

“Serenity Now!”

I think that most people don't realize how difficult it is to be a church ... to be the Body of Christ within a certain community. Each individual has their own thoughts as to what a church should look like; have their own definition as to what defines a church, have their own expectations as to how a church should function. Therefore, I also think that it is wise for any church after Easter to reflect on what it means to be a church ... what were God's intentions once Jesus “ ... arose again from the dead ... ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty?” Often there is a gap between the church as God has called it to be and the church as it actually is. There can be a depressing difference between the church as it is portrayed in the Bible and the church as we experience it in our own lives. However, I believe that by fixing our attention on the church as the living Body of Christ today called to live out the good news of the gospel, we can be led by the Holy Spirit to *be* the church, by the grace of God, as it is meant to be.

I begin with our lesson from Acts, a very significant portion being chapter 10 and 11. Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, devotes an unusual amount of space to tell the story of Peter and Cornelius, Peter and his trial. Unusual because in ancient times a writer did not have unlimited space to write. Writers used rolls of a material called papyrus, which was the forerunner of paper and was made from a kind of bulrush. A roll of papyrus was approximately 35 feet in length, so a writer had to choose his words carefully and write concisely. And yet, Luke writes in unusual length and detail for two chapters. That tells us that this information is very important and significant for the church to preserve.

One important fact is our unawareness of how close Christianity was to becoming just another kind of sect in Judaism, like the Sadducees. All the first Christians were Jews and the whole tradition and outlook of Judaism would have moved them to keep this new wonder to themselves and to believe that God could not possibly have meant it for the Gentiles (pagans, everyone else). Writes William Barclay: “Luke sees this incident as a notable mile-stone on the road along which the Church was groping its way to the conception of a world for Christ.”

Another important fact in the proof of the power of the resurrection is the quality of the Easter community. Few barriers are stronger than the wall between Jews and gentiles. Israel had survived through the ages because of its dietary laws that prohibited it from sharing at the table of gentiles. And yet Peter, the premiere disciple, has done just that. He has gone among the gentiles and shared food with them. How could this happen? Peter's behavior is scandalous.

The church calls a meeting and demands that Peter explain himself. Peter does so by repeating the vision of the sheet and the animals. In that vision Peter has learned that with God, there is no distinction. The amazing thing in this story is not so much Peter's unique vision of God's inclusive love, and not so much that Peter has changed in his opinion of the place of gentiles in the kingdom. The real miracle is this great historic epiphany that is stated in Acts 11:18: *When they heard this their doubts were silenced. They gave praise to God and said, “This means that God has granted life-giving repentance to the Gentiles also.”* At that very moment, after much debate, disagreement, defending traditions, the church, the whole church realizes that the love of God is boundless. God's promises have come even to the gentiles. I am sure not everyone agreed, but I am just as sure that this is “the church as it is meant to be, the church as it is seen through the gracious eyes of God.”

The Body of Christ is a representation of the boundless love of God that unites people, despite their differences, around the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This definition reminds me of a story:

Once upon a time, the colors of the world started to quarrel. All claimed to be the best, the most important. Green said: “Clearly I am the most important. I am the sign of life and of hope, the color of grass, trees, and leaves; there would be no plants or creatures.” Blue interrupted: “You only think of the earth, but consider the sky and the sea. It is water that is the basis of life, and the sky gives peace and serenity. Without my peace, you would all be nothing.” Yellow chuckled: “You are all so serious. I bring laughter, gaiety, and warmth into the world. The sun is yellow, and every time a sunflower rises up, the whole world starts to smile. Without me, there would be no joy.”

Orange jumped in next: “I am the color of health and strength. I may be scarce, but I am precious, for fruits and vegetables of my color carry the most important vitamins. When I fill the sky at sunrise and sunset, my beauty is so striking that no one gives a thought to any other color.” Red could stand it no longer, and shouted out: “I am the ruler of all of you. I am blood --- life's blood! I am the color of danger and bravery, passion and love!” Purple rose up, then, and proclaimed with great pomp: “I am the color of royalty and power. Kings and bishops have always chosen me for their own, for I am the sign of authority and wisdom. People do not question me! They listen and obey.”

And so the colors went on boasting, convinced of their own superiority. Suddenly, there was a startling flash of brilliant lightning. Thunder rolled and boomed. In the midst of the clamor, Rain began to speak: "You foolish colors, fighting amongst yourselves, each trying to dominate the rest. Do you not know that you were made for a special purpose, unique and different? Join hands with one another and come to me." Doing as they were told, the colors united and joined hands. The Rain continued: "From now on, whenever it rains, each of you will stretch across the sky in a great bow of color, as a reminder that you can all live in peace. The rainbow is a sign of hope for tomorrow!"

Peaceful, composed, tranquil, unruffled, and untroubled are not always the adjectives that come to mind when we think of the church. The root of serenity lies in the notion that there is a clear, cloudless path ahead without storms. This calls to mind an episode from the television series, *Seinfeld*, in which George Costanza's father, Frank, pleads for serenity, as he feels trapped in a world that is coming apart at the seams. Who can blame him? We, too, feel like shouting to the heavens "SERENITY NOW! SERENITY NOW! ... in the midst of war, economic uncertainty, constant change, impending environmental challenges, continuing economic inequality, political chaos, and corporate greed.

Frank Costanza's particular contribution to the search for serenity is the creation of his own holiday to compete with the usual Christmas craziness. It's called "Festivus." A website describes this invented holiday this way: "During the last few weeks in December when Festivus takes place, families and friends get together at the dinner table and have something call the 'Airing of Grievances.'" During this time, we share with family and friends all the ways they had disappointed us over the past year. After the Airing of Grievances, we get together during in the same night to do something called 'Feats of Strength.' This is where the head of the household tests his/her strength with another friend or family member." Also part of the holiday is gathering around the Festivus pole which is a plain six foot aluminum pole.

Now this holiday seems to be more about venting than celebrating. Of course, venting will no doubt bring some momentary serenity, but at a price! Though one might not appreciate the outcome, I can understand Frank Costanza's search for some alternative source of personal serenity. It does seem that there are plenty of people who have found something less than complete serenity in their faith community. As one author writes: *We long for a time when the church was serenely perched above the conflicts and controversies that divide others.* Yet, idyllic hope bumps up against practical reality with Peter's experience. "What? Welcome the Gentiles on equal terms. Serenity now!" True serenity may only come from entertaining the way God handles the grievances God might have for the way we have allowed the things to take shape in His world. God's power is not made manifest with the celebration of Festivus, but the beginning of knowing that God's power is made perfect in the midst of our weakness.

In Luke's retelling of Peter's experience, the church deals head on with the controversy. It does not take long for the Jerusalem church to get to the heart of the matter. "So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying: 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?' Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step ..." They asked Peter to tell his story. Peter does not respond to their questions by answering with "why" he went to the Gentiles, but with a personal narrative that explains "what" had brought him to the Gentiles. The object of Peter's story is less to convince and more to get the Jerusalem church to think. As he makes his personal testimony, then moves to the word of the Lord:

"And I remembered the world of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" Then Peter proclaims the common experience of the whole church: "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" Certainly, Peter has the apostles and believers of the Jerusalem church pondering ... for they are silenced, yet full of praise that "... God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." Serenity came to the Body of Christ at Jerusalem through personal testimony, scriptural citation, and direct conversation that did not allow the conflict to grow. The witness of common faith experiences within the Body of Christ brings serenity to any church that faces an uncertain, possibly stormy, future.

Yes, it is difficult to be a church, but not so difficult to be the Body of Christ, to be the church God meant us to be, the Easter people ... if we listen to one another, if we witness our personal faith, if we ground our mission in the scriptures, and if we allow our faith to change us. This was the way of the first church. This must be the way for today's church. Let us adhere to the experience of Peter, as well as to the wisdom of the Rain ... for whenever it rains, each of us needs to stretch ... stretch across the sky in a great bow of color, as a reminder to ourselves and each other that we can live in peace ... that we, as the Body of Christ, can be a great sign of hope for today and tomorrow. Amen.