

LOVE TAKING OVER

Sunday, August 23, 2009 at 2:31am

By Rev. Vance Ross

Immediately following the closing celebration of MARCHA's Annual Meeting in Chicago

On this evening I experienced a wonder of the Church: Worship in the deepest theological sense of the term!

I am attending the MARCHA meeting, the Hispanic Latino caucus of the United Methodist Church. Saturday night ended with a banquet. Awards were received by deserving leaders in the faith and the church, introductions of persons were shared and a speaker offered words from the head and heart. All this was good.

But a tradition among our sisters and brothers, a custom of usual and expected occurrence for them, moved my eyes to tears and my heart to joy. Shared worship, in the most genuine way, broke out.

O, this was not usual United Methodist worship. There was no liturgical format. There was no celebrant of the sacrament or an intellectual, erudite proclamation by a preacher. We heard no massive and well rehearsed choir and we had no UM Hymnals.

What happened was that our sisters and brothers, the Spanish speaking Diaspora, began to sing the songs of their homelands. They sang from Mexico and Brazil. They sang from Puerto Rico and El Salvador. They sang from Costa Rica and Honduras, from Cuba and Peru. The songs were different. Not all knew them, but all sang them. Young and old, men and boys, women and girls, every hue and hair texture, every possible wrinkle and blemish: they sang! Laity and Bishops sang and danced. Preachers and immigration workers sang and danced. Conference staff, general church staff, singles and married, well salaried and unsalaried sang and danced. They sang and danced with zest and enthusiasm, with zeal and boldness, with spirit and with soul.

Unlike many United Methodist gatherings, there were no keepers of decorum in this. The praise breakers-those solemnity chaperones who have been spiritless gate keepers for many a church meeting-assigned and determined to keep life out of and away from the people of God missed this appointment. This was unabashed and unapologetic joy. It was praise unto praise for and from people outside their homelands.

Jarring me as the rip of a lightning bolt was the knowledge that, in as true a sense as I have ever experienced, I was witnessing God's people singing The Lord's songs-their songs-in a strange land. These are they who have experienced unmerited rancor and arrogant discrimination. They have watched families strain to stay together and have seen them break under that stress. They have watched loved ones suffer for want of health care and perish for lack of food. They have felt the stinging whip of labor abuse and unfair distinction.

Some could only expect to go to offices-even church offices-and experience nobody-ness. Some dread, even hate, the fact that when they return to the world of work they will be received with all the hospitality of an insect, of vermin, their humanity trampled by a system and society that loves to use their gifts but too often refuses to love them.

Still they sang. They danced. They flung their voices and bodies into an era beyond time, an aura beyond space. They entered into the citadel, even the temple, of divine worship and pulled me in with them, an unknowing yet marveling participant in this revelation of something bigger than salvation.

Oh yes, this was more than rescue. There was a power, strength, a boldness in this worship that moved far past the elusion of wrath. This was liberation, freedom into divine dignity. This was the immortal imposition and inculcation of worthiness and somebody-ness that can only come from dwelling with the Holy! Salvation was apparent indeed, but it was salvation to something, not merely from something.

So reminiscent was this of my Black tradition, so clearly and astonishingly did the sacredness, the utter communion with God grip this room that I became overwhelmed with joy and jubilation. I felt driven to ask about the moment-was I really in the moment or living a nostalgia I subconsciously prayed would live anew among us all. One of my dearest, most treasured colleagues-Miguel Baldaras-assured what the time exemplified. He said to me: "Celebration is our tool. Tomorrow many of us will cry because of how this system will treat us, but not tonight. Tonight we celebrate that God is with us. And we will make it THROUGH tomorrow."

They will not only make it. They will challenge us to make it with them as followers of Jesus. This kind of worship will not be for a moment. This kind of worship celebration compels and propels into worship service-service for love, justice and the hope we can have only when we follow and believe in the empowering lifestyle of Jesus.

They will not only make it. We will make it with them because this kind of worship will keep breaking out. At

MARCHA and BMCR, at Asian Caucus and at Native American Caucus, every place and space where a people has been marginalized, put off and put down and where the true witness of Jesus is shared, this celebration will keep ushering forth. The traditions that kept us will arise. They will keep us yet again. The Lord's songs WILL be sung in strange lands, they will make foreign lands our lands because the revolutionary and transforming love of God-in Jesus-cannot and will not be stopped.

Love WILL take over. All we have to do-singing and dancing with abandon as did our Latino sisters and brothers tonight-is join the Jesus movement. And we will.