

Signal Communities: The Hope of Zion

Address at the 2008 Peace Colloquy

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I greet you this morning in the grace and peace of Jesus Christ, the One who not only taught us the way of peace, but who calls us daily to peacemaking in His name. I must admit that I have been somewhat surprised about how the phrase “signal communities” has generated so much interest in some members of the church. In fact, as a growing number of people have engaged in conversation and activity arising from the concept, I have felt both hope and concern.

Let me address my concern first. Given certain aspects of our early history, I am concerned that we do not resurrect any type of community-building that is seen as refuge or separation from the world. We must not promote any expression of community that is exclusive or insular. The moment we start defining community as being “just for people like us” we have departed from a faithful understanding of Christ’s vision.

We must also avoid the trap of pushing a particular approach as the only true model. The qualities of the communities we are interested in may be expressed in a number of settings such as families, small groups, congregations, neighborhoods, villages, partnerships, and even world-wide networks, such as the emerging Community of Christ Peace Support Network.

With those cautions out of the way, let me hasten to add: I am fully convinced the world desperately needs expressions of genuine community that are examples of living in creation as God intends. By their very nature, such communities are distinct because they are not the norm.

As I travel in different parts of the world, I am often asked by various government and military officials to identify my profession and what organization I represent. One time when stopped by some threatening rebel soldiers in Africa, I was asked to identify myself. After presenting my passport, I cautiously said the name of the church. I also threw in the name of Outreach International for good measure. Their intimidating, stern looks turned to smiles and they seemed to relax. They said, through a translator, “We know of the villages where your church is established and life is better for the people there. Do not be afraid for your security. We will watch over you here.”

The villages we visited where the church and Outreach International had been providing ministry and participatory human development initiatives are signal communities. The spiritual, physical, and communal lives of young, middle-aged, and older, are noticeably better. There is wholistic expression of the gospel in harmony with our best understanding of the cause and hope of Zion.

Signal communities positively deviate from trends and conditions in society that are contrary to God’s will for creation. They reveal a way of living that is a glimpse, demonstration, foothold, or foretaste of the peaceable reign of God on earth. Such communities provide a shining witness that the hope of the gospel is not wishful idealism. Conditions in creation can become better, more harmonious, and peaceful when we give tangible expression to the vision of Christ. Many places in the world are desperate for the presence of such communities of faith, service, witness and social transformation.

Why is this way of living the gospel especially important today? In his book, *Jesus is Shalom: a Vision of Peace from the Gospels*, Joseph Grassi, expresses it this way: “Peace is always complete(d) in community, not within individuals alone.” It may be hard for many of us to hear the full truth of that statement. We are becoming so immersed in cultures that promote individualism, self-centeredness, and satisfying personal needs and desires regardless of the needs of others.

A statement such as “peace is always complete in community, not within individuals alone” seems like a foreign language. This is particularly true if we have bought into privatized forms of the gospel that promise individual salvation and personal prosperity while ignoring the relational teachings of Jesus Christ, especially in relationship to the plight of the poor and dispossessed in the world. So, it may come as a shock to many of us today to realize that the inner and outer peace that we yearn for deep in our souls will never be unless we learn the ways of community.

Furthermore, the type of community called for is not community as we generally understand it. It is much more than friendly social fellowship or being good neighbors. What we are talking about is sacred community. Sacred community is community that arises from the continuing incarnation or embodiment of God’s Word in our lives and relationships. Sacred community, according to one writer, is where we find the presence of:

... repentance and forgiveness, speaking the truth in love, hospitality and reconciliation, the tender trust of knowing and being known, [and] the assurance that [our] friends in the community would lay down their lives for [us].

—See Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 112.

Jean Vanier, in his excellent book, *Community and Growth*, adds:

Communities are truly communities when they are open to others, when they remain vulnerable and humble, when the members are growing in love, in compassion, and in humility.

—Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, page 19.

Let me put it this way. Sacred community is the kind of community where Jesus would feel at home, because the outcast is invited, the stranger is welcomed, the wounded are comforted, and people are interconnected through compassionate and sacrificial love. Jesus would recognize himself—his vision, his teachings, and his passion—in the life of that kind of community.

How is such community born and sustained? When Jesus was certain his death was imminent he gathered his disciples in a room prepared for the Passover meal. It was a time of intimate sharing. During the course of that meal, Jesus opened his inner life and emptied it into the fellowship of disciples. He birthed a new covenant community through sharing the broken bread and cup of wine that represented the pouring out of his life. He infused the elements of the ancient Passover meal with powerful new meaning. Meaning meant to guide and sustain that community until he would share with them again—not individually, but as community—in the coming Kingdom of God. He entrusted to the community of disciples his vision and passion for God’s shalom on earth. He emptied his life into the community; a signal community from which many other communities of similar vision would spring up around the world.

Why did he do that? He did it because he knew that it was through true community that God's shalom, God's peace, God's salvation would find fulfillment. Jesus poured his life into a sacred, signal community so that God's peace could some day become the world's peace.

What does such community look like and how does it act in the world?

Last year the World Church Leadership Council went on a spiritual formation and community building retreat at Conception Abbey in northwest Missouri. The abbey is home to Benedictine monks who provide a place of hospitality, learning, worship, and peace for any one who wants to come. They always welcome and serve the "stranger" in whatever form the stranger might appear at their door.

Around 8am, June 10, 2002, a mentally ill man came in to where the monks live. He shot two of them to death and wounded two others. He then went into the sanctuary of the Basilica, sat down in back, and took his own life. A shocking, unimaginable tragedy had unfolded in a few brief moments of time.

What happened next? How did the monks respond? Apparently, they were so grounded in the gospel of Christ--having dwelt regularly in scripture, spiritual formation disciplines, sacraments, and community life—that they instinctively knew what to do. They moved as if they were one body with one mind and one spirit—the body, mind, and spirit of Jesus Christ. Though naturally stunned and grief-stricken they did not retreat behind locked doors. They brought healing ministry to one another, the staff at the abbey, and upset people in nearby towns. Amazingly, they even reached out in love and forgiveness to the family of the man who had inflicted such horror on them, offering to conduct his funeral and bury him in their cemetery. (Brother Cyprian, the questmaster at Conception Abbey has been with us throughout the weekend. He is a friend of the church and we are glad that he is with us.)

As people in surrounding towns saw this genuine living of the gospel, their fear and anger were quieted. That community of disciples signaled to the larger world an alternative way to respond to violence and the impulse to seek revenge. Jesus, in the form of a community, was teaching once again the sermon on the plain. The news media covering the story asked whether they would change their customs of hospitality, welcoming the stranger, and living peacefully in the aftermath of such tragedy. The Abbot or leader of the community responded that hospitality was such a part of who they were it was "inconceivable" they would change their welcoming, Christ-like ways.

I am both grateful for and deeply unsettled by the living witness of the monks of Conception Abbey. What would I do...what would we do... what would our congregations do if faced today with such a violent interruption of our individual and collective lives?

In our early history, when faced with violence we often responded violently. Just how compelling is our commitment to the gospel of Christ and the hope of Zion today as vision for God's peaceable reign on earth? This question is not meant to be critical or judgmental. It is

meant to stimulate us to seriously reflect on whether we who have been claimed by the name “Community of Christ” are actually living as Christ in community, which is the call. The call to become such community lies deep within the origins and history of our faith movement.

Early on, it was expressed as the summons to “seek to establish and bring forth the cause of Zion.” The cause of Zion was described as being of one heart, one mind, and one spirit, living righteously, and having no poor among us. Put in other terms: the gospel lived in community as harmonious relationships, Christ-centered spirituality, just relationships, and abundant generosity.

During the more recent past, the call has been sounded with new clarity:

Stand firm in the name of the One you proclaim and create diverse communities of disciples and seekers. . . . Heed the urgent call to become a global family united in the name of Christ, committed in love to one another, seeking the kingdom for which you yearn and to which you have always been summoned. That kingdom shall be a peaceable one and it shall be known as Zion.

—Doctrine and Covenants 161: 6a,b.

This call was sounded again through the most recent counsel given to the church in 2007:

You are called to create pathways in the world for peace in Christ to be relationally and culturally incarnate. The hope of Zion is realized when the vision of Christ is embodied in communities of generosity, justice, and peacefulness.

—Doctrine and Covenants 163: 3a.

Human will, intellect, social philosophies, and ethical systems, as important as they are, are not sufficient to form and sustain such communities. The sacred signal communities needed arise from deeply transforming spiritual encounter with the Word of God in Christ. That is precisely why we are called to come to this table today. Throughout this weekend we have received excellent information, insights, and questions to stimulate our understanding. We have been introduced to resources and models. We have been urged to apply ourselves more fully as builders of communities of justice and peace. What more is needed?

We need to come into the presence of Jesus Christ, humble and repentant, with a desire to open our hearts and minds to the indwelling of his spirit. We need to take into ourselves, through the elements of the sacrament of communion, the meaning, power, and hope of his life, death, and resurrection. We need to allow his spirit to form us into the kind of communities—locally and globally-- that will shine as “lights on a hill” to turn the heads and hearts of people to the hope of the gospel.

Then and only then are we prepared to become the kinds of communities that embody the gospel to such a degree that creation begins to tilt towards healing and peace.

Signal communities hear the call!

Arise and come to the Lord’s Table!