

Epiphany 5  
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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## Outlandish Invitations

Reconciliation is best motivated by glory. A long time ago a friend of mine began sending me far-right messages involving a lot of suggested gun violence. I endured it for a while, but then I got tired of it and pointed out to him the ridiculousness of what he was sending. His response was classic, "Oh, I didn't mean anything by it." I should have asked him, "Oh, I see, so if I say I'm going to blow up the Brooklyn Bridge and the police catch me, and I say, 'Oh, I didn't mean anything by it,' then I'm not going to get in trouble?"

On the other hand, I should have seen it coming. I had only left him two options, shame, or denial. Of course he took the easy road. There was no true repentance, no reconciliation, and no transcendence. That takes something else, something we see in the Gospel lesson for today. Repentance may be motivated by shame, but true reconciliation is motivated by glory. After all, How did Peter move from "Get away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man," to leaving everything and following Jesus?

Peter shows us the way. Luke does not record any calling of disciples until this story, so, Peter has just been one of the crowd, generous enough to lend Jesus his boat as a stage, while Jesus makes an impromptu amphitheater of the shore. But then Jesus makes an outlandish invitation. "Put out into deep water and put down your nets." Again, Peter is generous and obliging, though he might be thinking, "What's this guy know about fishing?" After all, they had caught nothing all night.

But then the nets come up bulging full—almost more than two boats' worth. The outlandish invitation has resulted in an encounter with the divine. The first step in reconciliation is an outlandish invitation that leads to an encounter with the divine. If you are reconciling with God, God has to become real to you somehow. If you're reconciling with someone, that person has to become a person for you, a sacred center, another valid human being, and not a projection of your own stuff. When we encounter the reality of another, as Martin Buber wrote, we encounter the divine.

That encounter never leaves us unchanged, for it plunges us into a sudden realization of empathy. Have you ever thought something was white, until you held it up next to something that really was? When you realize that another might see you through other eyes than your own, it might dawn on you that divine eyes might very well see you in a less favorable light than you would like to see yourself. What you thought was white...

Funny how in Peter's case, he says, "Get away from me..." isn't it? I mean, if Peter feels uncomfortable, why doesn't he leave? But it's not really all that funny, because we all do it. We take the divine other that challenges us and push it away. We reject the outlandish invitation. We deport, we marginalize, we persecute and oppress, we scapegoat, Anything to keep the divine at bay without putting ourselves out. Why? Because deep down we know that they have the power to show us the truth about ourselves. At least Peter has the courage to name it, "I am a sinner."

In the end, Peter does not leave, and Jesus does not leave. Instead of separating, Jesus gathers them. "Follow me and you will catch people." God has work for them. Peter becomes a disciple, who will become one of the chief apostles.

Reconciliation is the path to transcendence. Reconciliation is not,

- Giving in,
- Getting your way,
- Or hammering out a compromise.

Reconciliation is moving together to a new place, somewhere richer and deeper and wider and higher. A reconciled marriage is one that is stronger than before the dark waters. A reconciled friendship is more enduring than one that never faced conflict. A reconciled people is more resilient to the challenges of living as a community.

Reconciliation is complete when the relationship moves to a greater level.

Transcendence is always the goal, for reconciliation is greater than innocence; Heaven more glorious than Eden...and it all begins with an outlandish invitation.

We hear outlandish invitations all the time. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy said,

*There is no escaping our obligations: our moral obligations as a wise leader and good neighbor in the interdependent community of free nations – our economic obligations as the wealthiest people in a world of largely poor people, as a nation no longer dependent upon the loans from abroad that once helped us develop our own economy – and our political obligations as the single largest counter to the adversaries of freedom.*

Congress created the United States Agency for International Development, USAID, combining into one agency a number of other agencies of foreign assistance into one. The agency has always been part of the U.S. foreign policy, and we cannot ignore the fact that it has been an instrument for enhancing US foreign policy throughout the decades of its existence, but its vision has always been to make the world a more stable place so that the U.S. can live at peace. One could say that the nation heard an outlandish invitation. As a rich nation, it is in everyone's best interest to share that wealth, for if our neighbors

do well, so will we.

Some of those funds went to sustain the work of Cristosal, the largest non-governmental human rights defense agency in the Northern Triangle of Central America. The current administration has attempted to freeze a wide range of federal grant money. Cristosal had its budget cut \$2M; that's 40%. They are scrambling to replace that funding through the private sector. Is the freeze an act of fear? Have we lost the vision of the outlandish invitation? Are we forgetting that, if human rights are not respected in Central America, more people will try to immigrate to the U.S.? Are we saying "Get away from me?" without going on to say, "for we are a sinful nation?"

Two years ago, I heard an outlandish invitation. Should Resurrección and St. Paul's join into one congregation? It was outlandish to me because every other place I had seen such things happened, the Hispanic congregation ended up 2nd class citizens, or all the White people left. I had only heard and seen, "Get away from me." I asked around and found that there were indeed places where this was being done without the separation. New models were emerging, the demographics of the Anglo and the Hispanic populations are changing, and maybe there might be a way to hear Jesus' words "I will make you catch people," more fully.

We launched on a long process that is now in full swing. A committee of two members of each congregation plus St. Paul's chancellor has been formed to rewrite our bylaws to reflect a new reality, One congregation, one budget, one governing body and one cleric, but two ethnic centers in our common life. We are trying to figure out how best to **NOT** say, "Get away from me." We are trying to hear Jesus' invitation, "From now on you will catch people."

Where are you hearing an outlandish invitation, one where you are tempted to say, "Get away from me"? You might even be brave enough to add, "For I am a sinful person." What if the invitation, outlandish as it may seem, is actually be an invitation to an encounter with the divine, a doorway to transcendence?