

*A sermon given on Sunday, May 15, 2011,
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

Moving Upstream

The story has been told many times, but it is worth telling again.

Once upon a time there was a pleasant town situated on the banks of a wide and scenic river. The people worked hard, and on the whole, they lived well. There was, however, one thing that troubled them. Much too often they would be startled by the desperate cry of people caught in the swift current of the river. Coming from somewhere further upstream, these pitiful folk were sometimes swimming, on the verge of fatigue; sometimes flailing desperately, on the verge of drowning. Sometimes, tragically, they had already drowned.

The residents of the town were compassionate and conscientious people. They built rescue stations along the riverbank. They posted lifeguards. Over the years scores, even hundreds of drowning people were saved from certain death.

But eventually the town's residents began to wonder. How was it that all these people were ending up in the river in the first place? Perhaps there was a slippery path along the river bank which, after a rain, sent the unwary traveler into the water. Perhaps there was an old wooden bridge with rotten planks giving way beneath those crossing it. Or perhaps there were nighttime robbers, shoving their victims down the bank, or causing them to jump in fear.

The townspeople gathered together an expeditionary team to travel up the river and find out. They were not certain just what they would end up doing, but they knew that they must try. To rescue the drowning was good. But to move upstream and keep people out of the rapids in the first place would be even better.

It is, of course, a fable about ministry. It's a parable, if you will, about finding ways not only to pick people up after they fall, but helping to keep them from falling. It's a parable about immediate compassion *and* systemic justice.

Several years ago when this parish held gatherings about our future, we heard a widespread desire not only to continue serving those facing crises of subsistence, but to move upstream and see what we can do systemically to make things better. We serve meals to the hungry at Loaves & Fishes, and we should! But how can we help to strike hunger at its roots? We host homeless families at the church each summer, and we should! But how can we support creative solutions for quality low-income housing in this city of foreclosures? We send tutors to Miles Park Elementary School, and God bless them for their wonderful work! But how can we help the Cleveland school system turn back from its own trajectory towards drowning? Our long-range plan said we yearn to do these things, and to forge broader partnerships for the exercise of such leadership.

Over the past year I have become growingly hopeful and excited about the creation of a new coalition of religious congregations to do such work. You have read and heard about Greater Cleveland Congregations. As a part of its creation, many of you participated during February and March in a dozen gatherings here at St. Paul's, at which we were invited to give voice to our greatest passions and concerns for our city. Input from our meetings, together with that of about two hundred similar gatherings in some thirty-five congregations, was presented at an issues convention last month. Teams from all congregations voiced their priorities, and collectively determined the first five issues for the

efforts of our new coalition: Education, Jobs, Health Care, Criminal Justice, and Hunger. Over the summer and fall, teams will craft initial, immediate and achievable goals for each of these five issues.

Are these five issues broad and a bit overwhelming? Yes, but that is no excuse for inaction. Indeed, it is the very reason for uniting with others in a larger coalition – we cannot begin to address such issues on our own.

Are there other institutions and agencies and foundations working on these same issues? Certainly! And it is only by working together that we have a hope of making progress. But I am convinced that religious institutions should be among those at the table, not *instead of* but *together with* decision-makers in the public and private sectors. As people of faith, we have values, convictions, and commitments which should be given a voice.

Have there been other attempts at such interfaith coalition before? Yes, there have. But none appears to have built such deep and wide relationships, so quickly, across lines of race, creed, and county geography, as has this new effort. Who knows why. Maybe the need is greater than ever. Maybe we're more motivated because we're more desperate. Maybe the Holy Spirit is blowing stronger. Who knows. But I believe it is a good thing, and a powerful thing. And here is what I want you to do.

I want you to pray for the work of Greater Cleveland Congregations. And I want you to come to its Founding Assembly, on Monday, June 6, at 7:00 p.m., in the Masonic Auditorium. It will be the public declaration and celebration of this new organization.

What will happen at this Assembly? There will be choirs singing. There will be inspiring words from religious leaders. There will be recognition of guests in attendance, including elected officials and other community leaders. There will be prayers for our work, offered in various traditions. The goal is 1800 people in attendance. There will be a Roll Call of the 35 or 40 charter congregations. You can stand up and cheer when St. Paul's is called! It will be one part legislative assembly and three parts celebration rally. And it will be grand. And it will be important. Because the work that it launches is important.

Take a look, for just one moment, at today's reading from the Book of Acts, which speaks of the earliest Christian community. [2:42-47] *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ... [And] all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Have you noticed how we get really nervous when this passage is read? People get all twitchy and move on as quickly as they can to the next reading! It sounds a bit like some sort of commune, doesn't it? A social and economic system not in our comfort zone. In fact, it's true that religious communities have been founded to attempt such an existence, and they have failed unflinchingly. Communities like Oneida, New York; New Harmony, Indiana; and North Union Village – in a place now known as Shaker Heights.*

So, perhaps the passage is not a formula for viable communal life. But I suggest that underlying the passage is an altogether viable and indeed mandatory principle – generous concern for one and all, including the most needy. It is only after assuring that all were provided for that those early Christians were able truly “with glad and generous hearts [to be] praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.” And so for us. And so for us.

I really do hope you will come to that Founding Assembly and help launch an organization which I am convinced has every prospect to be a vehicle of grace for our city.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” We are invited into the work of Christ, who wants us and every child of God to have abundant life.