

The Second Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Patricia Millard

3-04-07

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17 – 4:1

Luke 13:31-35

As most of you know by now, one of my passions in ministry is working with bilingual and multicultural communities. I am currently serving as the Spiritual Director for a Spanish language Kairos team, and every time I meet with them, I am profoundly moved by the deep faithfulness of this group as they prepare themselves to bring the love and the witness of Christ into the lives of those affected by incarceration.

And when it comes to training leaders to minister faithfully and well in an increasingly diverse world, our diocese of Los Angeles is pretty much at the cutting-edge. So, for example, as part of my own continuing education, I spent this entire week at our Diocesan Cathedral Center, attending a Kaleidoscope Institute workshop on leadership skills for building inclusive community models.

It was a great week. One of the high points was being asked to officiate at a Eucharist with a Korean Methodist Pastor. With about 20 minutes of planning, we planned out and then co-celebrated a Eucharist that was ecumenical, trilingual, and multicultural. Another high point was the conversations and the stories; and what I want to share with you this morning, is one of the case studies that was offered to us by the presenter, Eric Law, on his own work in working with congregations that are struggling with conflict or with issues of diversity.

The setting where the story begins is a familiar one, an ordinary parish, an ordinary town somewhere, that was founded in the 1940's and really grew and thrived in the 1950's. As Eric tells the story, those were "the good years." The church was full with young families, the Sunday School classes were full, and so many people attended the worship services that they had to buy folding chairs for the sides and back of the worship space.

But the 1950's were followed by the turmoil of the 60's, then the 70's, then the 80's. The babies and children grew up, finished high-school and went off to college. A few of them came back, but most of them didn't. Sure, there were families that moved into the area, people that joined the church over the years, but gradually the numbers in the congregation started to go down.

One year, the pastor realized they didn't need the folding chairs anymore, so they went into storage. Sure, they still came out for the big services: Easter and Christmas, but then there came a day when even those services went just fine without the folding chairs. Then came the gradual consolidation in the Sunday School. Instead of 2's and 3's, there was "toddlers", instead of 1st, 2nd, 3rd, grade, there was "Elementary", instead of 5th and 6th, there was "Junior High." One by one, classes that had once been filled with children were closed, or used for storage. The congregation gradually grew older, even as the neighborhood around the church gradually changed to a completely different demographic.

One year, the governing body of the church, realizing that finances were getting tight, started renting out the facilities to a Korean congregation, which began to meet there on Sunday nights. And for a while, all went well. The Korean congregation paid rent, and for the most part, the Anglo congregation felt good about having them there.

But the pattern continued. In the Anglo congregation, there were few, or maybe no baptisms, and lots of funerals. Meanwhile, every few months or so, the Korean congregation would have a baptismal Sunday and add another 25 children and adults to their numbers. So it really came as no surprise that there gradually developed a sense of tension between the two congregations. People started to complain, things like “they left the kitchen dirty again”, or “the parking lot was full when we needed it”, all sorts of little tensions that, bit by bit, got more and more pronounced as the difference in numbers between the two congregations continued to increase. Finally, the level of tension in the system got so bad, that the pastor of the Anglo congregation realized he had to do something about it, so he called in a consultant.

So the consultant, that’s Eric Law, comes in, and after talking to the pastor, they decide to have a history day. Each congregation has their own space, in fact, they meet separately, and much effort is put into creating a safe and welcoming place where the congregation can begin just telling its stories. People are divided by decade, and they record everything they remember of their history as a church. So the Anglo congregation remembers, and celebrates those years when the church was full, when there were children all over the place. They record all those gradual changes over the years. And they come to this place where they really look at each other, a rather small group of people, mostly in their 60’s and 70’s. The place gets really quiet, and they finally just name it. We are a dying congregation, and we are so sad, and we are so scared. We are old, and there’s just no hope.

In our reading from Genesis this morning, Abram is also an old man. A long time ago, the Lord had promised him children. In fact, the Lord had promised him many descendants. Abram and Sarai had left their native land, and traveled to Canaan, and then to Egypt, and then back to Canaan. The years had passed, and Abram and Sarai grew old. And Sarai was barren. I imagine he, also, must have also felt this fear, a poignant wondering that was almost too much to bear - will this Lord who called me into so much traveling and moving really keep that promise of blessing, or was it all for nothing. Then, again, one more time, the Lord appears to Abram. This time, Abram voices his fear, fear of the Lord, and fear for the future. “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless... "You have given me no offspring.”

There’s just no hope. Have you ever felt that way? That all the promises of the past remain just dreams, the present is uncertain, and the future looks hopeless? Or that things are just too far away from God. Like Jesus, looking at Jerusalem as he travels towards what, he knows, will be his death, and the city just doesn’t have a clue. Our Collect this morning speaks of a God “whose glory it is always to have mercy” – and asks God to bring us back, to turn back to God, “with penitent hearts and steadfast faith.” But left to our own strength, even the act of “turning” may be more than we can bear.

And if all we had was this Lenten journey to Jerusalem, “the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it,” - if ALL we had was the cross, then few, if any of us, would have the courage to be vulnerable before the Lord our God, the courage to “repent”, the courage to be truthful about our fears, about our brokenness, and about our pain.

Small wonder, then, that the years pass us by, as the years passed by for the congregation in our story, and we find ourselves hiding our fears under a cloak of denial and silence. We become our own “Jerusalem”, stoning the prophets that would lead us out of our hopelessness, rejecting the ones God would send us to deliver us from the reality of our pain.

But God tells Abram, “Do not be afraid, for I am your shield.” But Jesus tells Jerusalem, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings” But Paul tells his people on Philippi, “Your citizenship is in heaven... stand firm in the way of the Lord.”

And so it was that, in a margin of grace created by remembering and gathering stories in the Name of Jesus, the good people of this aging church gathered their courage as well. Courage enough to come together with the Korean congregation. Courage enough to share their story. Courage enough to tell them how they grieved, how hopeless they felt, how it felt to know their community was dying. Courage enough to be vulnerable. Courage enough to be truthful.

And, after the Anglo group had shared, the Koreans began to share as well. They told of the pain and loss as well, how it felt to immigrate into the United States, and lose identity and a sense of having a place to belong. How it felt to be a minority, to have no place to worship, no place to create a sense of community. And after that, they spoke of their profound gratitude towards this Anglo congregation who were giving them a place to meet. Over and over, they said, “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” We had no place to be, and you welcomed us. Thank you, we are so grateful. Thank you.

"Look toward heaven and count the stars" says the Lord. "So shall your descendants be." And Abram believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness". And the Lord kept the promise.

Gathered together in the Name of Jesus, right there, in the middle of all that grief, all that fear, and all that gratitude, the miracle of the Gospel, the miracle of the Resurrection, began to take place. The miracle itself was extraordinarily simple – someone had the idea of sharing the children, children who were growing up knowing both English and Korean. The Korean families started “adopting a grandparent” from the Anglo congregation, and the Anglo congregation started “adopting” a Korean child as “their grandchild.”

It was that simple. Almost overnight, the tensions vanished. Birthdays became special as the families came together to celebrate each child, and the two congregations came together around “our” children. And it wasn’t hopeless anymore, because these children became the future, and these children became the blessing of God.

The good news of the Gospel is that the stories of our lives, and the stories of our communities, are not meant to end on a cross in Jerusalem, just as God never wanted this community of faith to end its life without hope and without a future. Even on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus would point to the Resurrection, reminding those of us who do our best to follow him now that, just as Abram believed God and received God's promise, the Resurrection of Jesus promises us the grace and courage to follow, to move through the complexities of this life as we see it, and into new beginnings, faithful action, transformed communities, and mended lives.