

Welcome to Kairos CoMotion -- March 2005

Amy DeLong, Chairperson

Tomorrow in churches around the world, sermons will be preached about Mary and Martha and their brother. Lazarus isn't doing well. Something deadly has taken hold of him and it will not let him go. This something is a powerful thing -- we know this, because it reduces Jesus to tears.

Some of us have been held in a grip like that. We understand Lazarus -- being buried in helplessness and hopelessness, with the smell of death in our noses. We know what it's like to feel spiritually and emotionally gone -- no longer in touch with the source of life. And often we're reduced to tears, too.

But then along comes Jesus -- and as always, he's got a different way of seeing things. It looks like the end, like the tomb is sealed, like death has had it's way -- like the only thing left to do is pass around the Kleenex.

But that ain't so!

I love what comes next. Of course, we recognize this next part as the great gay liberation text -- "Lazarus," Jesus shouts, "Come out."

Come on out, Lazarus. Come out of the cave, out of the tomb, out of the closet. Leave behind the wrappings and trappings of death. Lazarus, come out! You're not going to be mistaken for dead any longer.

And then there is an order from Jesus to the community. "Unbind him and set him free." Oh, that's good news, Lazarus has help. There are people gathered around who are gonna help him tear off his grave clothes and step into the breeze so the stink of death can blow right off him. It is the community that unbinds him and sets him free.

That's why this community has gathered here today, I hope -- to be set free ourselves and to set others free -- in whatever grand or small ways we are able to do that.

We can start by naming the pains and the hurts and the dead places -- and by acknowledging that sometimes those things that keep us from boldly proclaiming life are the very things we have been taught in church.

Some of what we have been taught says awful things about who we are, awful things about who God is, awful things about how God relates to us and how we relate to God.

At our very first Kairos gathering in 2002 when Bishop Spong was with us, I said that when progressive folks gather, people get nervous. Well, they're still nervous.

A couple weeks ago, the members of the Kairos Board of Directors and others received a letter from the Executive Council of the Wisconsin Confessing Movement. They are concerned about this gathering and what Rita will bring to us.

In their letter they said, "We note that it appears to us that the conference is likely to question or negate the United Methodist understanding of the atonement." Then, quoting the Book of Discipline, they ask, "How does your conference avoid the danger of 'dissemination of doctrines contrary to the established standards of doctrine of the United Methodist Church?'"

I don't know. We're not disseminating doctrines, we're just thinking! We're exploring, we're maturing, we're searching. I hope that's not illegal. I hope asking questions isn't now incompatible with Christian teaching.

After asking us six questions about whether we are going to change the United Methodist understanding of the atonement, and how we intend to implement that change, and what biblical basis we would have for such a change, and after threatening the ordained elders among us for violating our ordination vows to uphold the order, liturgy, doctrine and discipline of the United Methodist Church, they conclude their letter by saying:

"We fear that rejecting the United Methodist understanding of the atonement may jeopardize your own salvation and relationship with God, as well as potentially damage the church's witness to the Gospel and weaken the faith of others."

What would Jesus do? If only we had a record, somewhere, of him questioning authority. If only we knew of one instance where he broke a rule for love of God or neighbor. If only there were one time when Jesus was inspired to upend a cherished tenet of the faith. If only we knew of one occasion when Jesus helped folks see that the circle of God's love includes all people -- despite the exclusive lines drawn by the tradition. If only somebody had written it down, something like... "It has been said of old, but I say to you..."

In the end, I'm left with a question: What is our faith for? Is it for doing good and saving lives or for killing hope? Is it for trapping God or for unbinding us and setting us free? Is it for spotting a heretic a mile away or for seeing the holy in each other? Is it for deepening our experience of God or for defending the experience we've already had?

What happens here today might shatter old views and it might reveals new truths. It might be radical. It might be thrilling. It might be challenging. But it most certainly will not be heretical. Being open to the new thing that God is doing among us does not make us heretics.

Welcome -- it is good for us to be together -- it is saving for us to be together.