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Proverbs 31:8-9  
Radio 4/25/10

## WE THE PEOPLE ORGANIZED

Twenty years ago on the south side of Chicago a young man who was studying law at Harvard decided that the best way to help his community was to be a community organizer. So for three years he was the director of Developing Communities Project, and the Gamaliel Foundation (which takes its name from the prominent rabbi mentioned in the New Testament). During that time, while attending many a meeting in church basements and YMCA's, he discovered that he had a difficult time explaining his profession to people.

Typical of the remarks he would hear is this. One woman said to him, "Listen . . . You're a bright young man . . . You went to college, didn't you? [The man nodded in the affirmative]. " just can't understand why a bright young man like you would go to college, get that degree and become a community organizer."

"Why's that?" the man replied.

"Cause the pay is low [she continued], the hours is long, and don't nobody appreciate you." She shook her head in puzzlement as she wandered back to attend to her duties.

The young man who told this story continued: "I've thought back on that conversation more than once during the time I've organized with the Developing Communities Project, based in Chicago's far south side. Unfortunately, the answers that come to mind haven't been as simple as her question. Probably

the shortest one is this: It needs to be done, and not enough folks are doing it.”

The debate as to how black and other dispossessed people can forward their lot in America is not new [he wrote]. From W.E.D. DuBois to Booker T. Washington to Marcus Garvey to Malcom X to Martin Luther King, this internal debate has raged between integration and nationalism, between accommodation and militancy, between sit-down strikes and boardroom negotiations.”

If that sounds like someone who was trying early in his career to bridge social divides, to unite warring parties, to find common ground in the polarities of race, politics, and gender, then it comes as no surprise now. Nor is the identity of this person a surprise. It was, of course, Barack Obama, now the 46<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, and America’s first Community Organizer in Chief.

In the campaign the president’s work as a community organizer was dismissed by the one-time mayor of Wasilla, Alaska and then the governor who quit when she said, “My experience as a small town mayor is sort of like a community organizer except that you have actual responsibilities.” To my knowledge she has never apologized for that remark, which insults some of the greatest figures for social change in human history, from Jesus of Nazareth to Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

The problems he faced as a young community organizer in the late 80’s and early nineties can hardly compare with the problems he faces today. Indeed no American president has faced such daunting economic, social, and political challenges since Franklin Roosevelt. And at the heart of his plan to reshape America is his experience as a community organizer. He is, quite literally, and with a patience recently praised by syndicated columnist David Broder, reorganizing American society around a different set of priorities and values.

We are so accustomed to instant gratification and short-term thinking, which has crippled us both morally and financially, the Community Organizer in Chief, after passing historical health insurance reform, just began the long, arduous, and hitherto futile attempt to create a world free from the fear of nuclear annihilation. Because he is well liked around the world, his invitation to hold a summit on nuclear non-proliferation drew the largest crowd of world leaders to Washington since the summit that formed the United Nations in 1945. And out of that meeting came real and surprising first steps from

several previously uncooperative nations, notably Ukraine and China —and all this after the president signed an arms reduction treaty with Russia that substantially reduces the number of nuclear warheads that might fall into the hands of terrorists.

Now you may be wondering why I'm talking about this at all, since it is also the case that his presidency has created a real and frightening backlash, and the rhetoric of hatred toward our own government has not been this pitched since the days right before the Oklahoma City bombing 15 years ago. And the answer is that the two have always gone together. All social change, even when it is right and necessary and dares to take on special interests who benefit from the status quo, is agonizingly difficult.

And this is a sermon about the value of community organizing –something Mayflower is committed to doing with other faith communities. Those Mayflower members, who have been meeting for several years now to help organize faith communities in Oklahoma City, will meet after this service for their next strategy session, and they asked me if I would preach about the value and theology of community organizing in the church, and I said yes.

And because of the difficulties that they have faced, from critics who have used the same tactics used to try to sabotage health care reform, (smearing it all as a socialist plot), I wanted to remind them, and all of us, that we need more than just a vision and good ideas in the church. We need a vision that is organized and then possessed of an unearthly *patience*. Knowing that something is wrong is not enough. Passing a resolution condemning evil is not enough. One must go door to door, show up at city hall, participate in boycotts and non-violent demonstrations, and swing public opinion away from business as usual when business as usual leaves too many people out.

And please understand – the issue of *whether* it is theologically justified for congregations to organize for change is redundant. The body of Christ is made up of changed people whose mandate is to change the world, to be like leaven in the loaf of the Empire, corrupting it from within. The church is in terrible shape these days not because it flirts with community organizing, as some local Tea Party theologians have speculated, but because it has abandoned its role in social change in pursuit of personal salvation and an incestuous relationship to this Empire.

The church is not in trouble because it wants to organize around issues of community concern, especially on behalf of the poor, but precisely because it has stopped doing this, and now you can't tell a Christian from a redneck, or a racist, or a homophobe. Timothy McVeigh claimed to be a Christian, and so do the people who just called for an Oklahoma militia to patrol the borders of our state to guard against intrusions by the federal government. One of them, Randy Brogden, is running for governor!

So let's face it, the issue is not whether or not it is proper or theologically defensible for the church to do community organizing. It is a given. Jesus of Nazareth was a community organizer, and his disciples went out two by two to heal, preach the good news, and live for an alternative empire in which Jesus was Lord and Caesar was not.

But let's face it. Community organizing does not always guarantee a moral result. The KKK is an organized community. So is Opus Dei. So is every lobbying group in Washington. So is the shadowy, powerful community of Christian evangelicals known as "The Family." The question is not whether it is right to organize, since without organization, change can't happen. But on *whose behalf* should we organize, especially in the church of Jesus Christ.

To care is to make a difference in someone's life, and in the life of the community in which we live. Otherwise our existence is little more than a race to out-accumulate our neighbor, to have the perfect lawn, to drive the most expensive car, and to live safely isolated from misery, and make it to retirement with the most toys.

Yet the Bible we say we value in America is a manifesto on behalf of the poor that compels us to action from the first lines of Genesis to the last lines of Revelation. It's how the strong treat the weak — that is the ultimate ethical test. "Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all the unfortunate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and defend the right of the afflicted and needy" says the wisdom of Proverbs.

Perhaps it would be wise to pause here and say that I'm not talking about so-called "faith based initiatives" here, as in direct funding of religious organizations doing work on behalf of the poor by the government. I remain, quite to the consternation of some of my colleagues, opposed on the ground of separation of church and state. I do not want my tax dollars used in ministries that, in addition to helping the poor, try to convert them through fear to an

exclusivist version of Christianity, or tries to “heal” homosexuals, or present Jesus as a member of the Chamber of Commerce.

I’m a great believer in the separation of church and state, but there is another kind of separation I do not favor, and that is the separation of the church from the state of the poor. Faith without works is dead, and Christianity divorced from advocacy and ministry on behalf of the poor is “cheap grace” as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it.

We have been so focused on trying to figure out why the poor are poor, as if to alleviate our guilt, that we have forgotten that in addition to the mistakes that human beings make, whether they are on welfare or named Bernie Madoff, there is a whole industry that exists to gouge the poor which helps to keep them poor. Check cashing, pay advance centers, rent to own stores, convenience stores where everything costs twice as much, “buy here, pay here” auto dealers who charge outrageous interest, or even the biggest financial houses, like Goldman Sachs, and the failed Washington Mutual – selling securities that were *designed* to fail and enrich the few at the expense of the many. Jesus said “the poor you shall have with you always,” but that was not an excuse, or a reason to accept the unacceptable, but rather a call to address the world as it is and has always been — including people who prey upon the poor.

So what can we do? We can support those who organize on behalf of the poor. We can and should attack poverty at its root causes. When Roman Catholic priests tried to do this in Latin America in the 1980’s the Vatican shut them down. What those priests said was, “The world as it is, is the enemy of God.” The separation between one’s private morality and one’s public morality is fatal, and one cannot simply serve the poor without asking what makes them poor. Or as Paul Tillich put it, “power with love is tyranny, but love without power is sentimentality.”

If you look at the history of social change, it simply does not occur without an organized presence to speak truth to power. If one person shows up at a city council meeting to speak on behalf of the treatment of illegal immigrants, the response is boredom. If 200 people show up, it begins to have political consequences. Numbers matter, and without organization, we can’t turn out the numbers we need to press for the changes that the community needs.

If you want the sad truth it is this. Progressives don't organize as well as conservatives. We continue to believe that good reasons alone will change the world, and that's not true. If you want to mitigate the effect of the Tea Party crowd, then you need a movement as well organized and fervent, and right now, it doesn't exist. Faith-based community organizing could go a long way toward filling that void. And Mayflower is trying to play a role in such an effort.

Here is what we have done so far: We have conducted more than 20 house meetings last fall with about 100 participants. We have attended and participated in 10 different workshops and training sessions locally and nationally on community organizing, social justice and ecumenical advocacy. We have encouraged other denominations and faith groups to join us and we currently have commitments from about 30 such groups, Catholic, UCC, UMC, Nazarene, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Jewish.

As a result of the things our group has learned, several Mayflower members are spearheading a group that is bringing a before school arts and sciences program to Taft Middle School — one of the poorest and most diverse in the city. 97% of its children are on free or reduced lunch programs, 15% live in foster care or shelters, and more than 50% are raised by someone other than their parent.

Bringing a before school arts program is the kind of thing that community organizers do. So that poor children might start their day singing, or painting, or reading poetry. If that makes us radicals, so be it. If this is dangerous, subversive behavior, then I say let's do more of it. If you would like to wade into this fray, since all change is a struggle, but human society depends on it to survive, then I invite you to attend one of two house meetings, the first after this service today in the parlor, and the second after church as well.

Go and listen to what people want to do. You don't have to do anything but listen to what people are trying to do to make some corner of this world a better place. They promise to take only one hour of your time, to feed you a snack (since as we all know the Holy Spirit works better if the blood sugar isn't too low), and to let you hear the stories of other people who have decided that community organizing isn't an option for them, but a necessary expression of their faith.

Then on May 16<sup>th</sup>, there will be a big city-wide meeting of all the people we can gather, to bring together all the agendas that have been gathered in house meetings, and plan our first action. There is strength in numbers. You

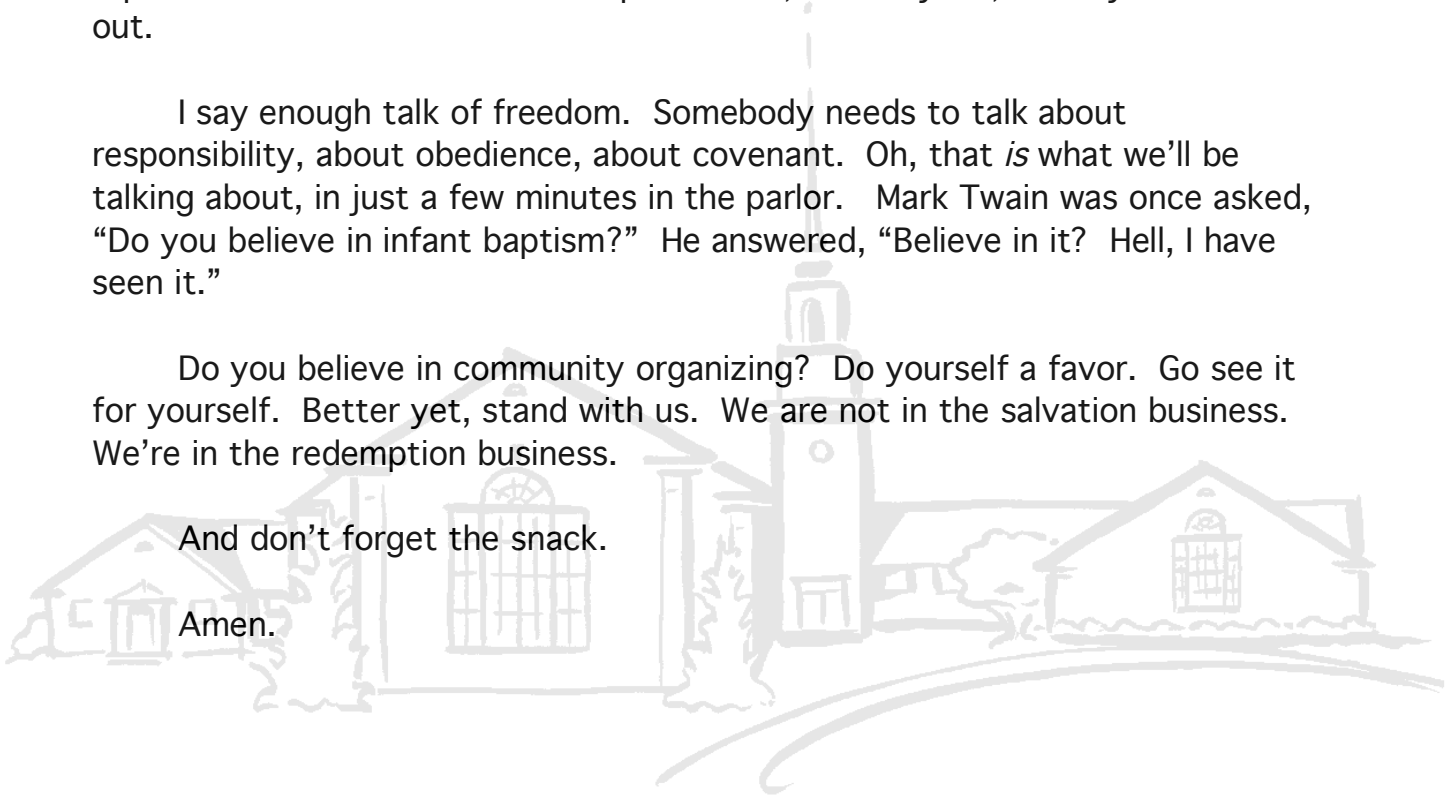
are the numbers. This is the church that ought to lead the way. People already think we are dangerous, so let's prove them right. Let us be dangerously concerned with the neighbor, with the stranger, with the forgotten, with orphans and widows who have no protectors, no lobbyists, nobody to bail them out.

I say enough talk of freedom. Somebody needs to talk about responsibility, about obedience, about covenant. Oh, that *is* what we'll be talking about, in just a few minutes in the parlor. Mark Twain was once asked, "Do you believe in infant baptism?" He answered, "Believe in it? Hell, I have seen it."

Do you believe in community organizing? Do yourself a favor. Go see it for yourself. Better yet, stand with us. We are not in the salvation business. We're in the redemption business.

And don't forget the snack.

Amen.



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Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, April 18, 2010

Lord of Life, fifteen years ago tomorrow, on a day calm and bright with the promise of spring, a bomb went off that shook the nation. Not only did 168 of our loved ones die in an instant of blinding terror, but we came face to face with the reality of what hatred is, and what hatred does.

It is often said that Oklahoma City responded heroically to this tragedy, and rebuilt itself into a stronger, better place — and that's true. But in one very ominous way, we have not learned a thing. The anti-government rhetoric that pushed the angry and infantile Timothy McVeigh over the edge is back and as lethal as ever. In those days it was the Militia Movement; today it is the Tea Party Movement and its affiliates. And the message is unmistakable — prepare to die in order to protect yourself from your own government. Think of it as an alien, evil force, made up not of your neighbors and family members, of judges

and social workers and teachers, but as an occupying force that threatens you and your family.

Bring out your weapons and flaunt them. Blame the president for creating the problems he inherited, and then call yourself a patriot because you want to circle the wagons and keep the world safe for white people.

Let the prayers that rise up from churches this morning be prayers against violence and hatred as the solution to our problems. Let us step back from the rhetoric of us against them before it is too late and the lessons of 15 years ago go unheeded. Let those who are in positions of leadership condemn the rhetoric of violence and vigilantism before the next Timothy McVeigh kills again.

We pray in memory of those who died, of those who survived but struggle to this day, and on behalf of those whose lives we might save in the future, if we will but have the courage to step back and stop the hate.

In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, Prince of Peace, Teacher and Lord we pray,  
Amen.



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