

Easter 7A: Acts 1.6-14

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H.L. Mencken was wrong about a lot of things. But he was right when he said, "For every complex problem there is a solution that is clear, simple, and wrong." A city is a complex problem, wouldn't you say? An unlikely friendship once developed in response to the question of what kind of complex problem a city is.

Jane Jacobs, probably the most important urban thinker of the 20th century, once received a letter from a Greek Orthodox priest named Timothy Patitsas. Jacobs was the New Yorker who led the effort to stop an expressway that would have decimated Greenwich Village in the 1960s. A movement not unlike one here in Memphis that kept I-40 from plowing through my Evergreen neighborhood and Overton Park.

In the last chapter of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs argues that much of the damage done to cities in the 20th century was by planners who didn't understand the kind of problem a city is. She said they either thought the problem was too simple, or they thought it was too complex. Sometimes they thought both things at once.

A simple problem is one that an individual mind can solve rationally. So, to use our local example, if the problem is how many cars you can get most efficiently from Little Rock to Nashville, the arithmetic isn't too hard. And everybody knows the shortest distance between two points is a line.

But when a problem gets infinitely complex, like how many people on a given Thursday will decide to drive from Little Rock to Nashville, we have ways of solving it as well. Even though all the thoughts in all the heads and all the events on all the calendars for every person in central Arkansas, plus chance and accident along the way, amount to an almost infinite number of variables, statistical averages predict pretty well how many people will be on the road.

Jane Jacobs argued that city planners thought they could solve a city's problems either through simple analysis of a few variables, or through statistical analysis of an uncountable number. But she said a city neighborhood is something in between. It's more like a living organism that must maintain a kind of active, living balance to stay healthy.

You don't want your doctor prescribing blood pressure medicine based on how much the average American needs. She needs to take into consideration how all sorts of things are in relationship in your particular body if your health and wholeness is the goal. The same is true for a living neighborhood like Evergreen or a place like Overton

Park. The health and miracle of both depend on tending to a delicate balance that's never quite the same in one time and place as in another.

Timothy Patitsas's letter said that Jacobs's work convinced him that cities are best understood as liturgies. "And this is true 'really,'" he wrote. "Not just by way of religious interpretation. It is actually the best description of this most complex form of human life, with its constant surprise ... openendedness ... and being formed by the plans of many." Much to his surprise, Jane Jacobs, a lifelong agnostic, replied to his letter, saying, "You are so much the best interpreter of my work that I'm aware of, that you are actually showing me what my own books mean..."

We Episcopalians can be a little precious about liturgy, as if it's a collection of tasteful historical artifacts or a reverent form of self-help. Dr. Patitsas and Ms. Jacobs are convincing me that liturgy is actually how all human life is ordered. And if a city like Memphis or a block like this one is to become a fuller expression of shalom or the peaceable kingdom or the reign of God, it will be because we realize we have a small but meaningful part to play in a larger liturgy than any one of us can imagine.

What does any of this have to do with the first chapter of Acts? Well, for one thing, Christians can tend to talk about the Ascension as the end of the Incarnation. Just as we can assume that when the deacon sends us forth into the world at the end of the eucharist, we are finished with our liturgy and reentering ordinary life where different rules apply. But the God who holds all things in being is still the God of Incarnation, just at our liturgies exist within a cosmos that is liturgical always and everywhere.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus's followers would often ask when he was going to fix things. They wanted to know when he was going to restore the kingdom of Israel, solving their problems like a proper messiah was supposed to, presumably with a bigger army than the emperor's. And forty days after the resurrection the apostles are still asking the very same thing. "Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?"

To be fair, their problem was real. Jesus may have been raised, but Jews were still living under Roman occupation. His crucifixion had been a vivid reminder. Crucifixion wasn't a Jewish thing. It was the empire's way of instilling fear and controlling would be rabble rousing subjects.

But Jesus's consistent response to the question, before and after the resurrection, might be summarized like this: "For every complex problem there is a solution that is clear, simple, and wrong." That Ascension day on the hillside, he put it this way: "God's ways and timelines are not yours to know. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

In other words, Jesus says once again that his incarnate presence will be among people, more than within them. He sends them back to Jerusalem, to the city where his Holy Spirit will blow through their lives on Pentecost. And when it does, people who

speak different languages and come from different cultures, as people in cities always have ... all these people will hear each other, understand each other, and find a different source of power in their lives from the conflict and competition, the warring and retribution that followed the scattering at Babel.

That, in the Book of Acts, is how the power of the resurrection makes its way incarnately into our lives. Because this is a liturgical cosmos. It's in the complexity of life with other people that Jesus still comes to us. Not riding in on a white horse with a sword.

A week ago, I was standing just inside the doors of the church, waiting for an usher to ring the great bell that calls us into this Sunday liturgy. I love the bustle of that moment, as late folks scurry into church, getting quieter as they feel the stillness others have made ready for them in the room. It was in that moment that Richard Hendricks leaned over to me and said, "The Penske van full of organ pipes was stolen last night."

Many of you — and actually, much of Memphis and people with connections to Calvary around the world — had your own experience receiving this unthinkable news. Mine just came earlier. I hoped Kristin hadn't heard. Not yet. I learned later that she had, and I still have no idea how she stayed upright, much less played the piano and directed our choirs.

But as our energies turned toward the search in the hours and days to come, something came into focus for me in a way it never had before. The strange fact was that those pipes were invaluable to us, and worth next to nothing out in the world. A van with a few dozen catalytic converters would be worth much more than this load of our precious tin to a thief. Which is how it hit me that the value wasn't inherent in the pipes. Value is something humans impart to one another and even to objects.

The shock and heartbreak and expressions of solidarity around those invaluable, worthless pipes, that spread so fast and so far last week, became a liturgy that drew all of us in, in a very real sense. It was fired by all the life and love and beauty that had made its way into this world through Calvary's organ over the past almost 90 years. The value wasn't in the metal, but in the hymns and anthems that passed from sheet music, through pedals and keys and circuits into bellows and pipes and then out into the air of this great nave, accompanying the voices of choirs, from restless children in cottas to our calm, knowing elders, all of whose music's first purpose is to support ordinary voices like yours and like mine in our praise.

And since Joseph Rotella and his crew of craftspeople were here, tending so carefully to the instrument when the theft occurred, the stunned silence and sadness in this room, as they carried on with their work on Monday, made their reverence for their trade and for our instrument palpable. Their affection, as surely as their skill, also filled up our worthless pipes with their value.

Add to these the unexpected grace some stranger receives for free from a prelude at Lenten Preaching Series or at a centennial presentation of Handel's Messiah. Or maybe most vividly in the three Calvary youth who each told Kristin separately this spring that they wanted to learn her ancient craft when she thought they were ready.

There is a thread, or a breath, that connects all of these moments, isn't there? In them, can you sense the beautiful complexity of this liturgical cosmos, in which we live and move and sing and play and have our being, which is expressed in a local, peculiar beauty, in time, among the likes of us here at Calvary? The lost pipes would just be old tin cylinders, were it not for their place and use in that sacred human liturgy, on which our lives are always depending, all of the time, everywhere.

I suppose our problem now is what to do in response. It would make a kind of self-protective sense to hunker down in fear of what else might go wrong. I'll admit that a part of me wants retribution. Part of me wants someone to pay. The clear, simple solution this world so often turns to is fear and then punishment. But these clear, simple solutions are not working. They never have. Which must be why, even from the cross, Jesus just wouldn't play along. "Forgive them, Father," he prayed, even then. "They think this is a solution. But they still don't know what they are doing."

But what would he have us do? Well, I think he'd send us right back down into our Jerusalem. Back into the city where the Holy Spirit still moves through incarnate people who don't speak the same dialects or come from the same countries or the same parts of town. When Jesus found fearful people huddled in locked upper rooms or on hillsides staring at the sky, he sent them right back down into the city. Right back into the liturgy of life in this world, that he so loves. The incarnate liturgy in which his holy and life-giving Spirit is still to be found.