

After Easter, the Narrative Lectionary moves out of the gospel story and into the story of the disciples, the early church. So we begin with the book of the Acts of the Apostles, which is a continuation of Luke's gospel, and Luke preaches to us about the next step and the next and the next after that. In his last appearance to the disciples, Jesus tells them to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father to be fulfilled. Naturally with the Passover and Palm Sunday not that far behind them, they think maybe NOW the messiah restores the throne of David and releases Israel from its bondage to Rome. But Jesus tells them that they can't know God's schedule. Then comes the theme verse, if you will, of the book of Acts: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The ball is in their court, but they will have new power. Then, like the prophet Elijah before him, Jesus is lifted into the heavens; and like Moses before him, he is enveloped in a cloud, the presence of God when leading the Israelites to freedom.

The disciples do not get much time to marvel at what has just happened, because two men in white robes appear to tell them that Jesus has been taken into heaven and will come back the same way, which frankly doesn't explain a thing to me, but there it is. So they return to Jerusalem and join the other disciples to wait for God's promise of the Holy Spirit to be fulfilled. That will be the starting pistol, when they go out as witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

So, witnessing. Think about when you're really enthusiastic about something, when you just know that people would benefit from knowing about this

thing, and you want to talk about it because you know as soon as they experience it they'll love it too. It happens with books sometimes, that sort of go viral among friends. Or restaurants. Or daycare providers. But do you ever worry that what you really loved, someone else won't? Or suppress a recommendation because you don't think they'll take it seriously if it comes from you? The medium is the message, right? To endorse something—to witness to something—is to identify with it in some respect.

This is what interests me about Jesus commissioning the disciples at this moment. Not only were they consistently confused and distracted during his earthly ministry, but they have just demonstrated that they're still prone to misunderstanding. "Lord, is *this* the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" What a bunch of clods! They don't seem to have learned anything. And still Jesus is all gung-ho to get them started on the next stage of his ministry, the each-one-teach-one stage where they go out and make disciples and enact the kingdom of God as he had done with them. Notwithstanding the promise of the Holy Spirit, you have to wonder if it's not too late for Jesus to find some more competent help. Who's going to believe these people?

So it was at this moment that I went to hear Paul Engler speak at CCI about community organizing. He grew up in Des Moines in a radical and religious home; his father, Cy Engler, was a former priest and his mother was a former nun. His father had been a prison chaplain during his priesthood, and continued his commitment to criminal justice after he was married. He established a lot of low-income housing in Des Moines because ex-prisoners have trouble finding affordable

housing, and so he was doing sort of radical real estate at the time of his death in 1987, when Paul was only nine.

Paul had a lot of struggles as a child, one of which was obviously losing his father and having his sole surviving parent have to work very hard to keep the family afloat. His mother could not continue the low-income housing work, so she let it go. He also had two high-achieving brothers, while he struggled with dyslexia; his mother helped him by putting him in touch with boys his age who also felt like misfits. So as he became an adult, he wrestled with how to understand what legacy his father might have left to him. The housing was not it; it had been let go. But the “beloved community” of social justice advocates and misfit friends, he thought, was the legacy. He would also form life-saving communities. And he became a community organizer.

Paul Engler is a very cerebral guy, an analytical thinker who has studied the history and literature of community organizing as well as doing it. I’m not going to share his main talking points here; I really am getting at Jesus’ commissioning of the disciples, eventually. But I want to say that he is both experienced and a scholar of the science of organizing. The point of community organizing is to teach people to use the power they don’t know they have to achieve what nobody will give them without a struggle. He said that traditional organizing builds sustainable organizations, while movements like Occupy are momentum-driven and exist outside of structures. He says that despair and failure are the seedbed for revolution. It is time for a hybrid model of organizing— mass movements have no theory of change, while traditional organizing does not create mass movements, but

each is important.

So I thought about Jesus and his movement. There was widespread despair in the Galilean countryside, for sure. There were failed attempts at rebellion against the Roman Empire. Jesus did not create a mass movement, although Palm Sunday evokes a momentary giddiness. But he had a theory of change. Jesus thought that if you loved God and loved your neighbor, if you disregarded all the boundaries that separate people from each other, if you loved your enemy and refused to act on fear, that you would create enclaves of the kingdom of God which will come in its fullness in God's time. Essentially Jesus thought that it was possible to create families, in the very best sense of the word, from everyone who wanted to play. Reza Aslan put forth a theory a couple years ago that Jesus was a political revolutionary, and you can see why he'd think that. But a member of the Jesus Seminar (Bernard Brandon Scott) says no, Jesus did not enter villages with a militia. He entered with women and children. He was making families, not armies.

That seems to me like a theory of change. "Let everyone in; they're all your relatives." And look at where the disciples are going to witness, according to Jesus: In Jerusalem (okay, fine, it's David's city), in all Judea (sure, home of the Jews, fine), *and Samaria* (wait! what? Samaritans, seriously?) and to the ends of the earth. Ends of the earth, there's no parameters there. Really, like where sea monsters live, and dragons, and savages who paint themselves blue? We're going to witness to God's kingdom there too? But of course they are, and really, who better than the clods who keep getting it wrong, whom Jesus kept wanting to hang out with anyway? Who better than the people who made lots of mistakes but wanted to hang

out with him?

At this lunch at CCI where I heard Paul Engler speak, one of the other organizers was telling me about a recent event advocating the \$15 minimum wage when one of the McDonald's workers who'd gone on strike in February spoke. "He was awesome," she said, and she meant it. Now, a full-grown man who works at McDonald's is not someone who, in the eyes of the world, has made a big success of himself. He's not someone you turn to to impress people with who you know. But in the fight for fifteen, the campaign to restore dignity to the working poor, this man has apparently found valence, or weight. He knows what to say and how to say it. And that, I think, is Jesus' theory of change: take seriously that every person really is a beloved, *valuable* child of God. Remind them of the truth: that they are a beloved child of God, and that their place at the table has already been set, with their name on the place card. This includes losers. This includes enemies. This includes the extremely opinionated veteran in my World Religions class who hates Muslims. This includes, God forbid, Terry Branstad.

On our own, we're bound to crash and burn. No question. But of course neither the first disciples nor we are on our own. As Jesus promised, God sent the Holy Spirit to them, and as we know from reading past verse 14, those clods and dimwits got it and witnessed in Jerusalem, Judea *and* Samaria, and to the ends of the world—by making families. The church has gotten off track too many times to mention, and seriously, damagingly so. But when we are truly the church, living by Jesus' theory of change, we embody the kingdom of God gloriously. And who can resist?

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, after your death and resurrection you sent your followers into the world to proclaim your resurrection to the entire world. Send us into the world to bear witness to all you have done in our lives. Amen.