

Come Together -- Epiphany 3A

The divine may come to life in individuals, may reveal itself in individual people; but it attains its earthly fullness only where, having awakened to an awareness of their universal being, individual beings open themselves to one another, disclose themselves to one another, help one another; where immediacy is established between one human being and another; where the sublime stronghold of the individual is unbolted and one person breaks free to meet another. Where this takes place, the Eternal arises in the Between. The seemingly empty space, that place of actualization is community, and true community is that relationship in which the Divine comes to its actualization among human beings. (Martin Buber—*On Judaism*)

This making room for the holy phenomenon of relationship is our universal vocation. Sometimes we feel more excited about it than others. Sometimes we just want to head for the hills, or down an empty stretch of beach or highway for a while to be by ourselves. But the old adage, “Wherever you go, you’re still there” hold true for the devout as much as for the rest of us. We can’t run away from ourselves.

The Desert Mothers and Fathers were early Christians whose piety and hunger for spiritual clarity led them to spend their lives as hermits. Their movement, begun in response to the persecution of Christians by Roman authorities, eventually grew into what we now know as monasticism: Nuns and monks and other religious. One story illustrates that even in the desert there is no escaping our own habitual responses:

A brother was restless in his community and often moved to anger. So he said: "I will go and live somewhere by myself. And when I must talk or listen to no one, I shall be tranquil, and all this painful anger will come to an end." So, he went out and lived alone in a cave. One day he filled up his water jug at the well and put it on the ground. It happened to fall over. He filled it again, and again it fell. When it happened a third time, he flew into a rage, snatched up the jug – his only one -- and smashed it on the rocks. Regaining his composure, he saw that the demon of anger had mocked him and deprived him of his livelihood. He said: "Here am I all by myself, and still the evil one has beaten me. I might as well return to the community. Wherever one lives, the need for effort, patience and God's help never abate." He rose up and went back, a wiser and more peaceful fellow.

Likewise, no matter how we try to separate ourselves from the realities of life and the problems of society, for us there is always the sense that, one way or another, we can be useful, we can participate somehow in lessening the isolation and pain in the world by encountering others.

"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light," declared Isaiah, "Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death— upon them has the light shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; for the yoke of their burden you have broken." The shadow of death is meaninglessness and isolation; the great light is mutuality. The burden is unshared pain, the yoke, isolation: when our cries go unanswered. Our joy is increased when the numbers of people we consider to be true friends

increases, and when the spaces of the world we consider safe, welcoming and free to move around in grows.

Life can be scary. We live in a time when the majority of us would agree. When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he got outta Dodge – in this case Galilee. He made his home in Capernaum by the Sea to participate in a community, a place where his pain could be shared, his cries could be answered and his work bear fruit.

Because had a plan. The prophecy of Isaiah had a greater meaning for Jesus than mere analgesia for his own grief over cousin John's brutal fate in Herod's house of horrors. Jesus knew he had work to accomplish. He also knew that it was work that by definition could not be accomplished alone, because it was the work of community -- the sharing of joy, the hearing of each other's cries, the breaking of burdens and healing of divisions – and so he had to have an organization.

Last week we heard John's version of the story, here we have Matthew: "As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon and Andrew casting a net into the sea and said, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' Straightway they left their nets and followed him. He saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father mending their nets, and he called them too. Straightway they left their boat and their father, and followed Jesus." This is most certainly not a call to abandon one's parents, but a statement of the truth: there are sacrifices to be made, comfort zones to be expanded, even left behind, paradigms to be shifted, habits to be broken, systems to be overhauled, if the light is to

shine on everybody. That is the nature of the Kingdom of God.

Our commission too is to go out and make disciples for good; to make community, to out and encounter one another one-on-one with the assumption -- the certain knowledge -- that we are with God's children. We must understand that whatever the balance or imbalance of our worldly power and resources, we have common interests. We are to listen and engage carefully and consistently enough to discover those common interests and build friendships, alliances, enterprises on foundations of mutuality with the materials of benevolent power.

We are not bidden to curl up, count our blessings, close our eyes and hope nobody bothers us. Chaos returns when everyone is expected to count on their own luck. Those of us who can must engage with and organize those who cannot. This is politics as the way of Christ. If we fish for each other, we can feed the world.

Paul wrote: "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me that there are quarrels among you, that you say, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Cephas." Or 'I'm a Conservative,' 'I'm a Liberal.' 'I'm a Democrat,' 'You're a Republican.' We are witnessing where that kind of thinking leads us. "Has Christ been divided?" asks Paul, "Was I crucified for you, or were you baptized in the name of Peter?" The only way to thrive is to organize; belong to the big organization, which for us is the Body of

Christ at work in the world. I must not act in the name of me, but of us. Struggles for wealth, significance and heroic dominance by so-called leaders and their instigators have led to all the troubles we have ever had. Think of how the world would look if we were competing for the privilege of enabling others to thrive.

As Martin King concluded, “The road ahead will not always be smooth. There will be still rocky places of frustration and meandering points of bewilderment. There will be inevitable setbacks. There will be moments when the buoyancy of hope will give way to the fatigue of despair. Our dreams will sometimes seem shattered and our ethereal hopes blasted. Difficult and painful as it is, we must walk on in the days ahead with an audacious faith in the future.”

Zimzum is the word from the Jewish Kabbalah that describes the one moment immediately preceding Creation, when God withdrew enough of God’s power from a particular space in the Universe to make room for the World. Our most creative acts proceed from the *zimzum* moments that follow one another in our lives without ceasing. Our most creative acts are those that make room for somebody else – people, creatures, natural phenomena. The sparks of divine energy that remain trapped in pieces of the broken water jugs of the world are begging to be gathered. It is our task to begin gathering them today, so the world might be repaired.