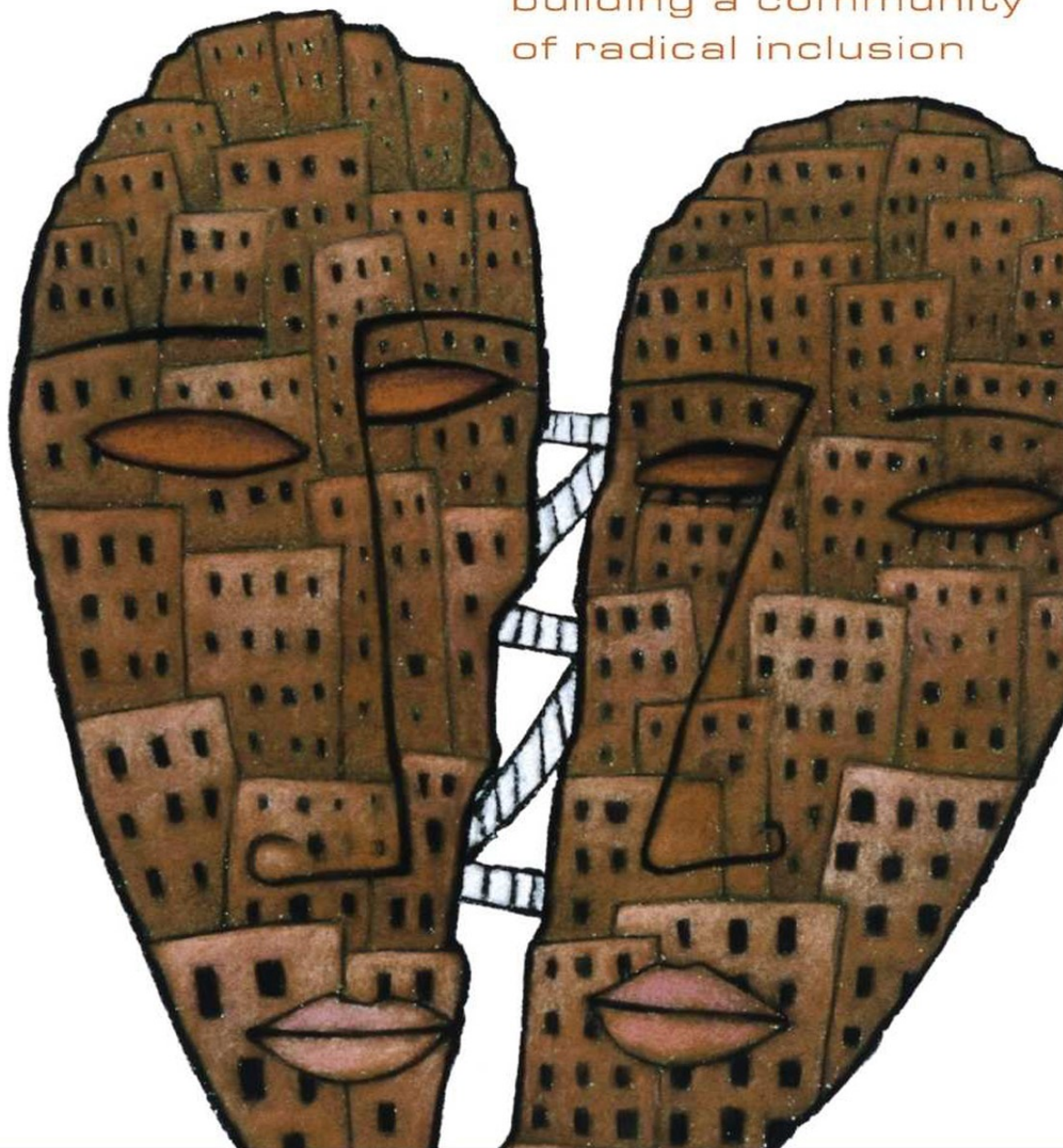


WHERE THE EDGE GATHERS

building a community
of radical inclusion



YVETTE A. FLUNDER

THE UPPER ROOM

Acts 1:4-8, 12-14, 2:1-2

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to a room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. (Acts 1:12-14)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. (Acts 2:1-2)

OUR STORY OPENS with a group of Jesus' disciples in a room waiting for something that Jesus called "power from on high." This ambiguous power experience was to enable them to be great witnesses, and the

command from Jesus after he ascended was for them to return to their upstairs rented room in Jerusalem and wait for it. Eleven disciples, now minus Judas, the women, the Marys and Joanna, Jesus' brothers, and those who believed, such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea—120 in all—were there, waiting.

PREPARATION FOR THE COMING OF THE SPIRIT

In my Pentecostal upbringing much emphasis was placed on the coming of the Holy Ghost but not on what transpired while the disciples waited for it. What was really going on among these believers? Graduation is wonderful, but the education that leads to graduation is the object of the experience . . . in the long run education makes graduation pale in comparison. Perhaps the preparation for the event was much more significant than the event itself. They waited together in the same room for ten days. What if the waiting afforded them the opportunity for reconciling relationships? These disciples had issues with each other and I can visualize them initially going to different parts of the room with the group and leader they most identified with. Here they were, stunned by the recent events, without the physical presence of their Teacher and with a commandment from Jesus to wait for power but not really know what to expect. On top of all of this . . . they had issues!

I suspect they had been so focused on the oppression from the outside, that they had little time to look critically at the issues they had among them and the things that divided them. I believe they were not unlike us—church folk—and church folk under stress can be a challenge. There had been much competition among the disciples, a lot of jockeying for power, and the residue of criticism must have still been in the air. There had been jealousy regarding some of them being too close to Jesus. Peter had denied Jesus three times in one night, had left, had gone back to fishing, and had now returned.

Thomas had doubted the resurrection until he saw the wounds on Jesus' body. James and John had argued with the others over who was greatest and who would have which position in Jesus' kingdom. There might have been some bad feelings between Jesus' family and the disciples regarding the rightful passing of authority.

Jesus had left John responsible for Mary, Jesus' mama, and she had other sons. Imagine that dynamic. In the mix of waiting disciples were those Gentiles whom Jesus had touched and I am sure this caused some consternation among the Jewish believers. Now Mary Magdalene with her supposedly spurious past was on her own without Jesus to cover her. What about the Pharisee Nicodemus? Could he be trusted? After all, he was a member of the Sanhedrin. He was from headquarters. And Joseph who gave his tomb—he was rich and therefore automatically suspect.

Church folk with church folk issues, waiting for the promise of power . . . for ten days they waited, together in one room.

I believe that the Spirit could have fallen as soon as they arrived but the process would have been thwarted. That's why Jesus sent them upstairs to wait. I am sure someone wondered, "Why didn't Jesus just give the blessing. What is all this waiting about?" That's where the church is today. Celebrating our denominations, appreciating our histories, performing our rituals and our baptisms, each one in his or her corner of the room waiting for power yet needing to reconcile ourselves to each other and our God.

I wonder what would happen if every city church as we know it was put on hold and we were closed up in one place for ten days—no structure, no liturgy, no one in charge, no order except for the word from Jesus to wait until we receive the power of the Holy Ghost. How long would it take us to take off our religion and become relational? What kinds of issues would arise for us? To which group in which corner of the room would we all go?

Someone said, well, that's simple. We are all on the same page.

Are we? And what page is that? What power struggles would be revealed in our waiting? What issues of superiority would emerge? What would be our collective goal? What efforts would we put all of our energy behind, even if they were someone else's ideas? What grudges would we need to drop? What Gentiles would we need to receive? Who would we need to forgive? Who would need to forgive us? How would we handle homophobia, xenophobia, classism, racism, sexism, and all the other phobias and isms?

Someone said the coming of the Spirit took care of all of that in the upper room, but I believe that the Spirit was poured out when the folks

started moving out of their corners and cliques and seeking to find ways to be with one accord.

The greatest manifestation of the power of God comes when we work together to find ways to be together and do justice together and love together and stand together.

In 1906 in Los Angeles a revival broke out in a small mission on Azusa Street, led by Rev. William J. Seymour. This revival marked the beginning of the modern day Pentecostal movement. The event has been reduced over time to a group of people displaying external "signs and wonders" such as speaking in tongues, healings, and prophecy, with little meaning to most people today. But the power of that Pentecostal revival was not in the external manifestations of speaking in tongues and healings but in the miracle of black and white people worshipping together, men and women preaching together and decrying racism and sexism by their very presence in one place. The Spirit still moves when we move past our prejudices and differences.

And when they were with one accord in one place there came sound, a rushing mighty wind, the wind of the Spirit that brings life to dry bones, and the fire of the Spirit that illuminates the shadows where some used to dwell, and the tongues . . .

The tongues came to make the message of the love of Jesus understood to everyone. We all need to hear it in a way we can understand it.

'Cause everybody ought to know who Jesus is. Our challenge is not how to receive the Spirit, but rather how to receive each other, so the Spirit can freely come!

OVERCOMING FEAR-BASED RELIGION

Hebrews 12:18-29

Indeed so terrifying was the sight (of Mount Sinai) that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering . . . (Heb. 12:21-23)

FEAR IS GENERATIONAL and hard to get under control. Our families and communities tell us what and whom to fear and then we add to it for generations following. "Don't let so-and-so people fix your car. Don't ever get into a business relationship with so-and-so. Keep your boys away from so-and-so." Religion is a major culprit because it includes supernatural retribution to control our behavior: "Jesus will get little girls who steal candy. God will strike you blind if you do that." People whom we consider religious often attack us, and because we believe in and fear God, our relationship with God is often fear-based.

Fear is institutional and a very useful tool in the hands of a nation or a government that knows how to use it. The formula is that any response of our government or institution, no matter how violent, is justifiable to secure our safety and the safety of those we hold dear. The in-

stitution simply has to create a villain so heinous that such a response seems warranted. You can see the process of creating a villain in any action film, and by the end of the movie our sainted mothers will call for the villain's blood if the scriptwriter and the actor can make him or her look evil enough in the earlier scenes.

Fear is controlling and it holds creative, innovative, and effervescent people hostage . . . particularly if there is someone to point to who tried and failed at what we are attempting. "See what happened to Jim when he stepped out . . . the same thing will happen to you if you take that risk." We listen, we stop, the years go by, we regret it, and we despair.

Mount Sinai represents fear. Many of us were trained to associate God and religion with fear. Listen to the words that describe Mount Sinai.

Gloomy darkness, tempest or whirlwind, fire or multiple lighting flashes—a terrifying place thought of as the habitation of God. The voice of God is described as so frightening and awesome that the people begged that God talk to Moses only and then Moses could tell them what God said. This was not a description of a relational loving God.

These images invoke thoughts of the history of Christianity—crusades, inquisitions, hangings, blood, burnings, excommunications, and trials by drowning, slavery, the subjugation of women, and the abuse of same gender loving people. It reminds us of Bible-based manifest destiny and patriarchy, black clothes and starched shirts, starched skirts and starched hearts . . . selfish piety with no regard for or kindness to those who are different. I see images of Afghani and Iraqi mothers crying for mercy for their children to the same God the American mothers cry to.

People have done frightful things because they cowered under the wrath of a frightful God.

Look now to the words that describe Zion. Zion symbolizes the place where the Christ reigns, the place where grace is victorious over legalistic fear-based religion. Zion is the safe home for the believer. There is protection in the company of angels, fellowship in the general assembly of the people of God, witnesses both living and dead, and Jesus the advocate and mediator who stands against all who accuse us. His death, his blood is not seeking revenge like Abel's, but rather it is shed for our redemption and reconciliation.

You would think that if people could move from such a dreadful place as Sinai to a place of confidence, assurance, and joy like Zion, that they would do it straightaway; but it seems that the fearmongers are also powermongers who capitalize on the need of the fearful to be afraid of God. I call it a form of spiritual masochism. It follows the classic model of spousal abuse where there is plug and a socket. And it is big business too, but all smoke and mirrors. As people move toward relationship with a loving God, they are less likely to fall victim to "God handlers" who use God as a violent pit bull under their command.

But notice the balance of the chapter that suggests that a shaking is coming so that the things that cannot be shaken will be revealed and will remain. Let us remember with godly and relational reverence that we have received a reign of God that is full of grace and not terror and we are obligated to free ourselves from religious tyranny and then to set about freeing others. When I fly on commercial airplanes the flight attendant mantra includes a piece that says, "In case of a loss of cabin pressure, oxygen masks will drop down . . . put your mask on first, then assist children and those in need of your assistance." Encourage yourself first and then encourage all people to think, and not to check their brain at the door of the church. Encourage yourself and others to vote with your feet, if you are under oppressive fear-based theology.

If you are on Sinai, move. If you look back and see others still there, tell them to move. When you hear our nation's religious and political leaders using fear to pass laws and snatch freedoms hard won, tell them fear only begets fear . . . we are a people of faith who speak truth to power until change comes. Our foundation is faith, not fear; love, not revenge. Who wins if we kill people who kill people and become killers to show killers that killing is wrong?

Martin Luther King Jr. said this: "I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant . . ."¹

Choose Zion . . . the air is clear up here.

MOTHER MARY

Luke 1:26-31

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." (Luke 1:26-31)

DO NOT BE AFRAID . . . how can she not be afraid? This pregnant teenager in a patriarchal warring society? She like so many women is threatened with stoning for babies born out of wedlock, as if by an unholy ghost.

Do not be afraid—yeah, right—with this sudden chaotic change in her life. Now she has to deal with being considered spoiled and damaged goods in a culture where her virginity is her only real commodity.

Where will she go and to whom will she turn? She thinks of Elizabeth, her cousin/mother with the "yes" face. This girl in trouble

needs an Elizabeth, a refuge, and a welcoming presence glad for a new life no matter how it got there. Elizabeth, who herself was pregnant with the promise of God.

Why did Mary choose Elizabeth? There had to be something in the past that made her know her cousin would offer solace and understanding. Maybe Elizabeth had a warm kitchen with the smells of fresh bread and a ready ear for troubled souls. Perhaps other young women found their way to her with the religious hounds on their trail.

What a splendid reputation Elizabeth had . . . one you can go to in trouble.

Elizabeth took hold of Mary with work-worn hands, took hold of her tenderly and said the things that built her up for what was to come. Elizabeth kept Mary close for three months, as long as it took to fortify Mary for what was ahead.

So great was this love and support that it took Mary through birthing in a stable, being a refugee in Egypt, being rejected by her home town, watching her son move closer and closer to his destiny, giving him direction, loyally supporting him, yet fearing for his life . . . because he was special, so he was vulnerable.

She could not protect him from his destiny. Every confrontation with the status quo brought him closer to his death; and she knew, as mothers do, that it was bigger than the both of them.

Yet remembering the love-support of her cousin/mother brought Mary comfort and strengthened her resolve even in her darkest hour, and she stood firm while her son Jesus was afflicted and accused, arrested, tried, and executed.

You see, when the words "do not be afraid" come from someone who loves you and holds your heart, the words have the power to bear you up and hold you tightly even when you would and should lose your mind.

And Mary went on to become the first church mother full of faith and power, sharing with others Elizabeth's words to her . . .

Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb . . . blessed is whatever the Holy Spirit has impregnated you with; blessed is your vision; blessed is your purpose; blessed is your ministry; blessed is your fruit, whether you are a young one like Mary or a aged one like Elizabeth; blessed are you who have believed in the promise of God!