

Fort Worth Reorganizing Convention
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I was out running in Stockton last Friday, along the river early in the morning. The bike path I was on was up above the river on a levee, along an old railroad grade, that let you see the road down below and the yards and parking lots across the way. I passed a school where there were 5 or 6 boys skateboarding in the dark. I didn't think much about it, but when I passed by again on my way back, I could hear yelling. Most of these 10 or 12 year old boys were still doing skateboard tricks, but one of them was standing in the middle of the court screaming obscenities, as loud as he could in his not-yet-a-man's voice. My initial reaction was irritation at his language, then puzzlement and curiosity. Why were these young boys out by themselves in a dark playground hours before school would start? I began to wonder what I could do. I wondered if I went down there and just stood or sat down in their midst, what would happen

Where did this boy's rage come from? What had his few years brought him, that all he could do was have a tantrum? Why had no one helped him to learn how to manage his frustration? And where were the adults in this early darkness?

I kept going, and it struck me that there's a parallel in the Church. We have quite a bit of experience dealing with people whose anger is out of control, for the church is one place that will receive you, usually, whatever emotional or spiritual state you're in.

I had a similar experience on Sunday, on one leg of my flight to Egypt. I'd noticed the same very well-dressed man a couple of times on my way from one terminal to the other – he stood out. When I arrived at the gate, I went over and stood near the door of the gate to the plane, as I knew they would start boarding very soon. As soon as the door opened, the same man rushed up and pushed in front of me. He tried to get in front of the handicapped passengers who were boarding first. I wasn't terribly surprised to discover that I was assigned the seat next to him. We stowed our things and sat down. The flight attendant came by with newspapers to offer, and this fellow pushed over me to grab one. I very politely asked him not to touch me, and he began to scream and swear at me. So I simply stood up and asked the flight attendant to reseat me.

Where did his rage come from? He certainly looked like he was in charge of the world, and until he lost it, he acted that way, too. But his rage was just as incoherent and inappropriate as the boy with the skateboard.

I think both of those guys had lost their way – or never found it. One of the great human yearnings is to have a sense of place, a home where others care for you and make you feel valued and significant. I have to imagine that the boys in the parking lot had probably left home or been dropped off because there wasn't anybody to care for or about them at home – maybe parents had to go to work hours before school started, or maybe they just weren't paying attention. The business man's response to the world was to assume it was all his, to do with as he wished. That does not exactly endear you to the other human beings around you, and it doesn't help to build a sense of home for anybody.

Most of the readings we've heard this morning are about building a home for everybody in the world. They're the readings assigned for the Unity of the Church – specifically, how the body of Christ might be a place where all Jesus' sisters and brothers know they have a home. The imagery is immense, expansive, embracing: the desert will bloom, weak bodies will be made whole, and fearful hearts – like the two I encountered – will be made strong, and all creation will rejoice. It's a vision of a world where fear won't keep anybody less than fully human.

How do we get there? The letter to the folks in Ephesus has got some suggestions – patience, humility, gentleness, forbearance and looking for ways to

make peace. Isaiah reminds us that we're not supposed to respond with vengeance, because vengeance is God's, not ours.

I'll warrant that there's a lot of anger and rage in this part of the church right now. I suspect that it's been the norm here for a long time. Given the stories I heard in San Joaquin last week, I would guess that leadership here has looked like control, fear-mongering, and intimidation used to keep people in line. If nothing else, that's not the way to build a godly unity. It may produce a tight uniformity, like political dictatorships continue to do around the world. But it makes the system pretty ripe for reform or rebellion, because we were not created to live in strife – we were created for peace. Isaiah reminds us that that great vision for where we're going is a road to peace and home that is so obvious that even fools won't be able to miss it.

The rage in this world is most often related to missing that road. The job of the Church is to help the raging find it. Often that looks like responding to the rage in a counterintuitive way. That is most centrally what Jesus' passion is about. He didn't retaliate, he didn't answer violence with violence, until his last breath he kept reaching out to his tormentors. And eventually God's road home became so obvious that even those fearful disciples couldn't miss the reality of resurrection.

I missed a couple of opportunities to try to build a bit more peace in this world. I was too rushed to go down and find out what was wrong in that school yard. And I was too tired to find out what was wrong with my seatmate on the plane. It is both in refusing to retaliate with violence, and in continually seeking to heal the pain that drives the rage, that our gospel work proceeds.

I want you to think about where the rage in Fort Worth comes from. At a very basic level, it has something to do with feeling that there is no home for you in this place, that you are not valued or welcomed. The great tragedy is that some believe they will find that home by leaving. The reality is that home is found on the road, that road we can't miss, because it's so obvious even the silly and the intellectually challenged should be able to find it. It's the road of daily encounters, where we struggle with our fellow skateboarders when they really tick us off, it's making peace with a fellow traveler who has unwittingly made your day more threatening, it's building communities where kids aren't left alone for hours with no adults to care for them, and it is continuing to reach out to and welcome those who have only been able to find an identity in opposition. God didn't make us for opposition, God made us in all our diversity to figure out how all those gifts differing can bless the world.

I want to encourage you to recognize the joy you're finding here this day. You will need that joy, buried deep in your hearts, the next time you have an encounter with the old violence and rage that's settled into this system. Your task is to avoid any response that looks like revenge. Anger and rage and violence and retribution will not heal the hurt. The only thing that will is love. I want you to think about how to practice peace. Even if you have to bite your tongue, count to 10, or turn away, don't get sucked into the spiral of violence. Be clear about your identity as kin of the prince of peace, celebrate the gifts that differ, remember that God has called you together in this place to serve your fellow human beings. You will discover that in serving your neighbors you will find the road to wholeness and unity once again. May God richly bless the journey.