

The Unexpected Workers

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Matt 16: 13-21

In 1984, there was a massive labor strike in Britain. It was, and remains, the largest and longest strike in recorded history. The coal miners went on strike to protest the government's closure of several mines, the lifeblood of many of the smaller villages. If there were a group of supporters these rural coal miners would never have expected, it was a bunch of gay men and lesbians. But, that's exactly who turned out to support them in their dire struggle with the British government.

A young gay activist, named Mark Ashton, was watching the news one evening when a story came on about the police attempting to break up the coal miners picket lines. The miners were out to save their livelihoods. They were protesting the pit closures which would decimate nearly all the jobs available in their rural communities. The closures were seen as a strategic move made to lessen the strength of the rural communities and their trade unions. Mark watched the violent suppression on the television and came to realize the miners were being bullied by the police in much the same way his community had been. It, then, clicked for him; the usual police presence around his community had eased. The near constant ticketing, detention, arrests and harassment had stopped. The gay community was enjoying some rare peace and quiet.

Increased policing, in response to the miner's protests, meant the LGBTQ community was enjoying a reprieve from the over-policing of their community. As Mark realized this, he recognized a new possibility: the gay community could do something to end police brutality and to end the political ostracism of disenfranchised groups by standing with the miners. This was a huge leap for many in the LGBTQ community. Many of Mark's comrades came out and were beaten up in rural villages in their youth. They were, understandably, weary of putting themselves in danger for people they were not sure even cared about them as human beings.

But, Mark and his rag-tag group (Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners) raised money, bought the miners' families food, and offered moral support. When the government shut down public transit in order to stop the protests, the group purchased a van to shuttle the miners to their picket lines. They attended rallies and showed their solidarity, providing the miners with hope to endure the fight. They helped the miners' weather the pangs of labor as they sought to bring new life, a new reality to their plight.

Just as the midwives in our Exodus reading did, when they stood up to Pharaoh by setting aside his mandate to kill every Jewish boy during childbirth, the group Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners set aside their own safety and tranquility to stand up for what was right. The actions of the midwives had the potential to save an entire generation of young boys. Their actions succeeded in saving the all-important infant, Moses. Without their bravery, there would have never been someone to lead the Israelites out of bondage. There would never have been a return of the Jewish community to Israel.

As one of the coalminers said in response to the assistance of Mark's group, "What you have given us is more than money. It's friendship. When you're in a battle against an enemy so much bigger and so much stronger than you, and to find out you have a friend that you never knew existed, ... well, that is the best feeling in the world. So, thank you!" Mark and his friends gave the miners sustenance and hope. They gave them a chance to live through the struggle.

The story of the coal miners and their unlikely allies was beautifully told in the movie, *Pride*. Based on real-life events, *Pride* is a historical drama, a literary genre in which historical facts are embellished in order to fill in the blanks lost to time and to tell a fruitful story. Perhaps, this is a little bit like how the accounts of Jesus' life came into being as the written documents we have today.

Human beings cannot remember every single detail in its exact and unfettered truth. The minute we commit it to memory it is already subject to how we classified it and the way our particular mind works in recalling memories. If you've ever played a game of telephone, then you know exactly what I'm talking about. It is just a part of our humanness to remember things a little bit slant.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus is talking to his disciples about the story they tell about him. Being the gifted, didactic teacher that he is, he was working with them on how to share his story with future generations. He has commissioned his disciples to go out into the world and share the Good News. In the meantime, to avoid his story being told just a little bit too slant, he checks to see just what it is they would one day say.

Why do this? His disciples are a ragtag band of nobodies – kind of like Mark's Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners. They are salt-of-the-earth people who Rome and the provincial authorities would pay no mind to. As long as they pay their taxes and keep quiet, no one in power has any idea who they are. They are fishers. They are tax collectors. His wider circle is made up of lepers, blind people, prostitutes and wealthy widows living on their own. If each of the disciples goes forth and shares a different message, there will never be a Christ movement.

If the coal miners fought for their right to human decency, a living wage and against police brutality all by themselves (if their story was simply their own), they would not have succeeded. If the LGBTQ community did not join the miners in their struggle (if they did not become a part of the miners' story), they would not have had the ally they needed in parliament when a bill in support of their right to life and happiness was brought forward for a vote. What the two groups discovered was their existence, and their flourishing, depended on the most unlikely of allies. It is, at times, the vocal work of such an unexpected ally that brings us closer to the kin(g)dom of God.

Sometimes, it is the quiet bold action of an unlikely hero who makes room for another to live and experience hope. It's akin to a poor carpenter from Nazareth offering up his future and his life to bring his people hope and resilience. It's kind of like the two unlikely heroes in Exodus.

Shiphrah and Puah ignore Pharaoh's declaration of an open season on Hebrew boys; they risk their futures in refusing to take part in a government sanctioned lynching. These midwives knew it was against God. It was against the ways of God. They could have just kept their heads down and done their job as instructed. They could have thought it was wrong, but let themselves be comforted with the notion that they were just "doing their job." Instead, Shiphrah and Puah moved from their own understanding of God. The story in Exodus, like the story of Mark and his rag-tag group, is a beautiful story about the power of moving from a place of our God given convictions.

It is God-given convictions Jesus is after with his disciples. Jesus tells Peter his convictions come from God. Peter knows who Jesus is, and can articulate it, not because of some

human knowledge shared with him. Peter knows this because of a personal encounter with God. (Matt 16:17)

How we understand Jesus, therefore, should be rooted in a lifelong conversation with God. Our understanding is meant to grow and shift as necessary. So much of our world, however, loves static, stable, unchanging things. A church, a denomination or an influential person in our lives surely all have an opinion, but in the end each one of us must decide for ourselves (in prayerful conversation with God) how we will identify Jesus.

This back and forth with God honors the fact that God is Living. God is ever-present and ever-engaged with us. The concept of a living God is one we know well here in the United Church of Christ. In the concept, “God is still speaking”, we assert that God is dynamic and alive. God, as shown in the example of Jesus Christ, is contextual and consistently relevant. A living, speaking God is a declaration affirming that God is not contained in any text, not even in a sacred text. God continues to move and speak in the world.

Jesus tells his disciples they know who is not by flesh and blood, but by an experience with him. Jesus, then, tells the disciples to tell no one who he is. (Matt 16:20) They are not to tell anyone he is the Messiah. It makes me wonder - how are they going to build up the community after Jesus is crucified if they are not to tell anyone he is the Messiah? How can they spread the Good News if they do not share that he is the Son of the Living God? How can they build an assembly so strong that the power of Hades will never conquer it?

It is by the life they live. It is the fruits by which they will be known. It is by letting God’s call speak in their lives: from saving innocent babies to helping lift up the plight of disenfranchised coal miners. Their lives, like Jesus’ life before them and our lives thereafter, are to be lived in conversation with and in honor of the Living God who created them.

Fisher, tax collector, Roman official, prostitute, widow, orphan, lesbian, gay man and coal miner – there is no category which excludes one from a conversation with the Living God. No matter where our journey begins, we have been created by God to live, called by God to love and commissioned by Jesus, the Son of the Living God, to serve where we are least expected. So, live, and live fully. Love, and love fully. Serve and serve fully. In so doing, become the unexpected worker of God who changes everything.