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Proclamation, Still!  
By the Rev. Salying Wong

Many years ago, I attended church in downtown Denver. In the summer, we would have coffeeshour outside. Sometimes, someone walking by would join us for coffee. One time, as I was pouring coffee in my cup, a stranger saddled up to me and exclaimed, “Jesus loves you!” I was astounded. I was thinking and feeling a lot of things, all at once. At first, I was afraid. Is this person safe? But, then in my fear, a string of commentaries came to my thoughts. “We’re Episcopalians. We don’t announce that. We’re not like those kinds of people (namely, the Evangelicals). We respect diversity and everyone’s belief. Our proclamation is the service we render to the poor.” I think about that now. Is it true that our lack of proclamation is because of our respect for others? What is outreach without proclamation? When we experience the good news of God in Christ, if it is so good, wouldn’t we want to share our story?

A friend who was standing next to me at the coffee urn said the right thing when he responded to the stranger, “Works for me!” What if I had shed my unease, joined them, and said, “Yes! Jesus loves you. Jesus loves me. Praise Jesus!” Perhaps, everyone at coffeeshour would have joined in, like the household of Cornelius, all extolling and praising God together. We would have belonged together in a whole other way, not just people who went to church, then ate cookies and talked about what we’re going to do with the rest of the weekend. We would have been church as in the Book of Acts—a joining in the Spirit. This, if you recall from last week’s story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, is the Holy Spirit’s intent. Remember how the Spirit told Philip, as he stood astounded when the Ethiopian eunuch rode by in his chariot, “Run Philip! Join him!”

The Book of Acts doesn’t let us get away with reductive gospelling. One example of a reduction of the gospel is to say the gospel is essentially charity work. Yes,

God wants us to be generous to the poor and to have an open hand. But, it is not the basic mission of the church. The basic mission of the church is following the Spirit to the margins and joining God's people there. It is about being in a relationship of equal belonging—not by nation, not by purity, not by class or gender or race—and not by who serves and gets served. This is clear from the beginning of the Book of Acts. Remember what we've heard from the Book of Acts at the beginning of Eastertide? After the Pentecost gift of tongues, the Spirit opened the eyes of Peter and John to see the man born lame at the gate called Beautiful. The man asked for alms, for charity. But, Peter said, "I don't have any money. But, I have something better. Jesus loves you. Now, get up and walk." If you read this passage, you'll see how often the word "see" is used. The Spirit gave the apostles the ability to see as Jesus sees. Jesus does not see this man as a charity case. Now that Peter, John, and the man born lame all see each other, they understand there is no us and them; there is only the "we" in the Spirit. The healing was a sign of belonging, not the goal of belonging. Sometimes the Spirit offers alms; sometimes she doesn't. Sometimes the Spirit heals; sometimes she doesn't. Sometimes, the Spirit gives the gift of tongues; sometimes she doesn't. She is wild and is not at the bidding of people. The book we call, "Acts" is not really the Acts of the Apostles. Rather, it ought to be called, "The Acts of the Spirit." The Spirit's work is to push us to the outer boundaries and do the joining there.

Service is one fruit of the joining. But it does not replace the proclamation of Jesus. In fact, even when the joining has occurred, the proclamation of Jesus must still happen within the newly gathered assembly. We know that the first community in the Book of Acts immediately started having problems. The non-Jews, sometimes called the gentiles, sometimes called the Hellenists, were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. This was a result of injustice—injustice resulting from a non-fully transformed relationship to Jesus' Lordship. It was injustice that resulted from operating within the old boundaries of race and class. So, the deacons were ordained to make sure justice was served within the community.

But, the elders (presbyters) dedicated themselves to reading scripture, to study, to prayer, and to proclamation. I imagine one of the topics they discussed among themselves is why the injustice happened. I imagined they considered that to claim Christ more and more means dismantling the structures within their minds and hearts that were about privilege, power, us-and them thinking. That is, because Jesus is their Lord, the community's work must include continual repentance, changing the mind and heart for a future where there is no "us" and "them." It is this work of prayer and study that gives the right proclamation. They must announce this good news of joining. The Book of Acts is unapologetic about the need to keep proclaiming, to keep following the Spirit to the ends of the earth, to take the community to the border and have the Spirit gather into it new disciples of Jesus.

I think about this in a personal way. When I first came to the United States, my family was a charity case. The church gave us used clothes and canned food. They taught us how to sign up for food stamps and for Section 8 housing. I will always be grateful for the church's charity. But, if the church only stopped there and did not proclaim to me the love of Jesus, my life would have remained impoverished. "We are not fed by bread alone, but from every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Matt 4:4) The gift that the church gave me that nourishes and sustains me is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, his love for me, his dying and rising for me, his teachings, and his church. The gospel saves me when all lights go out and I weep in the dark. The gospel saves me when tragedy and loss hits me like a bludgeon, when my courage fails, when the next day holds challenges that feel beyond my coping. The gospel saves me when I resist amending my life; it pushes me to acknowledge the harm I have caused; it gives me the courage for the work of repair, and gives me the consolation of forgiveness. The gospel is how I know whom to praise when I am struck silent by the beauty of a California poppy and the way the light shines through the long fingers of a Japanese maple. The gospel is how I know what lasts beyond the world's promise of pleasure, acquisition, and power. I know I belong to myself, to God and to you because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I am rich because the gospel is treasure that lasts.

When that Baptist church gave me the gospel, it gave me belonging in Jesus. The Spirit's mission has never ended. She is still taking us to the boundaries of belonging. It is more important than ever to proclaim belonging to one another and have this belonging be our source of joy, hope, and love. Will we join her? Come Holy Spirit, come. Your faithful people will follow.