

Church of the Crossroads
Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 1, 2006
World Communion Sunday
Neal MacPherson

“A SILENCE OF COMPLICITY AND SOLIDARITY”

Isaiah 25:6-10a

Psalm 96

Acts 2:1-21

Somehow, the Christian Church in the West should have known better, had it really listened to the message of Acts Chapter 2 and its description of the Day of Pentecost. It should have known that Christianity was destined to be a world religion rooted in an equality of languages and cultures. After all, on the Day of Pentecost, which has been celebrated as the birthday of the church, people from every known nation on earth were gathered in Jerusalem, and heard the good news of the Gospel proclaimed in his or her own language.

Given such an auspicious beginning, it is surprising how quickly the original vision was lost. Christianity soon became dominated by one culture, the culture of the West, and also the languages of the West, most notably Latin, German, and English. Christianity became a Western Christianity, and that Western Christianity gradually grew to dominate world Christianity. Asian Christians were nurtured in Western Christianity, as were Christians from Africa and Latin America.

That day is no more. A kind of justice is being achieved, thanks be to God. No longer is world Christianity dominated by the West. The center of Christianity is now to be found in Africa, and also Latin America, and to a lesser degree in Asia. The Christendom of the West is fading; a Christianity of the southern hemisphere is rising. The emerging Christianity is not the same as the old Western Christendom with its alliance between church and political power. The emerging Christianity of Africa and Latin America and Asia is much more of a grassroots phenomenon.

All of this was confirmed for those of us who were privileged to be part of the Bicentennial Celebration of the Haystack Prayer Meeting held just one week ago in Williamstown, Massachusetts. By the way, Carrie Bail

and Darius Jonathan send their love and greetings to Crossroads. Carrie, the pastor of the First Congregational Church of Williamstown, was at one time very much a part of our church community here. It was in Williamstown 200 years ago, at Williams College, that five young students got caught one day in a thunder and lightening storm. They took refuge under a haystack. Under the haystack, they prayed, and heard a call to carry the Gospel into all the world. These five students inspired the birth of the American Board of Missions and its missionary activities in many parts of the world.

Much has happened in the two hundred years since, including the missionary effort here in Hawai'i, but nothing quite as startling as the disestablishment of Western Christianity and the growth of non-Western Christianity. From my perspective, this geographical and cultural shift is not to be lamented. It is to be celebrated as an example of how God's justice can come about in the world. For it was unjust that Christianity should have been dominated by one culture and its languages. It is far more just to have a Christianity that is truly a worldwide community of equality, in which each may hear the gospel proclaimed in his or her own culture and language.

The question remains as to whether or not Western Christianity will be able to learn anything from this great shift that is taking place. Will Western Christianity, and especially American Christianity, continue to behave as though it is superior and in control? Will Western Christianity learn to let go of its theology of glory and triumph and center itself in a theology of the cross? Will Western Christianity learn how to be far more modest in its faith and witness? Will it be able to capture the spirit of that 1st century Christian movement with its reliance on the grace of God and the working of the Spirit? Or, will it seek to recapture the power and dominance it once had in the world?

These are important questions, and you probably know where I hope the church of the West will end up. I hope and pray that a spirit of modesty will dominate our witness in the world. I hope and pray that we will center ourselves in a theology of the cross rather than in a theology of glory. I hope and pray that we will be willing to become vulnerable so that the grace of God might work through us. Acknowledging and accepting our new position in the world can lead to these things, and can therefore get us in touch with the life and ministry of Jesus in a way that we have seldom known before.

The struggle for life and wholeness, justice and peace, takes place everywhere, of course, including in your life and mine, and in the city of Honolulu, but when it comes to the world as a whole, the real life and death struggles are to be found elsewhere. They are to be found in the embattled Christian Communities in war torn Palestine, in the Christian communities of Iraq (which we tend to forget much of the time), in the Christian communities of Lebanon and Syria; in the AIDS ravaged communities of Africa, in the base Christian communities to be found throughout Latin America and Asia. These are the communities with which we are called to be in solidarity, as we pray and work for peace and justice in our world. And yet, we cannot reach out to these Christian communities without an awareness of our complicity in their suffering. It is our economic power that is impoverishing the lives of those who belong to these Christian communities in Africa, in Asia, and in Latin America. In many cases, it is our weapons that are wreaking death and destruction upon them as well. Let us remember that the Israelis used American weapons in their attack against the people, including the Christian communities, of Lebanon. When it comes to the wellbeing of the world, we have much to confess.

On this worldwide Communion Sunday, we of the Western Christian church are invited to enter into a silence of both complicity and solidarity. Silence, because what the struggling Christian communities elsewhere in the world need is not our talk but our presence, because have talked too much in the past and have tried to control Christian mission too much in the past. Complicity, because, economically and politically, we are responsible for so much of the world's suffering. Solidarity, for the Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The phrase, *silence of complicity and solidarity*, is found in Paul Farmer's new book, *Pathologies of Power*. From Tracey Kidder's wonderful book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains; Healing the World*, you will remember that Paul Farmer is the Harvard doctor who has given his life for the impoverished people of Haiti, and elsewhere. He uses the phrase to describe his presence in a meeting in Chopas, Mexico, in which a group of Guatemalan refugees were planning to establish a mental health project in which they wanted to exhume the dead who had been killed and tortured by Guatemalan forces using U.S. weapons.

They wanted to locate and disinter those buried in mass graves by the army. Why? Because the victims had been "buried with

their eyes wide open.” And neither they nor their kin would know peace until they were buried properly. “So that their eyes may close,” explained Miguel, who, along with Julia, spoke as their leader.

Paul Farmer recalls,

“My own eyes were stinging, but not from the smoke. Again, a silence fell over us, this time a silence of complicity and solidarity. Ophelia spoke first, saying that we who would never know their suffering would try to do our part, and also that we would bear witness in the hope that such crimes could not be committed so readily in the future.

- *Pathologies of Power*, p. 4

My friends, World Communion Sunday, that Sunday of the year when we become acutely aware of the world community of Christians, calls us of the West to practice a silence of complicity and solidarity as we seek to be in relationship with our brothers and sisters who are struggling for health, justice, and wholeness in so many corners of the world. Let us be silent, and listen to their voices. Let us keep them in our prayers. Let us remember them each time we come to the Lord’s Table and recall the vision of a world in which sharing by all will mean scarcity for none.

And then, let us, relying upon God’s grace, seek to be faithful witnesses to the struggles of our brothers and sisters in our community and world, including those places of political and economic power. And let us seek to shape our own life, witness, and ministry, in our time and place, in light of the life and ministry of Jesus, who came so that all might have life and life abundantly, and in keeping with the peace and justice and spirit of human solidarity that God wills for our world. May it be so. Amen.