

Where Justice Gets Done, Community Matters

Ezra 1:1-7, 3:1-4 & 10-13

The Third Sunday in Advent

December 15, 2019

Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

You just never know what might happen when God “stirs up a spirit.” It happened earlier this week when a United Methodist Church in Claremont, California church set up their display of a nativity scene “depicting Jesus, Mary and Joseph as refugees in cages to draw attention to the conditions faced by migrants seeking asylum in the United States.”

“The Claremont United Methodist Church, about 30 miles east of Los Angeles, posted the photo on its website showing the three held in separate cages topped with barbed wire. The baby Jesus is wrapped in a silver foil blanket (my add: the kind our govt issues to individuals, including children separated from their parents today) Lead Pastor Karen Clark Ristine said, “We thought about the most famous refugee family in the world, the family of Jesus.” (NCC Weekly) More than 5,500 children have been “placed behind the fences of Border Control detention centers” in the last three years in our country; this “welcoming” church saw the connection between God’s Child and all children and decided to act.

God’s spirit stirs things up in other places as well. Here in *this* community God’s Spirit has stirred up Boyertown Multi-Service to expand its outreach to the community and add the Ricketts Center to its list of ways it brings hope and change to people in need. Lydia Messinger, the Executive Director of Boyertown Area Multi Service, met with the Pottstown Ministerium this week and described the changes planned to renovate, reopen and revitalize the Center

here in Pottstown. Her vision was met with enthusiasm among the gathered clergy as we began to image the possibilities for the Center and all who use it in our community.

And the Spirit was stirring in the text we read for today. The book of Ezra begins with these words: “In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia...” who in accordance with God’s word, ordered the rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem! It’s amazing what can happen. Injustice gets called out, renewal becomes possible, and that which was destroyed is rebuilt where justice gets done!

Throughout the Advent season we are imagining what the reign of God looks like when it comes among us as we anticipate the birth of Jesus once again. We know that where justice gets done, *words* matter, words that invite and include. We know that where just gets done, *places* matter, places that welcome and places that are accessible in every maner. And so, this morning we consider the fact that where justice gets done, *community* matters. It matters to the California church that has historically sided with the marginalized; it matters in our own city as proponents for wellness advocate for the revitalization of a community center meant to serve all just as it mattered in the Hebrew bible, when the prophet Ezra recalls the return of the exiles of Judah to Jerusalem. Community mattered, then and now.

The King of Persia was unlike the later Roman rulers who could not see beyond benefit for themselves when exercising jurisdiction over the people. Cyrus was an exceptionally thoughtful and appreciated king! Scholars say, it is rather remarkable that upon conquering Babylon, Cyrus both frees the Jewish exiles to return to their homeland *and* helps fund rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. How did this come about?

“A notable feature of the Persian empire is its integration of a great diversity of peoples into a single administrative system, while at the same time maintaining a tradition of respect for their local customs and beliefs. The Assyrians, and the Babylonians after them, destroy the temples of their adversaries. But the Persians are different. Though they have their own gods, they are polytheists. Their attitude is that having more gods on their side, who are favorable to them and to their rule, is a good thing.” They know something about the value of community! Make friends, not enemies. Work alongside the interests of others, not against them. Cultivate the positive currency of restorative justice over the negative, destructive power of retributive justice. Collaborate more, dominate less. Community matters where justice is done.

And so, the Persian king returns the exiles to their homelands and begins to build the temple with resources of his own, and of others who have freely decided to chip in. The text tells us that “The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites—**everyone whose spirit God had stirred**—got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the [YHWH] in Jerusalem. All their neighbors aided them with silver vessels, with gold, with goods, with animals, and with valuable gifts, besides all that was freely offered. King Cyrus himself brought out the vessels of the house of [God] that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods.” It was a *community* effort: the foreign king, the people who had returned and even those who had chosen to remain in exile all pitched in together in response to God’s “stirring” and *together* they began to build the Temple once again.

This is pretty amazing! This king had no obligation to invest of himself or his resources in the work of a conquered people. The returning exiles had been estranged from Jerusalem for

generations; they had no obligation to undertake such a costly and laborious effort of rebuilding. And the people who stayed in exile---for there are always those who are too “tired or complacent or comfortable to become pioneers once again as God leads us”^{*} were in no way “required” to use their wealth to reestablish the Temple in a place they were not intending to live, and yet they *all did!* *Together* they each experienced something of God’s “stirring”, as Ezra describes it. A movement so compelling that self-interest was set aside for the interest of the whole and most importantly, *the interest of God*. And *together*, the rebuilding was begun. *Together*, they laid the foundation of the altar on which to give themselves and their offering once again to God. *Together*, they revived their spiritual center and rededicated themselves to the work of God amongst the nations. Because *that’s* when happens where justice gets done.

Where justice gets done, people come together, united by a common cause, a solid core, a compelling vision of what the reign of God looks like in any given time and place. And we are told in the text that together, they “they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the YHWH, “For God is good, for God’s steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” *Together* they shouted and sang and prayed and praised, even though among them there were folks who were struggling. There were people who remembered the old Temple, in all its splendor and beauty, it’s wealth and riches. They remembered the loss and grief of its destruction and the pain of exile and they wept, the prophet tells us.

Isn’t that how it is, in community? That even in a season of rejoicing, there are those who weep, who’s loss and grief continues to be real and raw, and so *together* we hear and hold them, *together* we comfort and carry them, *together* we love and lift them until the day comes when they too can join the song of wholeness once again. That’s how community works. We

don't have to feel the same, look the same, be the same. Rather what unites us is our authenticity. What brings us together is our passion. What binds us is the one who stirs our hearts and calls our spirits to love and respect, to liberate and to care for *all* people, regardless of who they are. Where justice gets done, community matters. God draws us to Godself and to one another by the stirring of our spirits that we might embody the compassion and grace we have known ourselves.

In this Advent season, there are many who remain in exile: those in grief and despair, those in holding cells and jail cells, those in poverty and hopelessness, those on the margins and those invisible. In this Advent season there are also those who are rejoicing, who have been called home anew, who celebrate life and give generously of their resources to serve others and the world. And there *are* those with power who see beyond themselves, who see the world from a different perspective but who can value the benefits of seeing people united for a cause that serves us all, justice.

Kevin Ruffcorn writes, "change is inevitable as we grow and mature as disciples of Jesus. The fact that we change outwardly is not enough, though. The Holy Spirit seeks to change us from the inside out. By doing this the changes become a true expression of who we are..." as followers of Jesus in the world.

It is not enough to wish for justice; it is not enough to pray for justice. It is our call and work to bring justice to our community with our community. We are not the saviors, God is. We are not the center, God is. We are not the answer, God is. But we are a part of the saving, part of the centrality of God's justice here, in this place, this town, this world. We say in Advent that

Jesus is coming, and it is so. But we also remember that he is here. He is here in us and in our community. May we have the courage to embody the One from whom we wait, and in doing so, both build and become community in this place.

*(http://www.jesuswalk.com/rebuild/01_return.htm)