

APRIL 19, 2009
EASTER 2
“COMMONWEALTH”

Let us pray: Resurrecting God, by the power of the Spirit of the risen Christ, animate us believers who are of one heart and soul to practice resurrection in the way in which we live together, that we might be “martyrs” — a living testimonial — to that beloved community that is a “commonwealth” of sharing the good things of life rather than a collection of individuals whose first loyalty is to protecting “mine” from becoming “ours.” It’s in Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Some of you have heard me tell the story — or have read my account of the story which I shared with folks in Augsburg — of how three years ago this week I opened our LA County Board of Supervisors weekly Tuesday meeting with an invocation I’d been invited to give. Or as my telling of the story puts it, how I didn’t exactly give the Board of

Supervisors the prayer they were looking for but provided for them an “invocation” of quite another sort.

While I concluded by reading the poem of Wendell Berry that I read at our Easter Vigil as inspiration to them to “practice resurrection” as Berry himself concludes his poem, the text I used for my little four-minute homily was our first reading for today from the fourth chapter of Acts. What I actually said to them was this: *“You know that just two days ago we Christians ...celebrated Easter, the day that God raised Jesus from the grave where he had been laid following his execution by the political authorities of his day. Next Sunday in our churches (I continued), many of us will hear this particular text that I think has relevance to the work you are all called to do as well as all of us who call ourselves Christians. This text from the fourth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles gives us a strong hint as to what it means to live in the light of the resurrection: “Now the whole group of*

those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common....There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

"This is a text, as some of you know," I went on, "that became the inspiration of Karl Marx's" (now I could feel the fidgeting of the crowd) "from each according to their ability, to each according to their need," a text," I said, "that we can admit neither free market nor socialist societies have found it easy to embody nor for that matter the church itself. It remains for us," I now concluded, "the challenge of seeking the welfare of the city rather than merely ourselves and "our own" as the prophet Jeremiah urged."

This was, and I continue to stand by it today, just the "inspiration" I judged

appropriate to provide by way of “invocation” to our County’s political leaders—to take seriously their calling—their vocation—to exercise care for the overall welfare and well-being of the County they have been elected to serve.

Or to use a slightly more old-fashioned term that I want to play with a bit this morning, to care for our county in the sense of our being a “commonwealth,” a phrase that some of the older states of the union like Massachusetts and Virginia still use in describing themselves—“the great Commonwealth of Virginia,” e.g. I like this word in its more literal—and what my dictionary calls, revealingly, its “obsolete sense,” as “the general welfare” or the “commonweal” meaning “the public good.” But I like the word “**commonwealth**” especially as it conveys this literal sense we find in Acts 4 of a “common wealth”—a holding of wealth as a common, indeed communal, responsibility.

My old class-mate at Yale Divinity School, once the chaplain at Duke University and now a United Methodist bishop in Alabama, Will Willimon, in his commentary on Acts writes: *“The most eloquent testimony to the reality of the resurrection is not the empty tomb or a well-orchestrated pageant on Easter Sunday but rather a group of people whose life together is so radically different, so completely changed from the way the way the world builds community, that there can be no explanation other than that something decisive has happened in history.”* And I would argue even more strongly that a crucial dimension of the church’s mission is to witness to this intention of God’s for all human life in the public sphere—the welfare, the “commonwealth,” of all people.

At our best, I think that is what was happening in Augsburg, Germany where punctuating the many lectures I heard and

conversations I was a part of were stories of the church's ministry among the *dalit*—untouchable—peoples of India, those relegated to “low caste” status in traditionally Hindu Indian culture—even though such discrimination is officially outlawed in so-called “secular” Indian society. Or there was the presentation we heard from a Lutheran pastor in Australia and his ministry among aboriginal peoples, or the Argentinean pastor who works among HIV-AIDS victims, or Annete, a Cameroonian Lutheran woman who serves as a catechist among the war-torn refugee people of the Central African Republic.

Caring for the “least of these” is certainly our calling as church but there was general agreement that the church's calling is more than direct, charitable service. It is also advocacy and support—and sometimes direct action—to hold government responsible for the “commonwealth” of its citizens—a very

tricky thing in places like Zimbabwe and Israel/Palestine and Indonesia and wherever we Lutherans are a small, small minority. But we also talked of the difficulty of being advocates for the neediest in places like Namibia and Tanzania—and Sweden and the USA-- and how things change once one's own church members are part of the government in power.

In Monday's NY Times I read a front-page article—and then later in the week an editorial--that for me—and of course you're free to disagree—presents a good case study of the need for advocacy within our own U.S.A. regarding an issue that I expect few will find very controversial. Entitled “Plan to Change Student Lending Sets Up a Fight,” the article begins: *“The private student lending industry and its allies in Congress are maneuvering to thwart a plan by President Obama to end a subsidized loan program and redirect*

billions of dollars in bank profits to scholarships for needy students.”

The article continues: *The plan is the main money-saving component of Mr. Obama’s education agenda, which includes a sweeping overhaul of financial aid programs. The Congressional Budget Office says that replacing subsidized loans made by private banks with **direct government lending** would save \$94 billion over the next decade, money that Mr. Obama would use to expand Pell grants for the poorest students. But the proposal has ignited one of the most fractious policy fights this year.”*

Well, as the article goes on to detail, the private loan industry — made possible by government guarantees--which would have collapsed without a government rescue last year, has begun to “lobby aggressively to save a program that has generated giant profits with very little risk” — but, as you may remember it has

been a business known for its corruption and sweet-heart deals with particular colleges and loan officers. The president simply wants to cut out the banks—the “middle-men”—and use their profits to fund “direct” student loans. Opponents of the plan see this as a vast expansion of federal government, evidence of the rampant “socialism” the President’s opponents keep raising as a scare tactic.

I expect some of you still remember how we baby-boomers financed our college educations with just such direct federal loans, though they had to be justified in our day by calling them “National Defense” loans, the rationale being that it served the purposes of our national defense—especially vis a vis the Russians and their beating us into space with Sputnik. But these loans were available to anybody who could demonstrate the need—and not just the poorest or science students. And what’s

more many — like Ruth — will remember how a certain percentage of the loan would be “forgiven” if one went into teaching — which these loans helped make a dignified and honorable while affordable career path for so many in a time of rapidly expanding public education.

By contrast another Times piece on Sunday by Frank Rich observed how during the so-called “bubble decade” just ended “making money as an end-in-itself boomed as a calling among students at elite universities like Harvard, siphoning off graduates who might otherwise have been scientists, teachers, doctors, entrepreneurs, artists or inventors.” The Harvard Crimson, for example, reported that in the class of 2007, 58% of the men and 43 % of the women entering the work force took jobs in the finance and consulting industries. I knew it was high but had no idea it was that high!

Doesn't it seem just sensibly, appropriate public policy devoted to serving the "commonwealth" of our nation that student loans should be made available as widely and cheaply as possible—without having to provide a "profit" to any private interest for doing so? Especially when it's been so poorly and inefficiently run by the banks? These are just the sorts of questions we'll soon be asking regarding the reform of our medical system, of course, and a whole range of problems that our current financial crisis have both exposed and given a window of opportunity to do something about that benefits the "commonwealth" rather than merely private interests.

It's not that "socialism" is any more the answer than is the "free market system." Both have found it in practice difficult to put flesh and blood reality on the vision of the early church in Acts 4 as I admitted to the County Board of Supervisors. But the

serving of the “commonwealth” remains the goal—and a goal of which the church, in part, is called to remind our elected officials, as well as within our own community of faith. This certainly is one way of understanding our challenge to be a traditional and transforming community of faith that truly welcomes all people—including our very specific welcome extended to glbt folks who’ve so often been excluded by our churches and which now our upcoming churchwide assembly in August has a chance to remedy, by God! Practice resurrection, sisters and brothers in Christ, by recognizing the “commonwealth” we share for Christ’s sake. Amen.

