

Sermon.

Lisa Carne founded an organization in Belize called Fragments of Hope. What's unique about her organization is that it's one of only a handful like it that is trying to combat the effects of our warming oceans.

Nearly 20 years ago, Belize's beautiful and vital coral reef system was on the brink of extinction. Hurricanes, warming waters, and human development, from chopping down symbiotic mangrove trees to digging for oil off the coast; all of these were damaging the coral reefs at an exponential rate.

So, after one particular hurricane in 2001, she came up with the novel idea to begin a nursery or sorts, or a coral farm, where they began growing coral that could be transplanted into the reef that was, at the time, decimated.

It was a small grassroots, or perhaps we should say coral-roots, effort that grew its way to the top of the government's awareness. A nationwide vote by the people was astonishing; 96% of voters supported restoring and protecting the coral reef system.

Fanny Douvere, the coordinator for the Marine Program at UNESCO's World Heritage Center put it this way:

“Belize had a willingness to chart a new course for its country. It's an innovative plan that resulted in a landmark conservation success, and it can serve as a model elsewhere.”¹

I'm not sure that coral was included among the living species on that sheet that fell from heaven in Peter's vision from this morning's reading, but there is similarity between the stories.

Like Belize, led by a Lisa Carne, the early church, led by Peter, had a willingness to chart a new course for itself, too.

It's helpful to remember that some of this language that is awkward for us, dealing with circumcision, is nonetheless a very important detail in this story. Circumcision is quite the personal decision for families today, and it's falling out of popularity in the US, at least.

But for whatever reason, circumcision became a sign for the Jewish people in our Old Testament of being a part of God's people. And this is important because Jesus and his followers were almost universally Jewish. After Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, which is where today's story is situated, the disciples begin to spread out across the region. It's at this point their grassroots movement approaches a crossroads. For most of this time, they've essentially remained a version of Judaism; they had a Jewish rabbi who was the Messiah, and they were all Jewish themselves. It all connected and made sense to them. But very quickly they found themselves cast out by the Jewish community because they didn't agree with their new vision of the faith.

¹ <https://www.csmonitor.com/Environment/2019/0515/Reef-restored-How-Belize-saved-its-beloved-coral>

Is This as Good as It Gets?

Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35

Brent Newberry

May 19, 2019

5th Sunday of Eastertide

The early Jesus movement then, was confronted with this reality: their base of support or conversion into the faith was no longer Jews, but rather, the Greeks or the Gentiles. They were the ones drawn to this message, and this created problems.

For one, Gentiles were seen as unclean. This goes back all the way to our Old Testament, with certain purity codes meant to distinguish God's people from the Gentiles.

In fact, an aside: the word "abomination" that's used in some translations of Leviticus, could be better translated as "unclean." That's quite a difference worth noting when we think of some of the descriptions of who or what is unclean in Leviticus.

The other issue that confronted the early Jesus movement concerning Gentiles who were converting was this sensitive issue of circumcision. Some Christians were saying men had to be circumcised to be saved because there was still a tie to the Jewish roots. Others said Gentiles couldn't convert at all because they weren't circumcised to begin with.

That's where Peter's vision comes into play.

He sees animals of various kinds on this sheet falling from heaven, and a voice tells him to eat whatever he wants, even though some of them were an abomination—aka unclean.

In typical Peter fashion, he says, "Never my Lord!" and the voice corrects him, "Do not call profane that which I have called clean."

And from there, Peter interprets the vision with this response, "Who was I that I could hinder God?" And the text adds this critical line at the end of our reading:

"When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

Confronted with a growing dilemma, one that very well could have hinged on the early Church's survival, Peter and later the other disciples in Acts 15, **changed their mind. They had a willingness to chart a new course** for the early church.

Now, maybe if they had listened to some of the female disciples from the beginning, they would've realized this sooner, but the patriarchy was hurting itself with this one. But that's another aside for another time.

The early church, led by Peter, **charted a new course of inclusion because that was the direction God's Spirit was moving**, from the margins inward.

Sound familiar?

How many times has this church charted a new course of inclusion because that was the direction God's Spirit was moving?

The God who called us to start a church in 1812, with 14 women and 14 men, during another war with the British, the God who called us to keep gathering together even as we were ridiculed by the state religion, the

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God who called us to resist slavery, the God who called us to join the Northern Baptists and not the Southern Baptists, the God who called us to ordain women, the God who called us to become welcoming and affirming, is the same God we worship today.

And this is the same God who calls us today.

The question isn't whether God still calls God's people, the question is To Whom, what, and where is God calling us?

Or maybe even more apt:
Are we brave enough to chart a new course in that direction?

Now, I don't have anything in particular in mind. I'm not trying to cram some big change down our throats.

But if we're reading this text today, I think it's only right to ask ourselves if this is it. Is this all there is? Is this all there is to it, this space, this day, this service? Is this as good as it gets?

The church across the ages, our church across its history—

Is this as good as it gets?

Have we arrived?

Or, is there something more?

If the Spirit is always moving, always at work, and if the Spirit's work isn't done, are we?

Let me say this, I know that our world and even our country, is in a time of disruption. Turmoil, dissension, dissatisfaction, factions.

The idea of a church being some safe and stable space for us is legitimate and important.

But hear me now, we are not called to be a chapel.

We are a church. A church that is more than just a building, we are a living organism of God's people, called together to worship God, yes, but called to make a difference in this world by how we love our neighbors. And if our times are such that people are hurting, being trampled upon, being pushed out or kept out or left behind, if people are dividing up and fighting and no longer listening, if injustice is continuing and growing, then we as a church are called to do something more. We can't do everything, but we have to do something.

Because we proclaim a better way. We believe in the power of resurrection, for the crucified Son of God, but also for communities and churches and coral reefs.

In the years since Lisa Carne began Fragments of Hope, the coral reefs in Belize have rebounded. They are no longer teetering on the brink of extinction; they have experienced a remarkable resurgence. And the recovery is now a model for other marine

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biologists and nations who want to combat their own dying reefs.

Said one scientist now working in Panama, “We are constantly being surprised by the capacity for marine systems to be resilient or adaptive.”

Now, if some of the oldest life forms on the planet can regenerate and renew through change, how much more can our old churches and tired faiths be regenerated and renewed if we’re brave enough to chart new courses?

I’m not sure where we’re headed next, but here’s how I think we figure it out.

Start with asking these questions together:

1. Who isn’t here? As in, who is left out of our community of Worcester, pushed to the margins of our society, kept from feeling like they can worship with us—Who isn’t here?
2. What are other churches doing?

I read of other Baptist churches who are starting ministries for non-US born neighbors, English language learning classes, tutoring, or other needs that these communities might have.

I hear of other churches who are giving sanctuary to those who have fled persecution and violence and are seeking asylum.

I see other churches who are confessing and trying to repair broken relationships that were born out of slavery and racism,

other churches who are working toward affordable housing for our veterans, mothers, LGBTQ youth, and others who are experiencing homelessness,

I know of other churches trying to provide safety and recovery for those in the grasp of opioid addiction,

other churches who have quit worrying about their endowment if it means they aren’t embracing the ministry God has called them to,

still other churches who are paying bail for those awaiting trial for misdemeanors,

others who are fighting to ensure that records are expunged for those who are arrested but found not guilty,

other churches converting their green spaces into gardens to combat hunger in communities known as food deserts because they don’t have a grocery stores within a few miles,

still other churches who are paying down millions in medical debt for people,

and other churches that are paying down student and consumer debt through debt collectives.

Other churches that have begun offering micro-loans because predatory lending is such an injustice in the lives of the community they’re in

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The list goes on and on of amazing examples of churches radically, boldly, beautifully charting a new course that more closely follows the way of Jesus Christ.

Each of these churches is bearing witness to the power of the resurrection. More than mere fragments, hope is teeming amid the new life that's being raised. Like a coral reef regenerating, the church of Jesus is renewing itself as it empowers people in the community to live an abundant and good life as God desires for each and every person.

We proclaim that the Spirit that raised Christ from the dead is alive within us, leading us to chart new courses of inclusion.

So, friends, let me ask again:

Is *this* as good as it gets?

Amen.