Rev. Benjamin E. E. Kane

Homily on Acts 1

“The Safety of the Gospel”

By the grace of God, Michael Matthews and I met while we were in college. He was a junior when I was a freshman and we connected immediately because both of our dad’s were pastors, something that was a bit of an anomaly at Pitzer. We carved out a lasting friendship that has seen us both graduate from Pitzer College and attend seminary before joining the ministry. He started his ministerial career in the south, but three or so years ago he moved back west to a small town about an hour outside of the San Francisco Bay Area. It’s the geographic connections as well as the shared career choice that have kept us in contact.

We were never much for a phone conversation, but kept up via email. During one such exchange I told him I’d begun writing more letters because I didn’t want that art to be lost and he suggested we write to each other. It began as a way to check in, but has grown into a story-telling exercise. Because we both pastor churches of similar sizes in similar towns it is amazing to share stories that transcend geographic boundaries and point out the reality of God, the Church and everything in between.

Thankfully this past week I received a letter from Michael because I was pretty sure the Spirit was taking a break from visiting me since I couldn’t come up with anything to preach. He shared this story in his latest letter that spoke of the challenge the early church—and our church—faces in regard to understanding how we are to be Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

**LEAVING HOME**

It is common to hear someone mention the slow death of the town. If not daily, this line of conversation occurs at least every other day. “The town isn’t what it used to be.” Or, “Kids just aren’t coming home like we did,” are the two most frequently uttered comments. Having moved here and not grown up here I’m intrigued by these conversations because I always believe they are going to lead to something deeper. It took me about six months to realize these phrases (and their ilk) are not invitations for more conversations, but local parlance akin to comments about the weather or local sports teams.

Recently I heard three elders of our Session talking about this very issue while we were all drinking coffee at JJ’s, the local diner. Between sips of coffee they lamented that their generation would probably be the last to call Francis County home. I was sitting two booths over with my back to them, so when I stood up to refill my coffee I waved hello and then hesitantly approached their table.

These types of conversations are some times invitation-only so I was weary whether I was permitted to join. “Sit down, Pastor, and tell us why you young people don’t want to move home,” Donald demanded.

“I can’t tell you why your folks aren’t moving home, but I know I don’t want to move home because I’m not sure I know where home is,” I began. “I also don’t think there is much for young people to do around here—both professionally and personally. Especially with Silicon Valley and the Bay Area booming with jobs and things for young folks.”

This last thought came barreling out of my mouth and I worried I was about to be sent away. Given that none of them spoke immediately I gingerly took another sip of coffee while I reassured myself that my tone and inflection weren't accusatory, but were just my opinion.

“But the town offers so much for us and the way of life in a small town is great for a family, the cost of living is low and this place is safe,” Smith interjected. Whether it was nostalgia or hope, his words betrayed his steeling demeanor. You could sense him looking back on his life with a smile of pride. “But is that offering still available to young people?” I asked, tentatively.

“Maybe not,” said David. “But I wish it was and I wish people would do more to create opportunities so young people could move back. Plus we need more young people to help keep the town viable and safe. It’s important that this place is safe.”

This interlude occurs within each conversation about the state of the town. Politics, business, safety, history and a penchant for an optimistic memory emerge at this point. Times were always better; ‘the good ole days’ were happier, safer and easier. Conversely, everything today was harder, more expensive and less attractive. This inevitably led to a series of comments about how values, morals and institutions have fallen into disrepair.

“Do you think your children hear what you are saying right now and internalize it?” I muttered. There wasn’t any confidence in my statement, but I had to say it. It isn’t often that I’m invited into an intimate conversation amongst two or more where I can speak my mind openly. Given that my livelihood rests upon the generosity of others I find myself holding back my opinions or comments, lest I ruffle feathers that might soon find a new flock in which to roost. “Maybe,” Smith managed to say. “But I also just want them to be safe. The big city scares me and can’t offer what this town offers.”

Safety is always in the forefront of my congregants’ minds. They worry about what they see on the TV and remember the days when kids played outside and never came home until dusk. I could almost see the group of men looking to the sky, longing for those days to return.

As they looked upward the table sat in pregnant silence and I felt the urging of the Spirit to speak. “I’ve often wondered if the fact that highway 67 runs directly into San Francisco makes it easier to leave town? It isn’t hard to get there and it is just as easy to return for a brief visit. If it was harder to get out more people would stay; but if it was harder to get out we’d have to keep *everyone* here.” The last comment conjured up some muffled laughter as they thought about an individual or two whom they were glad headed out of town and never looked back.

I continued, “But I do want y'all (a little bit of the south sticks with me) that as much as I love that young folks are making a life for themselves in the Bay Area, I do worry who is going to become the pillars of the community? If the Bay Area is so attractive and there isn’t much happening here, then what becomes of a place like this? Who will be the stalwart members of the church and share God’s word here?”

When I came here three and a half years ago packed within the boxes of my books and office supplies were hopes for resurgence. This town and church are known as communities that nurtured great pastors and civic minded congregants. Plus I was young and there is that inherent belief that young people will attract other young people—I knew, they knew it. Maybe I could interject some vitality and energy into this place and restart some otherwise dead engines?

It is an unrealistic hope and one nurtured in vanity and pride, but it is there. You know as well as I do, Ben, that pastors harbor deep longings to be remembered for transformation or revitalization or something that someone else talks about as a success story. We go searching for the potential seeds of hope where our legacy can be planted and watered.

These thoughts were in the back of my mind when I shared this thought, “Maybe the church can be the place that helps bring your children home? Maybe we should be talking about what the town needs—better education, more middle-class jobs and more businesses? Those are vital aspects of reviving this town, aren’t they?” I asked.

Common among pastoral dreams are communal transformations. Yes, we hope that the church doubles in size and money pours in and members are dying to find a pew; but we also hope the larger town or city pays attention too. We want schools to be changed because of us and we want to be written up in *The Christian Century* as the church that changed the entire economic and social landscape of a particular place.

Donald could sense that my head was expanding at a rate that might soon pop and asked, “Didn’t you just preach a homily on the allure of being James and John and asking Jesus if one could sit on his right and the other on his left?” My ego burst and my heart sank at the sound of his words.

“Maybe the pipeline to the Bay Area is this town’s purpose?” David announced. “We talk about how to bring people back here, but maybe we are called to send people out. Maybe our goal isn’t to fill the booths at JJ’s or our church in Francis County, but to spread a little bit of the County to the larger world.”

I was floored at this last statement and was about to speak but Donald spoke first, “I doubt we are the first people to hope that they can revitalize a place with their dreams and aspirations—or even our laments. And I know my parents talked about safety and worried about us running around in the ever-changing world.

So maybe it isn’t the dreams and aspirations that should be realigned—we should always hope for the best for our kids— but maybe we should rethink where we place our dreams and aspirations. I wonder if God cared about the specific place where the Gospel would be spread or if God cared more about the people spreading it?”

Everyone around the table nodded, but then a Frank, a non-church member, spoke, “Boy I pray hard that God still cares about this town and Francis County—sure would hate to see all the gifts of this place go to waste.”

All I could do was offer my coffee cup up to cheer what was said around the table. Some of it was gospel and some was just a group of men talking. Maybe that’s all that necessary.

I took another sip of coffee because I was afraid to say what else was on my mind. That maybe we should start using coffee in our communion liturgy, seems to perk people up in a Spirit-Led way. Can’t imagine what our folks would say, Ben, if we suggested that!”

Be well and enjoy some bad coffee and Spirit-led conversation.

Grace and peace,

MJM.