

The Inclusive Community

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 24, 2010

1Corinthians 12: 12-30 Luke 4: 14-21

Theme: Nearness of God

Homily of Terry and Fred Quinn

Terry-----Paul's description of one body having differing parts, with some weak—some strong—some very different than the others, yet coming together to form the body and strengthen the spirit evolving in the body ---reminds me of the song De Colores. I used to teach it to all of my classes, explaining that the message is that the beautiful colors in nature, the different animals and all the different kinds of people combine to form the rainbow of the world. It speaks of connection, of acceptance, of working together, of ignoring differences and focusing on the spirit that unites us.

I think that this epistle needs to be read over and over within today's climate of focusing on differences, of undermining those who are not like "us", whoever "us" is. So, when institutions, like churches and governments and groups shut out "the other", when they discriminate, they shut out the spirit, the spirit which brings us together when people and creation connect-----in Eucharist when the communal gathering exhales that spirit within the community,--- which comes together when any 2 people who love each other pronounce that love in public or in private, --when the poor are welcomed and helped, when the children are taught well—wherever and whoever they are-----where God is near and ever-present.

Then in Luke's gospel we see Jesus, with the urging of the spirit within him, beginning his public ministry, returning to his Galilean roots, preaching in the synagogue, but giving an unexpected message to his listeners, a message they were not prepared to accept. It was after all ----different. It spoke of a Messiah—an anointed one-- being near to God by being near to the poor, those who are ordinarily not seen, those who are different, not accepted by the norm. It spoke of inclusion, the nearness of an everywhere God. The nearness of a co-creating spirit, not a denying or discrimination of the other ----as some in the so-called religious institutions of today, (especially within the hierarchy of those institutions, whether they be popes, cardinals, bishops, imams or born-again preachers)-- seem to promulgate. Luckily Jesus had some friends in his hometown crowd, who obviously helped him escape the wrath of his neighbors and family. Chilton, in his book, *Rabbi Jesus*, tells us that they

were not just appalled by his inclusive message, but that they were afraid for themselves, since Jesus' message was transformational and possibly detrimental and would be associated with his fellow Nazarenes.

The modern-day excluders, ready to throw Jesus over the cliff are those who also reject his message of inclusion. They exclude those who do not believe as they do, for theirs is the "right" way. They exclude the gay community because they do not understand the true concept of love, which encompasses everyone. They exclude women's choice, forgetting what the words choice and conscience mean. They exclude those who look different than they do and who have different customs. All these and any lumped into the realm of the "different" might be considered the Gentiles of today. The excluders are saying, "Ours is the only way to God"—not understanding that we are all part of "the body of Christ"—part of the ever evolving universe—all co-creating, becoming—essentially "we are all in this together." In the words of Martin Luther King, whose birthday we recently celebrated, "It really boils down to this --that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality."---Dr. King's statement becomes truly real to us as we view the scenes in Haiti on our TV screens—the horror, the devastation, but also the mutuality of help evidenced in the many countries coming together to respond to whatever need presents itself. How many times have you heard a reporter telling you that, for example, a person was rescued from the rubble by a team of say—Mexicans and Israelis---or an American surgeon working alongside a Chinese or British surgeon to save a life. Within this interrelation God-- is ever-present, suffering and rejoicing along with us.

Fred----

I'd like to tell you a true story about someone, who, though extremely gifted, was excluded because she was different. Though you may be somewhat familiar with the name Marian Anderson and some of her struggles, you may not know of the people who connected to her talent and her spirit, actively co-creating with her—so that she could share her extraordinary gift with the world.

She was born in 1897 in Philadelphia. Surrounded by singing in her home with her father, mother and two sisters, this young girl developed a love of music from an early age. Her special talent became well known in her neighborhood community. The choir director in her church in South Philly put her in the Junior choir when she was not quite 8 years old. Neighboring churches heard about her .They announced "Come and hear the Baby Contralto, 10 years old" And they came. She was invited to join the celebrated Peoples Choir, i100 voices from black church choirs throughout Philadelphia. She had to stand on a chair to be seen by the audience.

At the age of 14 her beloved father was gravely injured on the job and died shortly after. Her mother moved the family in with her in-laws and found work scrubbing floors and doing laundry. Marian helped with part time jobs. When she graduated from high school at 18, she received an offer from the Philadelphia Choir to pay for music training. She went to a music school and waited on line for an application. The girl behind the counter helped everyone else before Marian. Finally she was told, "We don't take colored." Marian had felt prejudice in stores and on the street while growing up, but was shocked that anyone surrounded by the beauty of music could be so narrow- minded. As she found opportunities to sing, they were usually at black colleges and churches or in front of segregated or black audiences. She would travel in dirty crowded Jim Crow cars reserved for blacks. Most hotels would not accept her. And yet when she did perform audiences were enthralled.

Finally she was given an audition with the well regarded famous music professor, Giuseppe Beghetti. When she met him at his studio, he told her that he had no room or time for any new students. Afraid to look at him she closed her eyes and took a deep breath and began to sing with great emotion,

Deep river, my home is over Jordon.

Deep River, Lord, I want to cross over into campground

Don't you want to go to that Gospel feast, that promised land where all is peace?

When she finished, Mr. Beghetti, moved to tears, said passionately, "I will make room for you right away. I will need two years with you. After that you will be able to sing with anybody!" She worked very hard with Beghetti and even got to practice songs from Italian operas. When she finished she received a scholarship to go to England where she heard colored performers were treated with more respect. She arrived in 1927. After studying she was invited to perform in concert halls in Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden. The response was so overwhelming that a Swedish newspaper called it Marian Fever. Within two years audiences applauded wildly in England, cheered in Paris, pounded on the stage in Russia for encores. In Austria, Arturo Toscanini commented that this was a voice one was privileged to hear once in one hundred years. During 1933 and 1934, she performed at 142 concerts in Scandinavia alone. John Sebelius, the famous Finnish composer, dedicated his song, "Solitude" to her, saying "The roof of my house is too low to hold your voice."

Marian returned to the United States in 1939 expecting to see a change in attitude. However, when her manager Sol Hurok, approached the manager of Constitution Hall, so that she could perform in the 4,000 seat venue, he was told that not only was it not available but would never be available because of their "white only" policy. Hurok told them that this was one of the greatest living singers in the world, but it did no good.

Many enraged fans wrote letters of protest to the Washington newspapers to no avail. Famous musicians protested. When First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt learned about the rejection, she announced to the owners, The Daughters of the American Revolution, that in protest, she was resigning publicly from their organization.

Finally with the approval of the President, the Department of the Interior invited Marian to sing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday. Marian wondered if anyone would even show up and if it would be dangerous, but she said she would do it. She was then 42 years old. She looked out on a river of 75,000 people with millions of others listening to her voice on the radio. She began, “My country ‘tis of thee-- sweet land of liberty...let freedom ring. A roaring cheer accompanied every song.

After that performance she and Eleanor Roosevelt became close friends. She received medals, rewards and many honorary degrees in recognition of her magnificent voice. She had sung for kings and queens, presidents and prime ministers, composers and conductors. Yet there was still one place where she had not sung. When she was finally invited she became the first African American to sing at the Metropolitan Opera. She was 58 years old. After she signed the contract, someone said, “Welcome home.”

Marian lived long enough to be accepted in many other venues. I’m sure she was aware of the nearness of God in her life. We can reflect on how acceptance and inclusion can bring forth the spirit of God into the world. May that spirit grow and inspire and may so many more know that God is near and with them.