
The Call to Beloved Community

A Sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler

Epiphany 2A--and Martin Luther King, Jr. Weekend

Jesus asked, "What are you looking for?" and he said, "Come and see."

John 1:38, 39

Last weekend, when I heard the devastating news from Tucson about the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and the killing of six others, I was on retreat with the Chapter of the Cathedral of St. Philip. (The Chapter is the elected group of eighteen lay leaders of the Church; four canons and I were also there.) We were in the snow-covered mountains of North Georgia, preparing for the year. Obviously, my outlook suddenly saddened. I was struck deeply by the news, not just because the violence was senseless and in such a public space, but because I admire public servants.

We need politicians. We need public servants, who are called and willing to enter our public places and to care for them. Public servants always risk their time, their honor, and their reputation; they are not supposed to be risking their physical lives. On our Cathedral Chapter this year, and on retreat with us, was the sister of one of Georgia's statewide elected officials; she knows better than I what her brother must endure and care for.

We need politicians, politicians who take challenges and make themselves vulnerable. However, the Tucson events reminded me that, at some level, we are all politicians. We all have a place, politically, in this democratic republic of the United States of America, and we all take risks. The victims of the Tucson shootings, from a federal judge to a nine-year old child, were fulfilling their roles in the public square. They were showing up for a good old-fashioned "Meet your Congressperson" event. People and politicians were doing what we were supposed to be doing.

The theme I presented to the Cathedral Chapter was "Beloved Community." It is the image with which I view the future. The Cathedral of St. Philip has the gift, in our times, of being a beloved community; all churches in these times have that gift. Our gift of beloved community enriches us, but it can also serve as a model of community for the world around us.

This weekend, our country honors the memory and the witness of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., prophet and preacher of this city. Dr. King was fond of the phrase "beloved community," and I will always associate the image of "beloved community" with him; but he was not its originator. I would claim that its origin goes back to the New Testament itself. "Beloved" is a dear phrase in the New Testament, from the instant in which Jesus is called "beloved" at his baptism, in the

gospel lesson we heard last Sunday.

The first thing Jesus does after his baptism, the first thing he does, according to the Gospel of John, is call people to community. According to the Gospel of John, the first recorded words of Jesus are to people hanging around him. "What are you looking for?" Jesus asks them. "Rabbi," they respond. And Jesus says, "Come and see."

Come and see. The first thing the beloved Jesus does is call disciples into beloved community.

Note, too, the countless instances in which Saint Paul describes his church members as "beloved" (five times in the Corinthian epistles). God really does love Jesus, who called the church into being. The church's great apostle, Paul, really did love his people. The church is meant to be a community, beloved of God, beloved by each other, and beloved for the world.

But these are times in which our society seems especially confused about community. Our culture too easily accepts shallow community; and we often demand shallow community. Waiters come up to my table and introduce themselves by their first names. Talk show hosts demand that callers use only first names. Our schools and civic organizations and sports teams call themselves "families." These associations are nice, and valuable to our wider community life. However, using intimate forms of conversation before the hard work of relationship-building can lead to dramatic disappointment. True community takes time and effort and care.

Another area where we are truly confused about community is in our use of television, the internet, and social media. (Can you believe that the term "social media" was not even a phrase a few years ago?) The speed in which we can acquire data, through television and random internet searches, leads us to think that we know all there is to know about a subject or person just with mechanical facts. Our social media sites give us the opportunity to make quick comments, and sometimes biting, vicious comments, about subjects and persons without having to look at other people face to face. These comments create a "form" of community, but that form is astoundingly weaker and less informed than face-to-face community! At their weakest, members of these "internet communities" are actually quite isolated and lonely; they become loners and renegades.

I do admit, of course, that these forms of social media, at their best, are wonderful! I find that, at their best, they reinforce healthy relationships that have already been formed face to face. I love reviewing social media photographs, for instance, which remind me of wonderful past events or which inform me of what my friend or colleague is doing.

Jesus continues to ask us, "What are you looking for?" Jesus continues to ask our culture, "What are you looking for?" And we are looking for community, even when we are confused about it. Today, I believe the church has the calling and gift to be true community, to be "Beloved Community." We are meant to gather together, to learn and laugh together, to love and cry together. And, together, we account for each other. We teach each other and hold each other to standards of civility and grace. We love for the long term, and we live for the long term, not the short term. The Christian Church, at our best, offers true and beloved community.

I am way down the line when it comes to being qualified to speculate about why the Tucson shootings occurred. Like you, I have read and listened to all sorts of reactions. But most of them leave me concerned that our various reactions to the shootings have become further elements of our polarized divisions. Even our various reactions to a tragedy have become

occasions for antagonistic extremes.

David Gergen, at CNN.com, made the sad observation on 9 January 2011, just a day after the shootings, that "As of this hour, we have a country that is not only deeply saddened but even more divided than we were before the shooting."

So, I repeat: Even our various reactions to a tragedy have become occasions for antagonistic extremes. I do not want to speculate too extremely myself. The simplest explanation for the Tucson violence is a deranged person. But I would also suggest that people who resort to violence are not, unfortunately, part of beloved communities. For various reasons, they sadly do not belong to communities who offer measured grace and civil relationship and justice over the long term. People who resort to violence are not part of healthy religious communities, healthy Christian churches, healthy Jewish synagogues, or healthy Muslim mosques. My sad comment about the Tucson shooter is that he did not have beloved community.

The way out of random acts of violence is the way of community. I mean healthy, life-giving, community; and I mean beloved community. It is beloved community that sustains daily interactions of civility and sustenance. With others, face to face, hand in hand, and sometimes arm to arm, we learn how to behave in the world. We learn how to care, and we learn how to express disapproval with peace and honor.

Finally, of course, in a beloved community, our ultimate values are the same values as the One who "loves" us. And it is a peaceful and just God who loves us. Such is the God who inspired Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., inspired him to realize that the church's values of peace and non-violence could be a model for the world around us. That world certainly includes the political world, in which we all play a part. Dr. King's vision of a beloved community came to include, not just the church, but the world itself. And that is our calling, too. All of us have a part in today's political world, to risk ourselves, to give ourselves, to the peace and justice, honor and respect, of a truly beloved community. I thank God for everyone who shows up in this church, for beloved community. I thank God for everyone who shows up in the public square, for the common good, to take that risk.

"What are you looking for?" Jesus said, "Come and see." Beloved community.

AMEN.

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