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Epiphany 8A Acting Together
Peace, Seattle
February 27, 2011 epk
John 13:34-35

ACTING TOGETHER

Sixty-nine years ago this month (February 19, 1942) President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, paving the way for the internment of some 120,000 Japanese Americans for the duration of World War II.

Some of you here this morning remember those days, and can recall the faces of friends, neighbors, classmates, and business associates who suddenly vanished from your lives.

When we look back at those days now, we wonder how something so extreme could happen.

Is there any wisdom to be harvested from that experience, from those who lived through it?

Listen to the story of Yoshi and his wife Karen, as they seek such wisdom from Yoshi's parents, wisdom to meet the challenges of today's hard times.[1]

Yoshi and Karen pulled into his parents' driveway. "Do you think they will help us?" Karen asked. "Help us with what?" chimed their kids, before rushing out of the van to greet their grandparents.

After their weekly Saturday noodle lunch, the kids ran outside and the adults stayed at the table.

Yoshi started to speak to his parents quietly. "Karen's company laid off a thousand people this week." A hush fell over the table. "So far, she's still okay. But we just don't know. We're not here to ask for money. We're here to ask you for something more valuable than money."

The clock ticked loudly on the wall, counting the seconds of suspense.

Yoshi finally spoke, "You lived through the Depression and the camps. We want to know how you survived." Yoshi's parents looked nervously at each other. Those times were not something they talked about. Digging up some money would be easier than sharing those memories. Especially because their daughter-in-law wasn't Japanese.

After a long pause, Grandmother Hana said, "Okay, but not today. We need to think, to talk, to get ready. We will write you a letter."

And so, a few weeks later, this promise was kept.

> Dear Yoshi and Karen,
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> Before we left for the camps, we had a prayer service at our church. We heard the story of Jesus saying goodbye to his disciples before he went to the cross. Jesus told the disciples to love one another, so others would know about Jesus. We prayed together, and then we boarded up our church, hoping it would stay safe.
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> We remembered Jesus' words when we had to say goodbye. "Love one another." Jesus said

[1] What follows is excerpted, with small editorial changes, from a Make it Simple Stewardship resource produced by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

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those words before he left this world. It was a terrifying time for the disciples. And now it was a terrifying time for us. The hardest part was that we were sent to different camps in Arizona. When we arrived at the camps, it was hard to breathe. Everything familiar had changed in a day. We had to endure large annoyances and small annoyances. Hot weather, bitterly cold weather, dust, cramped quarters, sick people, bad food. The indignity of being the subjects of the nation's suspicions. It was hard, but after awhile all the injustices just became normal.

We wrote to each other every day. Even though we couldn't send all the letters, at least each day we could be faithful. Jesus' words stayed in our minds when we felt bitter and angry. "Love one another." Just that. We remembered our church and how much our Christian family helped us.

Jesus went away from the disciples. We went away, too. Everything changed. Everything except God, who continually loved us. Somehow the Spirit that Jesus promised came to us. It moved among us like the dust. We didn't die inside. Our baptismal water kept us from drying up in the desert. We prayed. It was easier when we tried to keep each other going. Jesus walked with us, comforted us, and showed us what sin looked like.

There were so many people to help. We tried to witness to Jesus by keeping our hopes alive. Many people were looking for good news and something to hold on to. We made a new community—we had to. We learned to work together, not just worry together. This kept all of our spirits up.

Jesus wanted his disciples to be a model for others. We felt God's spirit drawing us to faith, pulling us on, pushing us out to someone else. And we knew deep down that God's love was something totally opposite from the injustice inflicted on us.

How did we survive? Only God knows. When we finally saw each other again, all the tears came. They washed away the dust of the camps. But the residue remained. What remained was the compassion we learned. We still feel it when we hear of the injustices in God's world.

Dearest son and daughter, our best advice to you in these times of change is the advice of Jesus. Love one another. That is the strongest tool for you and our beloved grandchildren, for your congregation, for God's world. Hold on to Jesus' words and practice them.

Jesus knew we needed to stay focused, so he gave us the gift of a commandment. Love one another. These words are a touchstone for your children—a comfort and a call.

Don't worry so much—love so much. When everything is gone, love remains. And a new reality, no matter what it is, brings new chances for worship and witness to Christ's love, multiple chances to pour out God's love that lives in you. Maybe our advice will seem too simple for this modern world. But you asked and now we tell you. How did we survive those times? We survived by Jesus' words—"Love one another."

Love, Mom and Dad

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Yoshi carefully folded the letter and looked at Karen.
They felt so moved they couldn't speak for awhile. Finally Karen said,
"I wonder if the people in our congregation would support each other through a crisis?"

They talked about the letter and came to see that their congregation could be a place in which to nurture bonds of endurance and giving. Karen and Yoshi asked themselves, "How much are we involved with the people around us on Sundays?"

Yoshi thought about his own job and all the recent emphases on sustainability and energy planning. He imagined transferring these ideas to their congregation. "If these are the people you can depend on through thick and thin, like my grandparents did," thought Yoshi, "imagine the energy potential of these people in this church working together."

Sustainability? That was easy. God's love would endure, no matter what. Creator, Son, Holy Spirit—love never ends. But how to use the power of that love? How to continue the mandate to love one another? That's what Yoshi and Karen wanted to talk about with their own children and their church leaders.

Like the warmth of the sun at dawn, Yoshi and Karen felt the comfort of knowing the connections among the people of their congregation, their connection to the body of Christ that spanned places and times. The same body of Christ that gathered with Jesus in the upper room, the same body of Christ that boarded up a church in California before moving to camps in Arizona, the same body of Christ that ministered to people who were separated from their families and homes.

Their concern about caring for their family led Karen and Yoshi to a larger sense of togetherness with their church family. Yoshi's parents' letter reminded them of the togetherness the whole church shares with God.

Yoshi couldn't wait to talk about this way of envisioning a community of faith with his church brothers and sisters. The body of Christ as God's energy plan. Fueled by love, convicted by compassion and justice, empowered by members with a multitude of gifts. His parents were forced to MAKE IT SIMPLE because of dire circumstances and injustice, as were Jesus' disciples. For the disciples then—and disciples now—Jesus prepared, sustained, and strengthened them with a simple directive—"Love one another."

Simply put, deeply embodied.

Sisters and brothers, All the way to his death, Jesus practiced that love that he preached; a love that was unashamedly self-giving, powerfully attractive, and ultimately effective in bringing God's will to bear on the world.

Acting together, living his legacy, we have been invited into that same kind of practice, that same kind of loving, that same level of commitment that makes God's love real in this West Seattle community where we have been planted.

Let us pray: God of compassion, the depth of your love for us is beyond our ability to comprehend. The call to practice such love as you showed us in Jesus is a daunting one. But your invitation compels us beyond our fears. Thank you for sustaining us as we seek to be faithful. In Jesus, Amen.