

Creating a Jubilee World

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In The Gospel according to Mark, Jesus turns to some of the privileged religious and societal leaders of his day, and he addresses them with these words:

When it is evening you say,
“It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.”
And in the morning,
“It will be stormy today for the sky is red and threatening.”
You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky,
but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.”

Interpreting the signs of the times two thousand years after Jesus’ time—this is still our challenge as liberal laypersons and ministers, members one with another in religious community.

Each of us is called, we are called together into the bonds of congregational life, to interpret the signs of our times. This is never easy, even when we are devoted to it.
I think a story illustrates our circumstance.

Last May I underwent laparoscopic surgery to repair a torn meniscus and some cartilage damage in my right knee. This was a relatively simple outpatient surgical procedure. Nonetheless, my recovery took more than six months. During much of this time to get around I used crutches, or a wheelchair, or an electric cart.

For a long time I have considered myself sensitive to accessibility issues in my life and ministry. When the church I served in Denver underwent renovation, I insisted we build a ramp to accommodate people in wheel chairs and others unable to negotiate stairs. I also promoted establishing a special fund to build an elevator to connect the three levels of the church.

However, I must tell you I did not understand the full impact of inaccessibility until I was on crutches, or in a wheelchair, or driving an electric cart. I noticed rises and drops in the sidewalk that were invisible to me before. I encountered curbs and stairs I had never noticed before. After I experienced the difficulty and frustration of inaccessibility I began to grasp the meaning of interpreting the signs of the times regarding accessibility issues and attitudes. The signs are not good. Improved? Yes. Good? No.

Interpreting the signs of the times is central to our religious mission. It never is easy. Always it is difficult to get inside any other person’s experience. It is even more difficult when the other person’s experience is shaped by an oppression that we do not share.

Difficult; yet our individual and community religious wellbeing depend upon our willingness and our ability to take up this difficult religious work. It is work rooted in love, compassion and justice, three of our most honored religious concepts.

I will use a powerful religious word here to express the importance. Our salvation, this-worldly salvation as religious persons and as a religious community, lies in our capacity to enter imaginatively into

another's experience. How can we do that if we are separated, divided and fractured both in our intimate and in our public relationships? We must overcome these alienations and stand together. If we don't, ultimately we will fall together.

We face a great challenge. At the deepest level we must recognize, we must own, the ways oppression is destructive, and not only for those who are oppressed. In different but real ways, the privileged suffer, too. And, most of us are privileged. In this recognition we come to know that our humanity is pinched, restricted, distorted and tortured by the oppressions of our day. We are called to oppose, to resist and to challenge. This is what it means to interpret the signs of our times.

Running across our society and deep within our culture, institutional racism and other forms of oppression exact a high price from all of us. The cost does not affect all of us in the same way. It does affect everyone.

We must get in touch with this truth. It is our common equivalent to my getting in touch with the oppressive cost of not addressing disability and accessibility. This epiphany is the key to our being able to interpret the signs of our times.

The Jubilee I Workshop which Carl McCargo and I led, and more than thirty of your congregational leaders attended this weekend, is devoted to help us all interpret the signs of our times, and then respond creatively and effectively. Your congregation will have other opportunities in the months and years ahead to continue building your anti-racist agenda.

As usual, the great poetic voices express the combination of challenge, crisis and opportunity that we all face each day, each week, each year. Let us ponder and engage T.S. Eliot's enigmatic statement of the human condition:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T. S. Eliot

from Little Gidding, the Four Quartets

Interpreting the signs of the times; together let us be about this important work.