

The Beloved Community
1Corinthians 12:1-11
January 14, 2007

As many of you know, the Sunday Athens paper last week had a headline story speculating about the future of the very ground on which we are now assembled. With the Boys and Girls Club moving to Fourth Street and Action, Inc. selling the old school house across the street, the article wondered if Carr's Hill might soon become an inhospitable place for our soup kitchen and its guests. One of our guests expressed a fact of life when he said, "There's a lot of people who don't like the homeless. They don't want us around. But we've got to go somewhere."

Further on, the article noted the unease of residents living near the Navy Supply Corps School over its proposed future use as a "one-stop shop" for shelter and medical care for the homeless when the school closes in 2011. Residents are fearful that "an influx of poor and homeless people will drain tax dollars and lead to higher crime."

Then returning to our neighborhood, the article concluded that high-density development is inevitable, bringing an influx of new residents and higher rents and property taxes. Sort of doom and gloom all over the place!

This article bothered me and many of you for several reasons. Most obviously the author's misunderstanding Our Daily Bread. He saw it as just another social service agency and not a vital ministry of the church, and he also speculated that newcomers to our neighborhood might think they could dictate to our church what kinds of ministry we can engage in. How annoying and aggravating is that!

But there was something beyond those issues that has been nagging at me all week. And I think I understand now what it is. The assumptions of the article regarding community are totally contrary to what the Bible teaches and what we, as Christians, believe and are called to do. I suppose I shouldn't blame the author for such a secular point of view; for all of its factual inaccuracies, the article does capture the prevailing secular attitude of fear of and defense against the stranger, and our society's anxious clinging to property with its attendant suspicious attitude towards the surrounding world. Alice Kinman confirmed this attitude for me in an e-mail regarding the article. In response to her published suggestion that community diversity might not be such a bad thing, she wrote, "I have already received one letter from a person who was incensed at my suggestion that the homeless population should be allowed to mingle with the ordinary citizens."

In the secular world we assume that the stranger means trouble. People who are unfamiliar, speak another language, have another color, wear a different type of clothes, or live a life style different from our own, make us afraid and even hostile. "We assume that strangers are a potential danger." (Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, NY: Doubleday, 1975, p. 69) Too often, as Ms. Kinman's correspondent illustrates, our good intentions towards strangers in the abstract are instinctively replaced by a wall of fear and hostile feelings when an actual stranger threatens to come anywhere near us.

The biblical message, however, is that when we welcome strangers, we entertain angels unaware. Abraham and Sarah welcomed three strangers to their home and learned that God would bless them with a child; the widow of Zarephath fed Elijah, and learned he was a holy man of God; dejected Cleopas and his friend walked with a stranger along the Emmaus road, and when they invited him to dine with them, they realized they were in the presence of Christ. In our epistle reading for today, Paul admonishes the Corinthians, who seemed always to be bickering and arguing over who was better than the other, and forming little privileged communities within the larger community, that all that we have – whatever varieties of gifts, or

services, or activities – all come from God, and are meant, not for individual good, but for the common good – to build up community.

Perhaps this news article's appearance last Sunday was providential as we begin a week-long celebration of the life and ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who spoke often and eloquently of his vision of the Beloved Community, that social setting wherein hospitality overcomes hostility, differences do not divide, and love conquers fear. As a result, I have spent a lot of time this week re-reading some of the writings of Howard Thurman, a King family friend and mentor, and Dr. King's speeches and sermons, and I have become more aware than ever of Dr. King's call to community wherein each person is valued as a child of God and where the inherent worth of every human being is recognized.

Howard Thurman affirmed that all human beings have the desire to be cared for, to know that no matter how difficult their individual journey, they are not walking alone (*Disciplines of the Spirit*, NY: Harper Row, 1963, p.105-106), and he wrote also that to escape the burdens that prevent community, "the individual must have a sense of kinship to life that transcends and goes beyond the immediate kinship of family or the organic kinship that bind him [or her] ethnically, or 'racially' or nationally. . . . As a human being then, [one] belongs to life and the whole kingdom of life . . . [one] sees [ones]elf as a part of a continuing breathing living existence." (Vincent Harding, "Dangerous Spirituality," *Sojourners Magazine*, Jan/Feb 1999, pp. 28-31) Dr. King echoed these thoughts when he said in a sermon, "All life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." ("A Christmas Sermon on Peace," *A Testament of Hope*, p. 254).

In his last address as President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, after outlining all of the difficulties that the African American community faced in the America of the '60's, he asked the question, "Where do we go from here?" Why are there 40 million poor people in America?" Why do we promote and support an economic system that produces beggars? "Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that is two-thirds water?" And he admitted that such radical questions could lead to a charge against him of communism. But he replied, "What I'm saying to you . . . is that communism forgets that life is individual. Capitalism forgets that life is social, and the kingdom of brotherhood is found neither in the thesis of communism nor the antithesis of capitalism, but in a higher synthesis . . . that combines the truths of both." ("Where Do We Go From Here," *A Testament of Hope*, James M. Washington, ed., San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986, p. 250).

Then he went on to outline his vision of a new America, a beloved community, where "the walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort and the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by . . . the forces of justice;" where those who "live on the outskirts of hope are brought into a metropolis of daily security;" where "slums are cast into the junk heaps of history, and every family is living in a decent sanitary home;" where "integration is not seen as a problem but an opportunity to participate in the beauty of diversity;" where all "will recognize that out of one blood God made all [persons] to dwell upon the face of the earth;" where "nobody will shout 'White Power!' – nobody will shout 'Black Power!' – but everybody will talk about God's power and human power." (p. 251)

On Friday I met with a group of Athens pastors who are trying to create a ministerial alliance to foster that kind of community that Dr. King envisioned in Athens. Our group has grown out of Partners for a Prosperous Athens, but is not a part of it. We come from various backgrounds and are quite diverse – men and women, old and young, black and white, Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Unitarian, non-denominational, some are seminary trained and some are not; some have affluent congregations, some do not; some are full-time pastors and some part-time. We recognize many of the things that separate us as a community – issues of culture,

housing, economics, racism, education, religion Our commitment is to tear down dividing walls and build bridges. None of us has any answers – in fact we all readily admit our lack of solutions.

But maybe that's a good thing, because when you think you already know the answer, it makes you a bad listener when others suggest different ideas. Instead, we hope to create a safe place, an open place, "a friendly emptiness," to use Henri Nouwen's phrase, in which we can first get to know one another – because we are all strangers to one another right now – and then, maybe from those friendships, will come, with the help of the Holy spirit, suggestions for the common good, for the building up of the beloved community among us.

But not only from among this group of clergy will the beloved community come. My hope is that right here we will continue to be a congregation of hospitality – creating that open and safe place, where strangers can enter to become friends, not enemies. Where we don't try to change people, but give them a space where change can take place, where each can find God in his or her own way.

Buildings come and go – the old school with all of its history and memories and the boys and girls club will give way to condominiums, and with them will come new people. God may just be giving us the opportunity, right here on this hill, at Oconee St. church, as the landscape changes and new people move in, to be a part of building God's beloved community where differences will not divide, where hostility will evaporate in the presence of hospitality, and where fear will be vanquished by our love for God and for one another.

May it be so Lord, may it be so. Amen.