
Of New Bishops and Beloved Community

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts,
be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and our Redeemer. Amen [Ps. 19.14]*

"Are you the new Bishop?"

With big smiles people asked me that question five or six times during the Peachtree Road Race this past 4th of July.

"Are you the new Bishop?"

Five or six racers queried me while I was "'staffing' the race with my fellow clergy and Cathedral members. Other church members offered *bottles* of water and refreshments to racers; we clergy were provided with big *buckets* and shiny *bowls* of water.

It's a bit counter-intuitive: holy water allowed to splash on the ground as we sprinkled people; holy water splashing from our bowls as we dipped-in and dipped-out; more holy water sloshing in and out of buckets whenever we needed refills. Nevertheless we kept going for about three hours, all the time declaring to everyone who cared to hear:

"Blessings! Blessings! Blessings on you!"

Often racers would come directly over to us on the sidewalk as they noticed us flinging-out the water onto people. And some of them would shout, "I need blessing!" or "Give me that blessing," as we sprinkled them passing by. We had also attached a huge sign to a big shower sprinkler clearly visible as you approached the church coming down Peachtree Road. The sign read, "Cathedral Holy Water."

So by the time some of the racers got to me, the only black male priest in a white collar, some of them must have wondered to themselves, "'Is this that guy who was just elected the first black bishop of Atlanta? Maybe he's out here today to join the Cathedral Dean in blessing the race.'

Ironically this year's race was the first that Dean Candler has missed since he initiated the Cathedral's blessing of the Road Race in 1999, thirteen years ago. This time he happened to be away at the church's General Convention. So if you were looking for prominent clergy that day and didn't see him at his usual post you might have thought, "'Oh, instead of the Dean they must have the new black bishop here today giving the blessings.'

"Are you the new Bishop?"

It was a curious sensation to be asked that question, in the heat of the morning and the heat of the race. Now I know it was a case of mistaken identity. But at one point I found myself wondering what is the penalty for "'impersonating an officer'" in this case an officer of the church. What would be the consequences, I asked myself, of saying "'Yes, I am the new bishop!' as the inquirer passed on by down the road. With sheer honesty of course I simply said, "No, that's Robert Wright."

But after the third or fourth time I felt myself thrust into a different set of reactions that I'm still processing many days later. And I want to share some of those reactions with you here because they illuminate our scriptures appointed for this Sunday.

"Are you the new Bishop?"

After the third or fourth time hearing that question I realized that people wanted me to be the new bishop! In the absence of the Cathedral dean, perhaps they even needed a bishop to be out there, blessing and completing the event as a kind of liturgy. Indeed, "the blessing of the runners' has become an annual liturgy for us, a ritual of commitment and expectation that renders Peachtree Road an extension of the church every 4th of July.

That's why Dean Candler jokes every year that on this day the Cathedral welcomes 60,000 visitors to the church! We even conclude the morning with a service of Holy Communion on the lawn where the horseshoe driveway meets Peachtree Road. But what I didn't anticipate was how real the liturgy of Eucharist would become for *me* this year.

"Behold what you are; become what you see!' Are you familiar with that ancient Eucharistic declaration? It can be traced all the way back to St. Augustine, the famous North African bishop who shaped much of the theology of Western Christianity during the fall of the Roman Empire.

Sometime in the 4th or 5th century Augustine preached a sermon, "On the Holy Eucharist" (Sermon 57), in which he reflected on "one of the deep truths of Christian faith: through our participation in the sacraments (particularly baptism and Eucharist), we are transformed into the Body of Christ, given for the world."

"Behold what you are; become what you see!' I paraphrase St. Augustine here. In particular this declaration highlights the moment of the liturgy when the priest elevates the bread and the wine during the prayer of consecration at the altar. "Behold what you are; become what you see!' In that ritual moment the church is mystically summoned to be "broken bread and poured-out wine for the life of the world.'

Something like that happened for me this 4th of July, as the racers passing-by asked about the presence of our new bishop. In our "episcopal' tradition"the word episcopos is Anglo-Saxon for "bishop"the bishop serves as the chief vicar or vicarious presence of Christ in the church. That's why there's such intensity in church history focused on the role and the person of the bishop"the church as the body of Christ has its symbolic head in the bishop as the Vicar of Christ.

That's also why the martyrdom of bishops is a symbolic echo of the crucifixion of Christ himself: by their oath of office bishops may be called upon to make the ultimate profession of faith"to give their own body and blood for the life of their community as our Lord himself did. And this self-giving is also what the church herself does when she is most truly the church. In today's terminology we might say that we are most truly God's "beloved community' when we are giving ourselves so that the world might experience itself as beloved community.

Well, a tiny bit of all that intensity got refracted through me this 4th of July as we were ritually blessing the runners. Although it was a case of mistaken identity, nonetheless I experienced for micro-moments what it is vicariously true for each of us as baptized Christians; vicariously true for all of us"from the child receiving her first communion, to the bishop retiring from years of faithful service.

The truth that each of us bears as vicars of Christ in our witness to the world is the truth of the love of God; the truth that God in Christ gives his life for others on the cross.

Now compare all this to two other icons of community in today's scripture readings: two kings of ancient Israel are pictured for us as alternative types of community. First, in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament reading we have King David presiding over the liturgy of the bringing the Ark of the Covenant into the Holy City. And among others leading the procession he dances "before the Lord with all his might." Indeed he dances so vigorously and ecstatically, the scripture indicates, that it becomes objectionable to his first wife, Michal, the daughter of David's rival, King Saul. (2 Samuel 6:14,

16)

But David's self-abandon is best understood as an iconic expression of devotion to God and to the purposes of God. That's what the Christian scripture or New Testament says about David: that when God removed Saul he made David their king, and said in testimony about him,

"I have found David . . . to be a man after my heart, who will carry out all my wishes" (Acts 13.22)

The contrast is obvious to us in today's gospel reading, with the despicable beheading of John the Baptist by that other King, King Herod. By beheading John, Herod becomes the head of exactly the opposite of beloved community; a community of hate and fear that God in Christ comes to save us from. (See Mark 6.14-29)

And there is also dancing in that "un-beloved community." But it is dancing that is an expression of un-Godly passion and rivalry. And it is performed by a young person who is duped into playing-out the will of her elders without really knowing what she is doing. Young people here today, take note: however young you are you are not too young to get to know God for yourself. You're not too young to become yourself a "person after God's own heart, who will carry out *God's* wishes' instead of the wishes of elders who have their own designs and schemes.

So in our scriptures today we have the stories of two kings, two dances, and two expressions of community. And in a few moments we will carry-out our own expression of community at this altar. But in turning to our own community I want to address the question that I think every community asks of its bishop, and every new bishop is asked to respond to, by his or her community; the query, "Do you love me?' Are we your beloved too, I hear us asking our bishops, beloved as "Christ also loved the church and gave himself for her?' (Eph. 5.25).

Now I think that was the unspoken question I was being asked that day on the 4th of July at the Peachtree Road Race. "Are you out here today giving us love and the blessing of your love as our new bishop?' That would be the deep structure of the question I think I was being asked that day.

Finally, I consider I also experienced the anticipatory love of people wanting to embrace their new black bishop"black people and white, immigrants of all backgrounds, multiple ages and classes, and people of all body types and abilities! Most astonishingly, as a child of the 1960s freedom struggle in the South, I experienced a remarkable redemption of race hatred this 4th of July.

The contrast was vivid especially when compared to the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot. That atrocity occurred a half century before I was born, but the stories are still told about hundreds of white men spending four days in downtown Atlanta hunting for black men to maim or kill. And now what a reversal! Instead of dozens of white Atlantans coming to assail and assault I encountered some of them yearning to discover, acknowledge, and engage"albeit to engage a mistaken identity!

So I pose for us this query in our 21st century U.S. circumstances: Are we icons for one another of communities-in-process" in process of being beloved community? I think that's the kind of umbrella question that every community, and particularly church communities in our Episcopal tradition, get to ask and be asked on the occasion of calling a new chief officer" in this case our bishop.

And in a few moments, here at this altar, let us rededicate ourselves and be re-consecrated as the elements for answering an affirmative, "Yes!" to that question.

"Are you the new bishop?"

No. But I'm part of an episcopal community that blesses all people for the sake of beloved community" for the sake of becoming beloved community in the church, and for fostering beloved community in the world. To this holy calling let us all be re-consecrated at the holy table today, my brothers and sisters ...

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

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