

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Luke 4:14-21

Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

January 27, 2019

The Third Sunday after Epiphany

What if I asked you to turn to the person next to you and say, "I have no need for you." And, be sure to say it with a little disgust...if you want to add effect, add a slight frown, maybe cross your arms, with a glare in your eyes. I have no need for you. Can you even imagine doing that? In this church?

Now...just to be sure...I want you to actually look at the person next to you or behind you – whoever is closer. Look at them and smile. My guess is that you would never say such harsh words to them. You would never look at them with disdain or talk in a disgusted tone of voice. Why? Because these people are your community. They are your friends and your family. You know them. You care for them and they for you. Even if you haven't been here long, my guess is that even if you don't know someone, you come assuming good intent.

And yet...how many of us, when we leave this place have found ourselves quick to judge, quick to finger point, quick to blame? When have we found ourselves moving too fast toward assumptions and accusations before we truly understand the real person or the real story or the real motivation behind someone's actions? When have we forgotten all about grace?

I can't tell you how important these questions are for us today. Because even though we may not be able to imagine telling someone in this place that we have no need for them, if we are honest, most of us have felt that way about someone we have encountered. I know I have. The person who we found to be reprehensible in their beliefs or their actions, the person who made us angry because they stood for something we disagreed with, the person who didn't conduct themselves in a way that we approved of.

Now...we may not want to admit feeling that way ourselves (it's uncomfortable to admit those parts of ourselves that aren't as Christ like as we would like for them to be) but we could certainly identify people we know or people in the media who do it all the time. It's our common narrative these days – the "I have no need for you" culture. You don't vote like me...therefore I have no need for you. You don't look like me....therefore I have no need for you. You don't pray like me. You don't work like me, talk like me, come from the same country as me...I have no need for you.

And yet, "for just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free." (1 Corinthians 12:12-13)

In fact, 1 Corinthians goes into extensive detail about the breadth of our diversity and reminds us that no matter how different we may be, we deeply need one another. Our ability to

function in wholeness is predicated upon our ability to lift up one another even when we may stumble, to support one another when we are weak, to love one another when we make poor choices.

That's the point Paul is making when he says that "the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect..." Why? Well, Paul says that there should be no dissention within the body, but the members should have the same care for one another. Paul is driving home the simple point that we should not say to any one of God's children...I have no need for you. Because, if we believe these words about being one body to be true, wouldn't we seek to live out a kind of radical grace for one another?

Well...maybe for those folks in these pews, the one's that we know but it gets trickier for the folks we don't know, the folks we don't agree with or just don't like very much.

To bring this home I am going to throw out a rather controversial story to use as a case study this morning— one you are all familiar with by now. And take a breath with me because this may be challenging.

This past week, we watched a number of teenage boys, one in particular wearing a Make America Great Again hat, interacting with a Native American elder on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The first story to emerge was that of a disrespectful teenager, smirking at this elder who had been chanting as part of a rally he was attending. The image was chilling. Everyone had an opinion and many were quick to cut off any explanation other than the one they wanted to hear. Fingers were pointed. Names were called. Judgements were made.

And then, the story came into greater focus...The boys had been taunted by another group who were verbally aggressive, shouting words and phrases at the young men to raise tension. The Native American elder stepped in between the groups to chant a peace prayer to try to dissolve some of the rising agitation. The elder seemed to single out this one young man as the focus of his chant.

The accusations from outsiders spread like wild fire. Fingers were pointed at the students, the Elder, the chaperones, the Israelite group. Depending on who was telling the story, a different trouble maker emerged, a different victim, a different motivation for actions that we never fully understood by just watching the media accounts. And yet, public opinion was quick to say who they had no need of.

That's the nutshell of the story. Now...how many different opinions have you heard about what went on that day at the Lincoln Memorial? How many sides have people taken? How many individuals have they dismissed as part of their judgement?

I must admit, I have listened to just about every perspective you can imagine. And what I have heard is people quick to cut others off but I haven't heard anyone say...let's stop for a moment...we are all one body here. Not once. Paul's words from Corinthians are ringing loudly in my ears and I can't help but wonder...what have we come to? Because this is just one story among far too many these days.

This week, I have spent a lot of time thinking about what it means for each of us, in these contentious times, to truly be the light of Christ in the world. What would it mean if we not only believed but lived out Paul's words? Could we actually accomplish this idea of being one body in Christ?

I was reading Henri Nouwen's book **Compassion** this week and he outlines three ways that we can live into this idea of loving and caring for everyone (not just those who are in the pews next to us). In Nouwen's opinion, it takes three things: Patience, Prayer, and Action.

- 1) Patience – Nouwen calls patience the “discipline of compassion.” In other words – to get it right, we have to keep trying. *“Patience requires us to go beyond the choice between fleeing or fighting....Patience involves staying with it, living it through, listening carefully ....Patience means overcoming the fear of a controversial subject. It means paying attention to shameful memories and searching for forgiveness without having to forget. It means welcoming sincere criticism and evaluating changing conditions. In short, patience is a willingness to be influenced even when this requires giving up control and entering into unknown territory.”*
- 2) Prayer – It's the simple act that brings us closer to all of our brothers and sisters. Nouwen says that through prayer our hearts are expanded to heal so that no one is excluded or shut out. It's when we overcome the power of our impatient impulses to flee or to fight when the going gets tough, when we avoid the impulse to become fearful or angry. That's when we go to prayer as our response. So that when we do think of our enemies we pray for them and for ourselves. We pray for reconciliation, for understanding, for peace between us.
- 3) Action – Nouwen states it beautifully by saying that our actions, when based upon our patient practice of compassion and our discipline of prayer, become the manifestation of God's presence that touches the heart of humanity, where justice and peace can guide the world. Our actions may then remove fear and suspicion. And out of those gracious actions we are able to listen to each other, to speak to each other and to heal our communal brokenness.

Patience. Prayer. Action. If I could apply these ideas to the scene at the Lincoln Memorial I would suggest this...the next time perspectives or cultures or ideologies collide, why not extend one another's hand in friendship? Why not ask about one another and then take the time to listen to what you hear? If you extend a prayer or chant or exclamation for justice, take a moment to share why it is important to you with respect to those who may disagree or not

understand your perspective. Can you imagine how you would have viewed this encounter differently if you had seen these kinds of actions taken place? How different would the narrative have been?

Finally, remember that each person involved in any given situation will not always respond in the best way. Because remember – this takes patience as we keep trying to get it right. It takes prayer as we continue to uplift the wellbeing of each and every person we encounter. It takes action that is above all grounded in love.

Give each other some grace to learn and grow together. Amen.