

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany Year C
Luke 6:27-38

Community

Standing in this lovely space, with the beautiful stained glass, the pipe organ, the piano, the vestments, the acoustics which are a dream for any musician, all of which our forebears built and handed down to us, and which we maintain at no small expense, and hearing today's scriptures read, I experience some cognitive dissonance.

In today's reading from the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we hear Jesus say "and from anyone who takes away your coat, do not withhold even your shirt". We hear Jesus say "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you". We hear Jesus say "give to everyone who begs from you". In other places in the same chapter of Luke, Jesus reprimands the Pharisees for putting the letter of religious law above human need. Jesus says "congratulations you, the destitute, because God's kingdom is yours". Jesus says "damn you, you rich people, because you've had all of the comfort you are ever going to get".

It's easy to think that the author of Luke must have been exaggerating to make a point here, because who can live like that? We can't go around naked, right? We can't give to everyone who begs from us and still pay the rent, right?

But the early communities of Christians, the first generations after Jesus, the communities that produced the gospels and other writings in the Christian Scriptures, meant exactly that. They were radicals. At least some of the early Christian communities required that you give all of your wealth and possessions to the community when you converted.

It's easy for us twenty-first century Westerners to think about these questions in individualistic terms, and overlook that the early Christians organized themselves into communities to accomplish the mandate Jesus gave us. So let's think about how we organize ourselves into communities.

Many Christians, at one time or another, will start thinking about how we might recapture this sort of radical engagement with the reign of God. I have a pretty deep-seated uneasiness about relying on an institution, any institution, as the pathway to find the Reign of God. I have an enormous longing to find a group of misfits who meet in the basement of a church, organize themselves as a collective, write all of their own

liturgies, sing shape-note hymns a cappella, and generally worry more about trying to live the Gospel than run an institution.

But I'm here today.

I remember that the only reason that the church basement exists is because an institutional church, probably very much like this one, exists. Twelve Step groups, immigrant safety training, gardening societies, craft groups, and recorder societies have a place to meet because that church exists. Some church basements in Chicago are sanctuaries housing immigrants.

I believe that church pastors should have a lot of training, a living wage, health insurance, and a retirement plan, and we haven't figured out how to do that without an institution.

Recently Mariann Budde, a bishop of the Episcopal Church, preached at a prayer service attended by the president; preached a message very in line with what we heard in the Gospel today. The president and significant elements of United States Christianity were very unhappy to hear that, and accused Bishop Budde of all sorts of things that I'm not going to repeat. If it wasn't for the institutional church, Bishop Budde would never be in a position to preach directly to the President of the United States.

Right now there is a lawsuit brought by 27 religious groups, including the Episcopal Church, making the case that allowing immigration enforcement officers to enter churches for deportation raids irreparably harms our ability to live the Gospel as we understand it. That lawsuit only exists because of institutional churches.

The institutional church is not the Reign of God; it is the toe in the door that lets us do things that nudge the world in the direction of the Reign of God. Which gives me hope, but I think more is still needed to respond to Jesus's preaching.

We are in the process of learning how to manage this church without a hard working, 24/7 onsite, and honestly overfunctioning rector, and if it feels like we've become a bit less "ourselves", a bit more like any other Episcopal church, I am with you. If you saw the pie chart that was presented at the annual meeting showing where we spend our money, and cannot quite square that with the Gospel we just heard – I am SO with you.

How do we live the radical call we hear proclaimed in the sixth chapter of Luke (and really all of the Christian scriptures)? How do we manage to be All In living the Reign of God like the early Christians, while living in the reality of today's world? How do we

cherish, maintain, and perhaps grow this church without making the institution our biggest job?

These are not rhetorical questions; they are the questions we face today. And I'm not here to answer them; at least not all by myself.

As much as I admire prophetic individual voices, I believe communities working together will be the leaders in figuring out how to be Christians, how to do Christianity, in today's world. Saint John's is in transition right now, and the question of what sort of church we are called to be is right in front of us.

Please take time to dream about, pray about what you hope for St. John's in the future. Participate in the coffee hour conversations Meghan is leading; the next one about parish size theory is very useful in understanding how we operate as a community. In the coming months, the Search Committee will be publishing the Congregational Assessment Tool; please, thoughtfully and prayerfully, answer that. There will be smaller group discussions to talk about where we are and where we want to go.

As we do all of these things, I am sure of this: if we center generosity, connectedness, empathy, selflessness, and love – the radical things Jesus teaches us in the Gospel of Luke – we will be on the right track.

Stephen Linam
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