

Pentecost19, Proper 24
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

October 19, 2014
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The Community Gathered

I sat in the corner of a long room. It held upwards of 100 people. They were all Tsachila people, of the community known as Cóngoma. Men on one side, women on the other. Children under 16 or so played in the large courtyard outside. It was a "sombeleya," the annual general community assembly. The elders sat in the front, along with a University-trained youngster with his laptop. He was secretary, and he was taking notes on a machine the older people could conceive as magical. I had arrived late, and the only convenient seat was on the women's side. I took it anyway, right by the door. I figured I wasn't Tsachi, and I certainly wasn't a community resident. I really had no voice or vote, I was just a benevolent observer.

The issue of a piece of land came up. It was on community land, but it was being lent to the Methodist Church by the community members to whom that parcel had been assigned. The discussion arose as to what to do. Should the Methodists be allowed to use community land or not? Was there a danger of the community losing that acreage to some sort of legal slight-of-hand. This, of course, was a particularly touchy fear, due to their history and experience.

The discussion went round and round with little progress. Finally, in timid and humble fashion as is customary among the Tsachila, I asked for the floor. I asked pardon for not speaking Tsafiqui well enough to make my point. And then I told them a story. It was their story, really.

50 years before something happened in the nearest town of San Miguel that had never happened before and has not happened since. A small airplane landed on the soccer field, bearing a young Gringo woman and her 6-month-old son. They, and the husband and two other children had asked permission to live and work in the community. They had been granted permission on the condition that they provide a social service to the people. They had complied, opening a store and providing basic medical care. In exchange, the couple began working on translating the Bible into Tsafiqui. That woman was my mother, and the infant was myself.

I pointed out that they had a historical precedent for handling these situations, and that it may prove helpful to them now. They quickly voted to allow the Methodists to use the land.

The Tsachila are not really much different than we. Oh, they speak a language not even distantly related to English, they eat very different foods, and their traditional dress is wildly different. But if you put two often-competing human needs together, that of the individual vs. that of the community, like we, the Tsachila value the individual very highly. And yet in this situation they did something very wise. They got together to talk about it. They made a decision in community. They valued the wisdom of the Council, for not only are two heads better than one, but in community one rightly tells one's story.

All wisdom comes from God, and the wisdom of the Council, of the People of God gathered, has always been valued in the history of the Church. Let's take the two aspects of living in community:

First, the current assembly. Jesus valued the current assembly. He was always going to Synagogue. He taught there, and he healed there, and he went to the great Feasts in Jerusalem as well. But there's a hint in today's Gospel lesson. The Pharisees try to trick Jesus. After some irritating flattery they ask the trick question: "Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?" If he says, "No, we're a sovereign nation established by God through Moses on Mt. Sinai," he gets in trouble with the Roman authorities. If he says that it is right to pay taxes to Caesar he's a traitor in the eyes of the people, for most people resented the rule of Rome. But of course, Jesus finds a third answer: The Kingdom of God is not of the same order as the Empire of Rome. One is an earthly kingdom, and the other is a heavenly kingdom. We are to participate fully in the communities in which we live—including the heavenly one!

Maybe in our day the question would not have been taxes but voting. One might say, "A Christian's final loyalty is to the Kingdom of Heaven. Earthly kingdoms are of no real consequence compared to the sovereignty of God. A Christian should not waste time on such things." Or one might argue, "A Christian also lives within a community in which we are called to be witnesses to the love of God. Social engagement is required. To not vote is to sell out on your divine duty." Jesus would say, "Vote, by all means, and also take part in the councils of the Church. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

The other aspect is the collective history. In the Old Testament lesson today there is some startling language. The prophet says that God calls Cyrus, the King of Persia, "his anointed one." The word, "anointed one," in the Hebrew is *Machiyach*, a form of "Messiah." Indeed, it is translated that way in other passages. And here is what is so startling. Cyrus was not a Jew, not even a Jewish convert. How could he be "God's anointed one," "God's chosen messiah?"

The reason this language is used here, in my humble opinion (and I am not alone in this interpretation,) is because Cyrus did something that saved the Jewish people. He sent them back out of exile to the promised land. That's like Moses and Joshua, and it reflects what Jesus will do on the Cross, saving us from sin and bringing us into the life of Heaven.

Prophecy can have two functions. On one hand it can "predict the future," which is the dominant meaning of the word today. But in the Bible it has another meaning, too. It means that the events being discussed reflect patterns of divine action seen in the past. The prophet sees a correspondence, a similar action, and deduces that God is acting. *If God did "thus" back then, and now we see "thus" happening, we can deduce that God is doing it.* This meaning of the word "prophecy" requires a knowledge of the past. Just like the Tsachila needed to know their own history in order to make a good decision about the Methodists, the Hebrews needed to know their history in order to recognize the redemptive action of God on their behalf. And a people's story only has meaning when told in community.

Starting Thursday night this past week, the Diocese of the Rio Grande gathered in Council. The People of God gathered to make decisions in community, and to make them in light of God's past action, as a way of anticipating future action. It's always thrilling to me to gather in that first Opening Eucharist, to hear the thunderous voices singing God's praises, to hear stirring preaching, and to say the prayers, and then to gather around the table and partake of the Sacrament together. Then, when the business meetings began, we gathered together we discussed the issues. We prayed when we felt it was necessary to remind ourselves that we do not negotiate for our personal interests, but discuss as a way of discerning the will of God. It was a good Convention.

And we do the same in the Parish. The Vestry gathers monthly to ask, "What is the will of God for Good Shepherd Parish?" We discern the answers in community. The Parish gathers once a year to elect its officials for the coming year, and to discuss the questions that are before us in the light of our current situation and our history with God.

People ask me all the time, "How can I know the will of God?" There are three sources of insight in your life: 1. The voice of God speaking deep within you, 2. The witness of Scripture, as interpreted in the community of the faithful, and 3. The witness of the Family of God. In the community of the faithful you can best tell your own story. Telling your story helps you see your life as it is right now, and helps you get a fix on the path that has lead you to where you are. This little three-legged model values the individual, as is important, but sets us in the context of community.

So what is your great question for God today? Listen to the Spirit within, search the Scriptures as honestly as you know how, and talk with other Christians whose spiritual life you respect and who know you well.

God speaks most clearly in the context of the Family of God.