

May 3, 2009

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B

Acts 4:5-12

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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NO OTHER NAME?

I received a note from a friend and parishioner this week confessing both that she was no longer sure that she could believe the teachings of the church even as she remained passionately committed to this community of All Saints'. Today we are baptizing a number of people into the community of the Church, a community that puts up all kinds of stumbling blocks to commitment, even as we hope those who are children will make commitment their own later in their lives.

Not least among these stumbling blocks, at least for modern sensibilities in which we are painfully aware of how religious differences are part of the complexity of bloody conflict in our world, --not least are claims made by some Christians to an exclusive corner on God's grace. One of the bases for such claims is found in Peter's speech to the rulers, elders, scribes and family of the high priest in Jerusalem in which he says of Jesus: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

But let's take a look at what is going on in the story before building a theological empire that allows crusades and bloodshed and dominance over others all in the name of God. Peter has performed a *mitzvah*, an act of kindness when he healed a lame man.¹ At first people thought that Peter was a kind of healer with special power, and he had to get that sorted out saying clearly that the healing power was not his but was the power of God.² By nightfall Peter and his companions were under house arrest and the Temple authorities were in a tizzy.³ And so we come to today's story in which the authorities make clear their concern. It is not meaning. They don't ask questions about resurrection or healing. No, their concern is *power*. "By what power or by what name did you do this?" The authorities wanted people to be faithful but under their tutelage and their control, and so instead of asking questions about resurrection and the mercy and grace of God, they enter into a conversation about power with people they have taken by force.

What Peter is saying is not 'the Holy Spirit has brought a new brand to the religious marketplace'. Peter is saying rather: 'there is no human power of construct or theological system or religious authority that can bring about health and salvation, but

¹ Acts 3:1-10

² Acts 3:12-16

³ Acts 4:1-4

only the grace and generosity of God'. He is not talking in an a world informed by television and internet and 9/11 about the vast worlds of faith by which, at best, humans have found ways to put their trust in the source of life and the ground of their being. Peter is talking in a much more narrow world in which the primary competitors for allegiance were Israel or Rome and he wasn't going to get caught in that flytrap. He was saying that healing comes from the power of God and the Holy Spirit released in and through the life and person of Jesus, whose story he tells.

Woe to all Christians who rather than bearing witness to God's grace and telling the story of Jesus try to control others. Woe to those who seek to require a particular way of thinking. Woe to those Christians who resort to force and threat rather than reflecting the gracious invitation of God. Woe to those who resist the expansive love of God when it seems to rock our worlds, doing things of which we don't approve, like making clear that 'those people' --whoever they are,-- are also within the love and grace and mercy of God. This passage is not about my power versus yours, my theology versus yours. It is about God's power above and beyond all our systems, all our ways of organizing our experience.

So back to my friend and her problem with believing the teachings of the church: more often than not I find a misapprehension of both belief and the teachings of the church under such concern. And those misapprehensions, if that is what they are, result from ways in which Christians have tried to exercise power in the history of the church. Take the creeds. Many labor under the idea that when we say the creeds we are meant to be giving intellectual assent to a series of dodgy or incomprehensible propositions. And there have certainly been times in our history when authorities have suggested exactly that, and demanded that such intellectual assent be to the original meaning as intended by the councils that promulgated the creeds. Suddenly the effort to be clear about the meaning of the story of God's grace and generosity in Jesus becomes a power tool in the hands of controlling humans. When we say "I believe..." or "We believe..." we are saying something more like 'I put my trust in...' or perhaps 'I belove...'; 'I take as my beloved...' So the creeds become the bare bones outline of the story by which we receive appropriate witness and make sense of the abundant grace of God. This involves our intellect as it involves our whole being, but it is not about some grand institution demanding or enforcing intellectual assent (or the pretence of it) for the alleged God and stability of society. 'Belief in the teachings of the Church' need not be a stumbling block to faith once we unhinge it from giving intellectual assent to improbable claims and return to the more relational act of placing our trust in God and bearing witness to the good news that we have received.

There is, of course, much more that could be said, but for now what we do is rejoice in making new Christians who join with the whole body in finding life and grace and hope in the generosity of God in the midst of this community of faith. Acts of generosity do not have to be a threat to power (although sometimes they will be) and such *mitzvot* are on display in this community more than any one of us will ever see.

A woman donates a kidney to a stranger. A scared and unemployed man volunteers to help with our annual appeal. A woman, not part of any formal group or

ministry, cares for an elderly and lonely man until he dies, makes his funeral arrangements in the absence of any family and closes what little estate he has left. Our finance committee decides to recommend increased giving to those in need. A family befriends a refugee family, formally at first until real friendship blossoms and gifts begin to flow in all directions from that relationship. A committee digs into their own pockets to make a gift to an AIDS ministry. It happens with structure of the church as well: Our vestry decides that lesbian and gay parishioners should be encouraged to celebrate their commitments in the midst of this, their community of faith. (That act of thoughtful generosity and justice did get the authorities upset.) A single woman supports financially and anonymously a family in trouble. A man educates a student that he met on a mission trip. This is the stuff of life that reflects the generosity of God. These, and hundreds of thousands of kindnesses and miracles like them, are the marks of grace in this community who put our trust in God, creator of heaven and earth, and take as our beloved Jesus, the Christ, in whom there is health and salvation. Amen.