

RUNNYMEDE UNITED CHURCH

THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

January 24, 2010

Word Alive

Nehemiah 8: 1-12; Luke 4: 14-21

Wisdom from that 20th century philosopher and observer of the human condition, Charlie Brown: Charlie leans against a tree as Lucy asks: 'What do you think security is, Charlie Brown?' Beginning one of his classic soliloquies, he replies: 'Security is sleeping in the back seat of a car when you're a little kid. You've been somewhere with your mom. It's night. You don't have to worry about anything. She takes care of everything.' Lucy smiles: 'That's neat, Charlie Brown.'

But, of course, Charlie Brown never quite knows when to stop. With a serious look on his face, he continues. "But it doesn't last. Suddenly, you're grown up and it can never be that way again. You're in the front seat now. Suddenly it's over; you never get to sleep in the back seat again!"

Lucy, visibly shaken, asks, 'Never?' And Charlie Brown, equally devastated by the impact of his own words, replies 'Never!' They stand there for a couple of silent frames, sensing a terrible loneliness awaiting them in adulthood. Finally, Lucy reaches over and says: 'Hold my hand, Charlie Brown.'

Charlie's 'Never' predated 9/11, but it speaks to 21st-century fears. When will you or I ever sleep securely in the back seat, again? Can anyone hold our hands enough to allay the fears?

'Hand-holding' is a high and noble calling. But if and when that phrase carries a pejorative connotation, it is because some trivialize the idea that we are to care for one another, for we are all, at one time or another both helpers - hand-holders - and helped - those who need our hands held. I wonder if we understand that more deeply, more sadly, this month than ever, as Friday night's rolling hours of benefit concerts covered the globe, suggesting a fresh understanding of Paul's words to the Corinthians: "If one part suffers, all suffer together." So, Paul described what he understood to be the 'new' way of relating that came with Jesus.

Karl Marx, you may recall, called religion 'the opiate of the people'. To him, religion seemed a kind of drug, a narcotic which allows one to continue on with things as they are, even if they are very wrong, or an anaesthetic, which numbs the user into caring little about this life because of a focus on a life to come. Could it be that Marx did not know of our Gospel reading for today? Or, perhaps, not enough Christians knew about it to influence his perception of their faith by their actions.

At Nazareth, with all eyes fixed on him, near the beginning of his ministry, Jesus reads from Isaiah. 'God has anointed me... to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives... recovery of sight to the blind... to liberate the

oppressed'. Jesus declares that vision has been realized. Imagine the remarkable authority in that brief sentence addressed to a hometown audience: "Today, in your hearing, this text has come true." Word, alive.

I've heard this passage called 'The Nazareth Manifesto'. Touché Marx! This kind of hand-holding brings God's Word alive. It reminds us that our reaching out is an intentional, perhaps risky, act of solidarity, a source of strength and power, a channel for the work of the Spirit, for connection with Christ's body.

Could it be that Lucy, reaching out for Charlie Brown's hand, was doing more than merely retreating from fear? Life, from the perspective of the front seat, can be frightening, but it does not have to be experienced alone. Perhaps it is in the simple impulse to hold another's hand that our true security is located: we are one with another; our identity springs from our connectedness, oneness, sense of community. One body.

These are familiar affirmations. Do they roll off the tongue and echo in the ears with little capacity to startle or surprise? Or do they challenge, call for reflection? Today's readings echo them, bring this word alive.

Nehemiah offers a vivid glimpse of the nature of the community of faith. The Hebrew people have returned to Jerusalem after 50 years of Babylonian exile. It is time for rebuilding, renewal. How do they begin? By gathering! All the men, women, children gather, from early morning till noon, to hear the Torah, God's Word, read, interpreted. Rebuilding begins in hearing God's Word. In response, they weep, cry out, 'Amen!', prostrate themselves in worship before God, whose word they have experienced anew.

After considering together the meaning of what they have heard, they are sent forth rejoicing - to serve others. Word, alive.

Ezra and Nehemiah, leaders of people who weep before God, exhort them not to grieve, but to rejoice and feast, for this day is holy. And the great meal, spread out among them, is to be shared by all, with portions sent to those who have nothing. It was this faith within which Jesus was nurtured, lived, carried out his ministry.

Our worship asks the same of us. And that, too, is how we know the Word, alive among us: we bless, sing, pray, listen, think, respond. We acknowledge grief and taste joy. We feed each other and are strengthened by the Spirit to provide for those who have nothing.

At the core of the Jesus' ministry is this image of a gathered people: central to our identity, fundamental to all aspects of faith, what it means to be the Body of Christ... In this 21st century world, it may seem a contradiction, alongside such mantras as individualism, personal property, the nuclear family.

It is perhaps in order to challenge these ideas that we are called to insist on the communal aspect of our life, the centrality of this weekly gathering we call 'church'.

This is not to suggest that you can't meet God on ski slopes or encounter the Spirit alone in a canoe on a lake. Nature certainly reveals the divine. But, Psalm 19 reminds us that to be in touch with God's judgments, God's Word, is to taste something even 'sweeter than honey, fresh from the honey comb...' Something unique, essential, comes out of the gathering of the faithful to experience God's presence and wisdom.

Jesus challenges the hearers in the synagogue - and us: Today, something new is happening.

We are people of faith; we are people of the Book, the Word, alive among us. Perhaps in a world of Facebook, Twitter, i-phones, we need to take that description more seriously than ever. I'm not suggesting a mindless literalism that encodes God's word in stone. We know that time and place, language and circumstance colour objective truth. But we also know that our sacred texts point to a truth by which we can become, not passive recipients of a media blitz, but active participants in God's word, alive among us.

How do we become people of that Word? First, we open ourselves to God, in disciplines of prayer, reading and meditation. *Be still and know that I am God.* God's message to ancient seekers of the divine is even more timely in a world of cell-phones and electronic agendas. We need silence and stillness to 'read, mark, learn and inwardly digest' the scriptures, as an old prayer puts it.

I remember a story of Dylan Thomas telling actors rehearsing *Under Milk Wood* to 'listen to the words - love the words.' What if we were to love the words of our faith? What if we took seriously Jesus' sense that being in touch with God's word means dreaming of alternate realities, that that is how God speaks to us and through us? Is that not what Jesus is encouraging us to do? Is that not what Martin Luther King did when he spoke of having been to the mountain? Is that not what we see working to bring healing and hope to a ravaged land?

Jesus says: *Today, in your hearing, this text has come true.*

Lucy says: *Hold my hand, Charlie Brown...*

Our faith invites us to meet God in Jesus who calls us deeper into the Word - of love and justice, caring and sharing, being still and reaching out: who calls us to a constant journey towards God. God's story does not change; God, who is Love, is the God who is alive, fully alive, among us, giving us wisdom and strength to discern the word in our world. Amen.