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The Big Tent and the Great Parade

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Versions of this speech were delivered at the annual meetings of the Minnesota, Central Atlantic, and Maine Conferences.

In his poem *Messiah*, the contemporary poet Mark Doty describes a production of Handel's great work by a group of amateur singers in a small Massachusetts town. It's a scene we all know well, played out in countless churches during Advent. Most of the singers he knows from other contexts: "From here, the first pew, they're a looming cloudbank of familiar angels: that neighbor who fights operatically with her girlfriend, for one, and the friendly bearded clerk from the post office - tenor trapped in the body of a baritone? Altos from the A&P, soprano from the T-shirt shop. . . . Who would have thought they'd be so good?"

This music
demonstrates what it claims:
Glory shall be revealed. If art's
acceptable evidence,

mustn't what lies
behind the world be at least
as beautiful as the human voice?
The tenors lack confidence,

and the soloists,
half of them anyway, don't
have the strength to found
the mighty kingdoms

these passages propose
- but the chorus, all together,
equals my burning clouds,
and seems itself to burn

commingled powers
deeded to a larger, centering claim,
These aren't anyone we know;
choiring dissolves

familiarity in a up-
pouring rush which will not

rest, will not, for a moment
be still.

Aren't we enlarged
By the scale of what we're able to desire?

What a marvelous image for the church whose individual members can't quite muster up the mighty kingdoms but who as a chorus, all together, can equal the burnished clouds the poet glimpses out the window over the roof of the Methodist church against the slate gray of a December New England sky. "Glory shall be revealed!" I'm reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous words about congregational singing:

It is the voice of the Church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings, it is the Church that is singing. . . . Thus, all singing together. . . serves to widen our spiritual horizon, makes us see our little company as part of the great Christian Church on earth, and help us willingly and gladly to join our singing, be it feeble or good, to the song of the Church.

But it is Doty's question, prompted by this experience, that I find most engaging: "Aren't we enlarged by the scale of what we're able to desire?" Perhaps what Bonhoeffer was talking about in "widening our spiritual horizon?" In other words, imagination matters, and the scale of our imagination matters even more, for it can enlarge us or diminish us. I once saw a local church profile that named the congregation's top three priorities. The first two were predictable: Add new members and increase giving. The third was not, and it was revealing: Paint the parsonage! I'm not opposed to attractive housing for our pastors, but it did seem that the scale of this church's desire was just a bit small. What is it that we imagine for our church? For its ministry? And, specifically, how does imagination affect our capacity to bring Good News?

Amos Wilder reminds us of the critical dimension of imagination in our lives and, I think even more, of the role of imagination in the life of faith:

Imagination is a necessary component of all profound knowledge and celebration; all remembering, realizing and anticipating; all faith, hope and love. When imagination fails doctrines become ossified, witness and proclamation wooden, doxologies and litanies empty, consolations hollow, and ethics legalistic.

What is it that we imagine for our church? Survival? Success? Growth? A community of extravagant welcome? A movement for evangelical courage? Today I want to help us imagine the church's life and mission through two images that may help us enlarge the scale of what we're able to desire. Those two images are the big tent and the great parade.

Since 1983, assemblies of the World Council of Churches have found their spiritual center in a big tent where the community gathered daily for prayer and worship. From meeting spaces and cafeterias and dormitories delegates and visitors alike streamed into the big tent where worship gathered together a rich array of languages, liturgies and symbols representing the church in its many social and cultural contexts around the world. The tent was big in order to accommodate a large number of people, but it was also big in the sense of making room, making space for diverse liturgies and traditions. The hope, sometimes achieved, was that every tradition would find a welcome, that every community would experience hospitality, that every worship style would be reflected and celebrated, that everyone present would recognize in this worship, in spite of vast diversity, the faith of the church through the ages. The big tent of these Assemblies tried to imagine a new kind of church. For many it represented an enlarged desire, for many it was inspiring in its image of a place of extravagant welcome with an embrace both global and ecumenical.

I believe that for most of our first fifty years the image of the big tent has animated the life of the United Church of Christ. It's a natural image for a "united and uniting church," a church that brought varied theological, ecclesial, racial, and cultural communities together. Under one roof - it was hoped - these diverse parts of our church could each find a home, interact with each other, learn from each other, grow to trust and appreciate each other and, eventually, become one. Here was an image whose scale could express the extravagant welcome of our desire. "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here." Come to the tent. Gather at the tent! And be one. Sometimes our big tent has resembled the tents of the World Council of Church's assemblies - rich liturgical celebrations trying to express the great diversity that we cherish, but under one roof.

And sometimes the tent has been more like a revival tent, a place where good news has been proclaimed, a place of transformation, healing, and renewal where the lost have been found, the stranger has been welcomed, the sinner brought to repentance, where the waters of baptism have enabled us to become immersed in the grace of God and have sent us forth from the tent in a new depth and intensity of discipleship, the scale of our desire enlarged. Often this revival has taken place in the context of a local church where, in the Black church tradition, "the doors have been opened" and all are welcome to a place of earnest transformation. Sometimes this revival

has been experienced at General Synods like last year's 50th anniversary in Hartford where a big tent in the form of a hockey arena became a place for renewal and recommitment. Often the revival tent becomes a place of renewal and restoration for pilgrims weary with the journey, a place for respite, for revival of souls and spirits worn down by the rigors of the pilgrimage. Yes, a revival tent! Now some of our traditions have been cautious about the image of the revival tent, seeing in the "anxious bench" of the evangelist only cheap emotion and shallow commitment. But ours is a tradition that has also encompassed "great awakenings" that have led to profound social change and liberation for African Americans, women, children, and the vulnerable poor. Yes, imagining our church as a revival tent has, and perhaps still could, enlarge the scale of our desire.

Sometimes, and perhaps more often, the tent has looked and felt more like a circus tent, clowns included! We've been a festive, unruly, chaotic and joyful gathering gazing first on one act, then another, and then another in this three ring event where the unity of the tent has been stretched to the limits with the diverse acts going on in rapid succession for a church with a limited attention span and an endless curiosity for whatever might be coming next. Here in our big tent we have entertained the funny and the courageous, the odd and even the strange - the daring young man or woman on the exegetical flying trapeze, the theological juggler and the ethical contortionist, the high wire act daring to work without a confessional and creedal net, even the elephants - political and otherwise! For some of our ecumenical partners we have seemed a weird ecclesial side show, at once queer and freakish, perhaps even freakish because queer. But we've been content - some of us anyway - to be this circus, even exhilarated to be a spectacle of sorts inside our big tent.

In many ways, the image of the big tent - ecumenical and global, revival, circus, or otherwise - has served us well. It has tried to embody the scriptural charge "that they may all be one that the world might believe." It has resonance with our ecumenical vocation and with our reach for a wide welcome. It has accommodated the thoroughly modern notions of unity and integration still in vogue in the 1950's and 1960's before everything became "post," - post modern, post liberal, post denominational. And, if we accepted that the tent has three rings, three acts going on simultaneously, it's an image that allowed us the notion that no one is ever excluded, that there is something for everyone in this big tent. People wandering into this tent may have been surprised or even shocked by what they experienced. But many kept coming back, intrigued, curious, affirmed, engaged.

Yes, the big tent has enlarged the scale of our desire, an image that captured our desire for an extravagant welcome. And the tent can continue to be important for us, a place of temporary rest, renewal, revival when the journey has grown long, the resistance grown intense, the inner strength lags. But is the tent as our dominant image one that can continue to serve us into the future? Some have never felt welcome in this big tent, no matter how wide we have tried to pitch it. Some have left the tent disturbed, alienated, never to return. Rather than a place to hear Good News, they have heard news that alienated. For them, the very "bigness" of the big tent has been difficult, a tent pitched too wide for theological comfort. Some have lingered around the edges, alternatively indifferent or appalled, never fully engaging. The tent has been open to all,

the welcome extravagant, but there is only one show, or at most three. It's one thing to be welcomed to the tent, quite another to feel welcomed and included by what's going on in the tent. And even for those who have been content to call this tent home, there's been discomfort over the fact that there is no one center, but three or more, a tent lacking in theological or confessional coherence, a tent lacking a clear, decisive identity. Can the big tent serve us still as an animating image?

In a curious way the tensions that have emerged within the World Council of Churches over the character of its big worship tent have parallels in the United Church of Christ. The attempt to create a united worship experience reflecting an array of liturgical and confessional expressions became increasingly uncomfortable for some in the global family who felt that the distinctiveness of their own rich communal tradition was being lost, even violated, dissolved if you will into a liturgical hybrid of sorts, and one dominated by the theology of a pan-Protestantism of a liberal northern hemispheric orientation in spite of very real and honest attempts to draw in the cultural contributions of the global south. As the United Church of Christ struggles with what it will mean to become an increasingly multi-racial, multi-cultural church, the big tent grows less and less tenable, imposing an integration of sorts that violates - or can violate - the integrity of the diverse parts in the world of post-modernity.

Some, for example, wonder whether it's possible to be open and affirming and, at the same time, truly welcoming to the gifts of new immigrant communities or even older racial and ethnic communities where issues of human sexuality are seen through very different cultural lenses. Is it possible for a tent to contain both commitments? The departure of the Puerto Rico Conference after our 2005 vote to affirm "marriage equality" presses the point in disturbing ways. Moreover, the big tent is also a rather sedentary image, a place people go rather than a movement into which they are called. A tent waits for its audience; it doesn't move out or into the world. Tents, legitimate places of respite for the wounded and weary, easily become homes. Like Elijah's cave, God may be asking, "What are you doing here?"

So, while the image of the big tent of our extravagant welcome has enlarged our desire over these past fifty years, perhaps it needs its own enlarging. Can we move from this relatively static image of the church, with its essentially passive and private audience or congregation, toward a more dynamic image, one that is more public in its vocation, more evangelical in its spirit, more courageous in its encounter with the world? Instead of the big tent, or perhaps in addition to and alongside of the big tent, could we consider the great parade? A parade that moves to the energetic tempo of our God is still speaking melody with its call to move, to move beyond today, beyond the comma, toward a new word for a new day? A parade that carries us with our anointing into the world where Good News will be heard and seen?

The parade I have in mind is not a military parade marked by rigid cadence and identical martial uniforms for all, though soldiers and chaplains would certainly be welcome in the parade! No, the great parade I'm imagining is more like a small town Memorial Day parade, or a protest march, or maybe a gay pride parade, or perhaps even a circus parade! It is a parade that has its own form of extravagant welcome, but a parade that is clearer in its public witness to evangelical courage.

Can we learn to love a parade?

This parade is a bit more like Mark Doty's volunteer Messiah where individual participants may lose the cadence and walk out of step, but where the movement, the direction, and the cadence of the parade as a whole demonstrates the glory that shall be revealed. Imagine, if you will, a circus, this time not under a big tent but out on parade, not static, but moving. In a circus parade all the acts participate, but they are all doing their discrete and distinctive things within the context of the one parade. The horseback riders are riding. The jugglers are juggling. The acrobats are leaping in great arcing trajectories. The clowns are clowning - with each other, with the other performers, with the people along the route, engaging, inviting, breaking down the boundary between participant and observer, insider and outsider.

The unity of this parade is in its motion and its direction and with its affirmation that God is speaking still. But within that unity diversity is honored, valued, and on full display. In a circus parade the curious along the route are exposed to the spectacle of the performers. There is an element of wide welcome to the image of circus parade as public spectacle moving through the streets of the city rather than sitting isolated at the edge of the city. It announces something. It is in itself proclamation. "Behold, how beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings, who publish peace!" Isaiah gets us up out of our seats in the tent, and on our feet toward Zion. Imagine the church as circus parade, following the trajectory of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, announcing in its playfulness the good news, the Gospel, transforming neighborhoods with its unexpected joy and inviting all to follow along toward a performance that is yet promised. Imagine the United Church of Christ as circus parade.

Or, if you will, imagine a protest march, a solidarity march, moving courageously into the face of resistance and opposition, a witness to justice and peace that will not be confined but is prepared to be profoundly public and daring. Deep convictions, born of biblical faith, provide the direction and cadence to these parades. These parades are evangelical in their origins because Jesus, the drum major for justice of Martin Luther King's famous sermon, goes before the parade and the great witness of the biblical Jeremiahs and Amoses and Isaiahs accompany it. They are evangelical but they are also courageous, for they are often confronted by the rage of oppressors, the fears of the prejudiced, and the anger of the privileged who find themselves defensive and threatened, offended by this rag tag, unrespectable procession. These parades require the precision not of the drill sergeant, but the inner discipline of those trained in non-violent resistance, the discipleship of those who follow the One who led his own kind of protest parade into Jerusalem and who marched his own solidarity parade on the Via Dolorosa, the way of sorrows which is the way of the Cross. These parades challenge those who watch, confronting and inviting, calling for commitment, for joining in, for marching alongside, for dropping nets and following.

These parades move, sometimes with great solemnity, sometimes with exuberant energy, pouring into the streets to announce a great "No" to everything that diminishes and demeans, deceives and destroys, proclaiming a great "Yes" to all that gives life, that serves justice, and that makes for peace. Think of the monks in Myanmar confronting the Junta that just months later would turn

its back on a desperate nation. Think of those who faced down the dogs and the police batons at the Edmund Pettis Bridge along the route from Selma to Montgomery. Think of gay pride parades, especially in the days when it was dangerous, took risk, demanded profound personal courage.

But think also of smaller processions, in their own way requiring even more courage: The peacemaker teams and ecumenical accompaniers in Palestine walking with children to school in Hebron in the face of the Settlers' hostility, or accompanying farmers at hundreds of checkpoints across the West Bank as they wait to have their passes inspected before going to their ancestral olive orchards. Think of the Grandmothers of La Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, moving across the open square in front of the presidential palace, demanding an accounting for their children and grandchildren, the disappeared and the tortured who were the victims of the dictatorships of the 1970's and 1980's. Think of the vigils at the gates to the School of the Americas protesting the training of torturers, and of the vigils today - far too small and far too timid - protesting the Abu Grahیب's and the Guantanamo's and the secret CIA flights and detentions that represent our nation's own deep moral failure. Can we imagine the church as this kind of parade, this protest parade of courage and resistance? Consider how the scale of this desire would enlarge us!

Or, finally, imagine a Memorial Day parade in countless small towns across America, parades like the one where I live. Community parades and community building parades where fire engines and antique cars and gold star mothers and Little League teams and Brownies and VFW units and the high school band and the staff of the public library with their "book cart brigade" pass by with more enthusiasm than precision. Parades where little children line the streets to grab the candy that is tossed their way, where older children weave in and out on their in-line skates and scooters the way I used to do on my bike, baseball cards attached to the spokes to make cool motorcycle sounds (or so I thought!). Parades like some I've known where everyone eventually becomes part of the parade as those who lined the streets join in after the last unit so that by the time the parade ends it is twice as long as it was at the beginning. A parade of extravagant welcome inviting all into sacred service and perhaps even sacred conversation. The neighbor, the girlfriend, the A&P clerk and the teen from the T-shirt shop. "Who'd have thought they'd be so good!"

Imagination enlarges the scale of our desire, and in so doing enlarges us and our churches. We need a new imagination today, an imagination not for settled churches announcing open doors and warm friendship, but an imagination for pilgrimage and parading churches prepared to make public spectacles of themselves out on the streets where the curious gather to be invited and the brokenhearted and downtrodden wait for solidarity in the face of oppression. Churches anointed not just to hear Good News, but to bring Good News.

The days of being able to pitch a big tent on the town green are over for the United Church of Christ. The age of cultural establishment when our churches could thrive by simply mirroring cultural respectability are behind us. No matter how welcoming, no matter how courageous, church only imagined as big tent all too easily surrenders to a culture eager to privatize and marginalize it. It's time, as one of our churches puts it every fifth Sunday, for "Jesus to leave the

building," the tent.

And churches eager only to be the big tent for all are tempted to abandon prophetic courage for fear that some will be offended by the scandal of the cross as it confronts the scandals of the day, whether it be our indifference to the poor, the assault human rights and the torture we tolerate under the banner of a war on terror, the xenophobia that fears and hates the stranger from beyond our borders, the racism that persists in our communities, or the words of mass deception luring us into wars that plunge the innocent into danger and put our very souls in moral peril. No, if it's only a big tent we imagine, a superficial unity will always trump a challenging diversity, and at least from the standpoint of the Gospel, we will have created community that is more irrelevant than beloved. We will fear being a divided church more than we fear being a church that stands for nothing. The poet challenges us: Can the scale of what we're able to desire be enlarged?

Parades are not really new to the church's imagination. As a pilgrim people we know that even our tents, like those of Israel in the wilderness, must be pitched only for a time and then be struck for the next stage of the journey. The Ark of the Covenant might have inhabited the tent temporarily, but then the people's eyes were fixed on the pillar of fire and cloud that led them forward. Like walking the Stations of the Cross, our parade pauses only briefly at each station, a station that beckons us toward the next and the next and the next until, finally, we find ourselves before the holy mysteries of Good Friday and Easter into which we were baptized. We even call our holy meal "bread for the journey," and experience it as a sign of the reign, the kingdom, the Empire of God toward which we are parading, "marching" as it were, "to Zion," a visible spectacle of our twin vocations of extravagant welcome and evangelical courage. So we march with baptismal water to shower blessing along the way, carrying bread and cup as an offering for the very future they signify.

While playing with these images of big tent and great parade, a good colleague of mine reminded me that many of the cultures making up the United Church of Christ aren't really comfortable being a spectacle. Believe me, as a native New Englander who has served a German Reformed church, I know that well! But we can only inhabit our tent so long, can only patch it so often before we need to resume our public vocation in the world as those anointed to bring good news, a vocation that is a visible witness to welcome in the face of rejection and courage in the face of oppression. Bonhoeffer puts it this way:

Followers are the visible community of faith; their discipleship is a visible act which separates them from the world - or it is not discipleship. And discipleship is as visible as light in the night, as a mountain in the flatland.

"Aren't we enlarged by the scale of what we're able to desire?"

So, are you up for a parade? Maybe it begins in a small way - a banner that announces to the world that "God is still speaking, that no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here." But then making it clear that "here" is not confined to the tent but is the parade itself. Imagining a church that parades itself through the streets like a circus troupe, announcing, playing, practicing, inviting, moving toward the realm of God with individuals and

ensembles of all kinds sharing their gifts and daring their visions, not in lockstep or uniforms, but in a glorious array of costumes walking, skipping, rolling, running to the cadence of One whose laughter and tears encompass all the pain and poignancy, the promise and prophecy of the clown. Imagining a church marching in protest and solidarity, confronting the world with the prophetic cadences of judgment and grace and, in the process, encountering the deep resistance of those who have been privileged by injustice and violence, a movement of evangelical courage that will not be silenced or confined to the tent, but that takes to the streets disciplined by the One who bears the wounds of a Cross rather than the demonic and ultimately futile power of a sword. Imaging a church parading through its community, ordinary folk gathering up the curious and the questioning who may be fearful of the tent but are drawn by the joy of the beloved community that weaves past their homes and welcomes their children.

Imagine such a church! "Who'd have thought they'd be so good?" This parade might demonstrate what it claims: Glory shall be revealed." Good News announced. Parading feet bringing glad tidings. Who knows? Un-tented, we might even learn to say, "I love a parade!"

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