the cleansing, faith-creating, reconciling work of the Holy Spirit? To what are we, who are white, clinging so that we may preserve our power and privilege but also hinder God's cleansing work? What am I doing to create obstacles to our being together in Christ as a multicultural, multilingual, multiethnic Pentecost church? To what might we be holding onto in our identities as Lutherans that may hinder God?

I predict absent a vision from God, lacking a vision of God's cleansing work, these questions will fade quickly away and we will be known as another denomination in decline that is divided over sexuality rather than as a people living a vision of God's promised future, a vision that transforms our reality and challenges our most deeply held convictions.

Talk about the power of a vision from God to transform reality. Can we even begin to fathom the power of the vision John showed with those early Christians in Rome being persecuted and martyred for their faith? "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more."⁴ What a vision from God! The sea was no more. No, it was not the production of an ecological disaster such as we are now experiencing on the Gulf Coast. The sea in Scripture was the symbol of chaos, the place from which the evil Leviathan comes. The sea separates and divides. The sea is an abyss without form, a void into which we fall when life holds neither meaning nor hope. "I saw a new heaven and a new earth. [T]he sea was no more." God comes down to dwell with God's people. Death no more. Tears wiped away.

Oh sisters and brothers, just try to imagine the power of such a vision of God's presence for people literally being killed by the Roman Empire. In February, we were with an ELCA delegation in Rome. We went down into the catacombs, those hallowed and hollowed out spaces in the walls where those martyrs were buried. We gathered around a table placed in one family's tomb. There with Word and bread and wine, we received Christ's merciful gift of forgiveness. There in Christ, we were joined together with the communion of souls of every age, with those martyrs who clung to the vision of

⁴ NRSV Revelation 21:1

the Lord on the throne making all things new even as the Roman Empire sought to preserve all the old ways of domination and perseverance.

Oh sisters and brothers, do we?

- Do we trust the promise and power of God's vision for our lives?
- Do we claim it for Christians leaving the West Bank out of despair there will never be a just two-state solution?
- Do we believe it for Iraqi churches being persecuted?
- Or might we even believe it for those creatures, those species, becoming extinct by our consumptive living?

This is the vision from God. This is the promise that the Lord makes all things new. That promise is for you, for your congregation, for the Pacifica Synod, and for the whole ELCA. Through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, God is making your life new. God is joining us together in Christ. God is sending us into a world that knows all too well the reality of death, the thirsting for clean, uncontaminated water, the hunger for daily bread and justice, the longing for an end to poverty and mourning.

Into that world—God's world—the Holy Spirit sends you to live God's vision.

- Live it by loving one another just as Jesus loves you.
- Live it by wiping away the tears of those who mourn.
- Live it by going into places of death and proclaiming the presence of the risen Christ.
- Live it in your stewardship of God's creation.
- Live it by proclaiming in Word and deed your struggle for justice and peace.

Jesus is making all things new. These words are trustworthy and true. Amen.