

Luke 13:31-35
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“Urban Spirituality”

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Last week we found Jesus in the wilderness being tempted, today we find Jesus filled with sorrow as, without regard for his own life, he considers the well-being of the city of Jerusalem.

One of the oldest cities in the world, Jerusalem is special to Christians, Jews and Muslims. Israelis and Palestinians both claim Jerusalem as their Capital. In 2015 the population was recorded at just over 800,000. The city is surrounded by the Mount of Olives and Mount Scopus, and the landscape is strewn with valleys and dry riverbeds. Jerusalem is and always has been a center of cultural, political, spiritual and commercial life. During its long history, Jerusalem has been destroyed at least twice, besieged 23 times, attacked 52 times, and captured and recaptured 44 times.

We can feel Jesus’ tears longing to protect all who come to the city like a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings. Yet, the story says, “you were not willing.”

We hear almost daily how peace and security still elude Jerusalem today, and we are aware of the needs and troubles of so many other major urban centers; Flint, Kampala, Uganda, and many more. This is a concern as our world becomes more urbanized. Statistics show in 1950, 29% of the world’s population was urban, but by 2050 close to 70% will be city dwellers. What will happen if we don’t find Spirit in the city?

Augustine’s writing, The City of God has often been understood as belittling the earthly city. But Philip Sheldrake, director of the Study of Contemporary Spirituality argues Augustine’s writing actually retains hope in the city as an anticipation of the city of God.

The Author writes, “In the medieval city, we find not a separation of sacred and profane, but the city made sacred not only by its cathedrals and theological schools, but by its shrines, public celebrations of holy communion, street preaching, and communal expressions of devotion to God.”

Here at Emanuel we have chosen to respond, like Jesus, caring for the city to which we are attached. We go to the Former Friedan’s UCC educational building which has been transformed into the Guest House Men’s shelter to serve meals. We help transform St. James Episcopal church basement into a meal program. Some of us have attended gatherings at All People’s Church to talk about tense relationships in the city. The city can be a place of great need but also a place to gather the resources needed to respond to the issues.

What else do Christians have which could help shape a spiritual, urban landscape? In our faith we proclaim a covenant with God and all God has made. This covenant becomes the foundation of mutual trust and accountability for every relationship we have. Covenant means simply that no matter how tough the going gets, God will not let us go, and we cannot let each other go. Could covenant inspire a new model of relationship and community in urban areas?

As Christians we have a faith which speaks of God becoming flesh in Jesus Christ, experiencing life as we do, and revealing divine wisdom. Could incarnation help shape an urban spirituality where we treat all life as sacred, understanding everything and everyone as being held in God?

We share Holy Communion in the church as a sign of God's grace and forgiveness offering us healing and wholeness. As deep divisions separate and segregate our urban areas, could holy Communion become a ritual by which strained or severed relationships are renewed?

We have a savior who has called us to welcome the stranger and provide hospitality to those beyond our family and friends. How might an urban spiritual landscape be enhanced if we changed our stance toward "the stranger and foreigner" from fear and skepticism to radical hospitality.

Finally we hold a commitment to work and pray for peace and justice. Could this provide a new foundation block for discussions about what makes for a city "good?" How we treat the least of these and the lost, and provide access to those without power or representation around the tables of decision making?

None of this is to deny the gifts other religions and forms of spirituality might have to offer. But these are some Christians could offer that may have universal appeal.

It is important to sit with Jesus and mourn our urban areas, but it is also important to recognize the resources people of faith have to help transform our cities into the city of God.

Dancing in Jaffe is a documentary which was released in 2013. It is a story of hope for the city. Jaffe is located adjacent to Tel-Aviv. After decades of bloodshed, it's hard to imagine what can bridge the divide between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. But Pierre Dulaine has an idea: dance. The four-time world champion ballroom dancer thinks dance can transform long-held prejudices, turning wallflowers into confident teens in the process.

Dulaine is a Jaffe native. The child of an Irish father and Palestinian mother, he was born in 1944 in the port city south of Tel Aviv, and he recounts how as a child his family was forced out to make way for the creation of Israel. He hadn't returned until the making of this movie, and although there are hints of sadness in his voice, he's not there to focus on that loss or attempt to reclaim his land. He just wants both sides to get along.

He begins teaching ballroom dancing at the city's mostly segregated schools, working with the individual youth separately. But his ultimate goal is to get the kids from the Jewish schools to dance with those from the Arab schools in a big competition.

That plan seems ambitious given that it's hard enough to get the boys anywhere near the girls. The kids grimace at each other, then cover their hands with the sleeves of their

sweatshirts or position their hands a few inches apart for fear of actually making contact with one another. The no-nonsense Dulaine responds by nudging the kids together, occasionally slapping them gently with his tie and sometimes, when pushed to the limit, giving up on a school altogether.

The climax of the movie is the kids' ballroom competition where the instructor successfully gets Jewish Children to dance with Arab children. It is deeply heartening to see the kids so transformed.

In Acts 27, the author writes, "So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea. At the same time they had loosened the ropes that died the steering-oars; then hoisting the foresail to the wind, they made for the beach. But striking a reef, they ran the ship aground; the bow stuck and remained unmovable, but the stern was being broken up by the force of the waves. The soldiers plan was to kill the prisoners, so that none might swim away and escape; but the centurion, wanting to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for land, and the rest to follow, some on planks and others on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land."

May we too find ways to help all God's people become safe on broken pieces!

Amen