

“Who’s in Charge Now?”

Acts 1:6-14

Look around at the congregation today. Really take a look for a moment. Most of us come to church and look for our friends, the familiar people who have been here with us for a long time. So take a minute now to look at the people around you, and notice people you have not noticed before.

This congregation, right at the edge of downtown Oakland, surrounded by people who have come from many lands, who speak many languages, is very different from the congregation it was many years ago.

When I talk about Lake Merritt United Methodist Church to others, I tell them that this is a merger of several congregations in Oakland who years ago had it in their hearts to be diverse. As we worship here today, that intention, that vision in the hearts of the people a long time ago is being lived out here.

The people who live around us are now becoming part of this congregation. Are we truly open and welcoming? The world is changing so quickly, and so are we, the people of Lake Merritt United Methodist Church.

A funeral took place in this sanctuary this past week, on Wednesday. Many of you will not have known about the funeral of 22 year old Bianca August of Oakland, a victim of homicide, murdered by her lover.

Well over 300 people gathered here in the sanctuary for the funeral of Bianca, many of them young people with beautiful little children, who played after the service in the courtyard. Well over 300 people gathered also for traditional “repast” after the service: feasting, part of the African American culture.

The funeral brought together so much of the diversity of Oakland: a gathering in this church building, right at the edge of downtown Oakland. The lesbian and gay community. The African American community and some of its leaders, pastors and teachers, dignitaries. A woman, bent over at the waist from osteoporosis, spoke to the people in the funeral service. “We all have the devil in us,” she said. “And we all have Light in us, the Light of God. Bianca is beautiful, and she is in God’s presence now. We have grief, but she is in God’s presence.”

“Our children are dying,” she told the community. “Our children are dying.”

The woman encouraged the people to make a change in the way they approached others in the community: smile, be kind. Simple things. Profound things.

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Austria, March, 1938, the year before the beginning of World War II. In one day, Hitler and the National Socialists succeeded in annexing Austria into the empire they hoped to build. England and the rest of Europe were astounded at the anti-Semitic raging that followed that day. The homes, businesses, and the fortunes of Jews in Austria were pillaged. Many of Hitler’s cronies profited. By the end of April, 1938, all but one of the wealthiest of the Jewish families had left Austria for safety in the United States, South America. Canada and Australia refused to welcome the Jews who were fleeing Europe.

Even those who were ambivalent about the rise of the National Socialists – the Nazi party – were surprised by the violence, the looting. 1938 was the year that the concentration camps began to be filled, beginning with non-Jews, writers, journalists. Later, the Jews would come.

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Who is in charge? Who is in charge when the young people are dying in this city? Who is in charge when ethnic cleansing continues to go on in the world? Who is in charge? The answer is so simple, in a way, and yet it eludes us.

“We all have Light in us.”

We have to flick the switch! One person at a time, we have to realize that of our own power and best thinking, of our own attempts at leadership, of our own attempts at being good people, we have failed.

Families suffer, like empires and countries, of having no one in charge. “Someone needs to be the adult.” And that takes someone who has flicked the switch, who has turned to a power higher than themselves to guide them.

I imagine the disciples were thrown off their grounding when Jesus left. We can see them, looking up at the sky, gazing too long at the ascension, while all around them, people were suffering, longing, hoping, dying for something to save them.

The Holy Spirit is like electricity. For many of us, that electricity is latent in us. We have lost our ground. We are looking up at the sky, living in our heads, thinking our best thinking will make the changes the world and this country so desperately needs. We haven’t flicked the switch! All of our suffering has not led us to the Light we have in us!

The 2012 Presidential campaign has already begun, with the announcement of Mitch Romney in Massachusetts this past week. Now we have to go through all of this again. Mitch Romney will want to look as if he is in charge. He’ll make lots of promises, the air waves will be filled with promises and slurs.

I’ll want to be seeing if he can handle himself with character, with hope, with grounding, with maturity. Only then will I know who is in charge.

“We all have Light in us.” Flick the switch. The world is waiting.