

*Knowing Your Name*  
Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost  
August 31, 2014  
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Exodus 3.1-15;  
Psalm 105.1-6, 23-26, 45c;  
Romans 12.9-21;  
Matthew 16.21-28

There's a church in Grand Rapids that sits in the middle of a neighborhood that for many years was economically depressed. They've struggled with all the dynamics that go with that reality: shifting demographics, rising poverty, abandoned properties, little opportunity, not enough jobs, increasing crime. The church, under the leadership of their current pastors, has become very involved in creating a strong neighborhood association. As their neighborhood has all of a sudden become a hot spot for development, they have leveraged their connections in order to have a voice and influence with the businesses coming into that neighborhood. "We'd be happy to put in a word for you with the zoning board. But how do you feel about hiring the residents who live around your business? Would you be willing to hire someone with a felony on their record?" They do this because they've seen what happens to the poor who are looking for work when their neighborhoods become "up and coming". They've seen how impossible it is to rebuild a life coming out of prison because of that box on every job application that will not let their past stay behind them.

There's a church in Holland that offers a bible study within its ministry that brings together some of the diversity of our city into this one group. The person telling me about it attended this bible study some years ago as one of his first activities in the life of that church. He happens to be a PhD in some area of biblical studies. Some question of interpretation came up and he offered his expert opinion. Someone else in the room, someone he knew lived at the mission at the time, didn't agree and went on at some length offering a counter opinion. He laughed when getting to this part of the story this week. He said that he knew that his interpretation was of

course the right one (as if there's ever only one). But then very seriously said that when he went home he told his wife "we have got to be a part of this church because somehow they have created a culture where someone with little formal education, and absolutely no social standing or practical power in the world is given as much space and honor in a bible study as a PhD in biblical studies."

There's another church in town who gathered this past week to talk together about what has been happening in the city of Ferguson, MO since that day in early August when Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, was killed during a confrontation with police. It was a multi-racial gathering, and a multi-generational conversation. And while it began talking about the tensions around race in that city, it grew to be a conversation about the life we share in this city. The pastor of that church gathered a number of us clergy from the community to hear about their conversation and to have a conversation of our own. It was a place to name our grief, to express our feeling of helplessness, to name the inter-related dimensions to the kind of suffering we are seeing and hearing about and experiencing as a community and world. And it became a place to name some of the ways that our churches are seeking to love our neighbors and to actually embody a love that is genuine as we hear the apostle Paul speaking of it today in the book of Romans. That's where I heard about these churches I mentioned a moment ago. We ended by saying that we needed to meet again and from time to time to see how we might collaborate more and where we could perhaps leverage some of our collective voice and witness and presence in this city.

I really needed that gathering after Chris Dorsey's sermon last week. I don't know about you but I've been thinking about that sermon all week long. I've been thinking about his claim that the church is built on the confession that Jesus is Lord and Messiah. He asked us to consider whether we are in fact living that identity and becoming mid-wives for justice. This was an image he drew from the first chapter of Exodus. He spoke of the vulnerability it took for those mid-wives to defy the king. He lifted up the vulnerability that it took for Moses' mother to place her child in that basket in the stream, praying that someone would stand against the forces that were literally stealing the lives their children. And then he took

us to other streams in our day and time where vulnerable people place their children, their hopes, their dreams for a better future. And he asked – where is the church?

I left feeling the weight of our calling as the church of Jesus Christ. I know that Christ is right to push us. The church often fails. But I also left feeling inspired because I know deep in my soul that God from the beginning of time and to this day has a hold of us in this world and does not let us go. We may fall short, we may run and hide from our calling as Moses does in our story for today, but God finds a way of grabbing hold of our attention and drawing us back into this work and into this way of life that brings liberation and freedom and healing and hope.

It was about a week ago that Earl Laman sent a poem to those of us on the Reconciliation ministry. It was written by a student at North Park University in Chicago as part of a movement in Chicago among the faith community there called “People Are Not Illegal.” It’s a movement to address immigration reform and the mass incarceration rates in our country. There is a line in that poem that has stayed with me. It’s the turning point of her poem when she shifts from describing the broken and seemingly hopeless world in which we live to turn and look at the Savior whom we follow. She writes: “Our mission shouldn't be to change just the way we act but the way we see; Asking God to dilate our pupils so that we can let in more light.”<sup>1</sup>

When I read this story of Moses at the burning bush, when I hear Jesus talking with Peter about what it means to follow him, I see this prayer enacted. This is God’s work with us, changing how we see, what we notice, what we captures our attention, what remains in our field of vision. It impacts everything from how we see God, to how we view ourselves, to how we see one another.

You can trace each of these moments in our texts for today: Moses thinks he can run away and hide but God seeks him out in the middle of nowhere

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<sup>1</sup> Poem “People are Not Illegal” by Hayley Sheaff. You can read about the context for this poem and the inspiration for the title of it at the following website:

<http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs113/1110849011673/archive/1117147967643.html>

in this vision of a burning bush. Certainly Moses' view of himself is changed: what he can do, what God can do through him. But even more, what's transformed in Moses' vision is his view of God. God is revealed as one who sees the misery of hurting people, hears their cries, and knows their suffering and comes down to deliver them. This is who God is. "I am who I am and I will be who I will be." And this deliverance - it is God's work but it comes through God's people.

Shift with me for a moment to the gospel. Peter's eyes are being opened in a similar way. Jesus began showing them that he must go to Jerusalem to undergo great suffering. Peter cannot bear the thought of Jesus having to suffer. What he does not yet see is that this ongoing work God is doing of bringing deliverance to those who suffer means that God is involved with us. And getting involved means getting your hands dirty. Jesus does not come to simply lay out an ethical framework for living. He could have given that in a single lecture. Jesus came to proclaim good news and then proceeded to show us what it looks like.

You want to see love that is genuine, watch Jesus with his disciples over the years they share together. You want to see what it looks like to hate what is evil but still show honor to all, watch Jesus engaging with the power brokers in Jerusalem. You want see what it looks like to extend hospitality to strangers, watch Jesus interact with the woman at the well. You want to see what it looks like to never avenge yourself, watch Jesus offer forgiveness for his executioners as he dies on the cross. As God in Jesus enables our deliverance from everything that holds us captive, Jesus inevitably touches and shares in the suffering of the world. So Jesus expands Peter's vision to see that "not only will I suffer but if you follow me so will you." This work that God is doing is God's work but it is done through God's people.

So where is the church in the face of the world's suffering? Sometimes we are right there in the middle of it with our eyes wide open and our arms extended ready and willing to be the hands and feet of Jesus; instruments of God's deliverance even when it brings us into the mess and suffering of the world. We do this corporately and we do this individually. And it IS happening all over the world, all over this community, and all over your

lives. And I thank God for you and for Christ's church and for the unbelievably creative ways that God's Spirit is alive and at work.

And sometimes, in the face of the world's suffering, the church is nowhere to be seen. Like Moses we are running scared; with a very narrow vision that sees little beyond ourselves.

And so we keep looking to Jesus and we pray:

"God, open our eyes; dilate our pupils to let in more light. So that knowing your name, O God, that you are who you are and you will be who you will be - we might be bold to follow you no matter where it might lead us or what it might cost us....."