

Living Into Resurrection: One in Mind and Heart

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We welcome our pastor emeritus, Dr. Al Hart, and the other accomplished musicians of the Elders of Jazz back to our sanctuary. This is part of this church's tradition, dating back to heaven knows when, when Dr. Hart and several folks of this church wanted to do something about the dip in attendance that comes with the Sunday after Easter, and came up with the thought that jazzing up worship would be a good way to do that.

To some folks, this is a novel way of celebrating worship. We don't have this kind of music every week; in fact this is the only week in which we celebrate worship this way. But letting jazz music enhance our worship is nothing new. There are other churches that do it. And as you can tell from the paragraph in the bulletin, worship and jazz have gone together since jazz became a form of music.

In some deep, significant ways, jazz music symbolizes what worship and the Christian life is all about. There are some accomplished jazz soloists, but my slight knowledge of this musical form tells me that, for the most part, jazz is a form of music which is best done in a group, working together.

One of the hallmarks of jazz music is the improvisation that goes into their work. Every member gets to put their own distinctive spin on a particular piece of music. But it has to be within certain forms, and it has to be done in a way that includes the other instruments. The trumpet can go off and do its own thing, but sooner or later it has to come back to the group. The trombone can slide its way all over the place, but eventually it too has to come back home. The clarinet, the drums, the piano, the saxophone, they all have their place, and they all get to show off what they can do in a piece of music. But they all come back together because they need each other. The fact that they can put in their own unique mark makes this music form a beloved one for many. But it is when they come together that the music really resonates in our souls.

In a lot of ways – maybe even more than we realize – the church is like a jazz band. We do not all play the same instrument. Some of us are trumpets, some are trombones, some are drums. But we all need each other in order to play the special song that God has given to us as a community.

This concept of how important we are to one another comes alive for us in many other ways than a jazz band. One such way for me this past week was the latest meeting of the TLC group. TLC stands for Transformational Leadership Coalition, and it is a group of people with widely varying theological and ideological viewpoints who have been meeting since last fall. For the most part we have been discussing a book by Diana Butler Bass called *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith*. It's a book which has been welcomed by some and pilloried by others. But it has been a good conversation starter, no matter where you are on the theological spectrum.

Last week we were looking at one of the spiritual practices that transforms the church, the practice of diversity. In that section there was a discussion of a concept that an Episcopal church in Cincinnati uses as a way of bringing people together. It is a concept called *ubuntu* theology, and it is described by the South African church leader Desmond Tutu. Roughly translated, *ubuntu* means "I cannot be with you." What this means is that "a person is a person through other persons ... we are set

in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God's creation." In other words, we cannot see who we are unless we see ourselves in relationship with each other, no matter how different the other might be.

I know for myself how important it is to be in relationship with others. It doesn't matter whether or not I agree with someone about the job President Obama is doing or about abortion or even about what sports team to root for. What is important is that we are here, we are in relationship, and that we need each other, even with our differences. One of the things that pains me about churches leaving our denomination is that we need their voices; we need them for balance, for flavoring, maybe even for correction. We need to listen to each other, not to seek to prove the other wrong but to hear the other's story and to see how Christ is working in our lives together. For that is ultimately what brings us together – our unity in Christ, the resurrected One who is making us new together.

A way to help us is not just to take the example of a good jazz band. We can also look at our faith story as well. The account that we read out of the fourth chapter of Acts sounds wonderfully ancient and contemporary at the same time. It sounds like the early Christians were getting into socialism in a way, or maybe even communism, as they shared all things and had all things in common. We have certainly heard enough about that in our own country lately, as many people worry about our nation becoming too socialist as the government buys up failing banks and offers bailouts to corporations.

But there is something else going on here besides a lesson in national economics. These early Christians were people who were living in the light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the light of that great event, their lives had changed, their perspective had changed. They were not the same people they had been before. Resurrection was not something to be greeted with lilies and chocolates; it was a whole new perspective of what God was up to, and it had given them a new courage and a new outlook, and a whole new way of living.

If you want a three-point breakdown of what is going on here, you could do it this way – they were dared, they shared and they cared. They were dared – the story starts off with a healing account in the temple, and the witness of Peter and John. That's right, the same group of guys who months before had cowered in the background while Jesus was beaten and crucified. Now they are speaking out boldly, giving witness that it is the resurrected Christ who has the power to bring healing to people and to nations. They are warned not to speak of this name any more, but that just gets them going even more. They lift up prayers to God, and the Holy Spirit blessed them with an extra dose of boldness.

Funny how God works this way. When individuals and communities ask for boldness, God gives it. It may be boldness to speak out against an injustice; it may be the boldness to work for those who are disenfranchised; it may be boldness to reveal systems which are greedy and which are taking people for granted; it may be boldness to talk about our faith whereas before we wouldn't have wanted anyone to think we were holy rollers. There is great boldness that God gives to communities when they are willing to work for those things which God has in mind.

And what does God have in mind? Basically that leads to the next two - they shared. They shared all the things they had because they recognized that in the light of Christ's resurrection those things were not that important anymore. Now, those folks thought that the end of the history was coming around the corner, and now here we are two centuries later and we are still waiting for Jesus to come back. So we live in a big meantime. But in that meantime we have a lot of work to do. And it is

the same work as those of old – to share; not to be caught up in the stuff that we have; not to let our possessions possess us; not to think that we are only as good as our paychecks; not to look down on others because they don't have as much stuff as we do.

The reason this whole sharing thing sticks in our craw is not because of worries about socialism or communism. It is because we like our stuff and we don't really want to share. It's not in our nature. We pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps, and all that. But it has been shown in just about every faith tradition that the material things of life can get in the way of the faith journey when they become ultimate. When we spend more time studying our stock portfolios than reading about what God is up to, we have lost our way. We need Peter and John and all the others to remind us of what is ultimate, of what is important.

Not only did these folks share. But they cared, and the case could be made that these two go together. They shared because they cared, and they cared because they shared. When Christ calls us to live in the light of the resurrection, that does not mean that we sit off on the sidelines of life and contemplate how great we are that we get to go to heaven. We have been called to be a blessing to others. We have been called to care about others. We have been called to let the light of the resurrection shine through us to others.

And sometimes that light shines back on us. Last week I read in the Mission Yearbook about Dr. Leslie Morgan, who with his wife Dr. Cynthia Morgan make up our mission team in one of the poorest countries of the world, BanglaDesh. Les was talking about standing at a crowded train station when three Muslim men came up to him and engaged in conversation. In our context when we hear about a Christian man talking with Muslims we might worry about him, about what they were going to do to him. But I'll let Leslie Morgan tell his story:

“At first the men hesitated to speak to me, but when I answered in Bengali, they smiled, nodded to each other, and let their questions roll. I told them I was returning from Christian Mission Hospital in Rajshai where, with funds from churches in America, I treated patients who could not afford medical care. Now I was on my way to run clinics in the slums of south Dhaka, near the shipyards. They knew the area for its drug dealers, prostitutes, and abandoned children. As I spoke, their smiles and nods evolved into expressions of appreciation and respect.

“As the train rolled in and the anxious crowd raced for the doors, the three men insisted on helping me. One took my suitcase, another took my medical bag, and the last led the way through the crushing mass and onto the train. The experience taught me why God wants us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with (God); others will see and do likewise, and it will benefit us all.”

No matter where we are, no matter who we are, we all need each other. We might even inspire others to engage in Christ-like acts of compassion and caring, just because of the ways we live our lives. When we do that, we walk in the light of the resurrection. Amen.