

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

August 4, 2019  
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 12:13-21  
Ecc.1:2,12-14,2:18-23  
Psalm 49:1-11  
Colossians 3:1-11

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Dignity. It's defined as the state or quality of being worthy of honor or respect. Our baptismal covenant asks it this way... Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?<sup>1</sup> It's the last question in our covenant. Our proclamation of who we profess to be as followers of Jesus Christ. The last thing we are left to consider on our journey as Christians. And we faithfully answer each time we state our baptismal covenant, "I will with God's help."

I have to say, when it comes to dignity, I felt defeated this week. Defeated by the hate. Defeated by the constant onslaught of divisive, harmful, and violent rhetoric from the highest offices in our country. I felt defeated and angry and discouraged. How are we even here? How has it become commonplace for us to hear other human beings being disparaged, put down, and dehumanized? How is it that we can even justify what we hear?

What has happened to dignity? What has happened to our sense of decency?

This was the question raised by the National Cathedral this week in light of the words and actions of not only our leaders but of ourselves. The letter states,

*"We have come to accept a level of insult and abuse in political discourse that violates each person's sacred identity as a child of God. We have come to accept as normal a steady stream of language and accusations coming from the highest office in the land that plays to racist elements in society."*

I want to say unequivocally...words matter. And as the leaders of the National Cathedral, the seat of our Bishop Michael Curry, remind us - violent words lead to violent actions. The letter goes on to ask,

*"When does silence become complicity? What will it take for us all to say, with one voice, that we have had enough? The question is less about the president's sense of decency, but of ours."*<sup>2</sup>

This powerful letter made me consider...is this behavior OK with God? And if not, why is it OK with us? Is this who we want to be?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/baptismal-covenant>

<sup>2</sup> <https://cathedral.org/have-we-no-decency-a-response-to-president-trump.html>

Let me be clear (and you know this about me and about this church)...we respect one another in this place. We understand the importance of each other's dignity. We have come to understand that each of our opinions matter, whether left or right, liberal or conservative. We understand that the Gospel and our call as Christians will at times feel political but we have cultivated a discerning heart when it comes to these kinds of issues. I am grateful for that. And, now more than ever, we must separate what is healthy political discourse (a much needed and valued part of our country) and what is blatant disrespect for the dignity of God's children. Is this who we want to be?

I was humbled by the letter from the National Cathedral. Whether you agreed with the message or not, the call was clear. Change starts with us...you and me. We can stand by and allow our fear and silence to hold us captive while human dignity is ignored or we can begin building step by step a more civil, caring, and compassionate community, where difference is valued, where opinions matter, and where respectful discourse is uplifted. And above all, where each individual is treated with dignity.

When I shared the letter this week, I got a range of support...from multifaith families who were scared for the wellbeing of their loved ones; to community advocates who are thankful that a message of change continues to resonate within the church; to people who are still figuring out how to voice their own fears and frustrations. But, I also got a message of hate and condemnation, for being a "false witness," for failing my faith and being deceived by a "false church."

I wasn't surprised. I know those views are out there. I also know who I am, what our church stands for, and who we are called to be.

Colossians reminds us to rid ourselves of the things that perpetuate dysfunction...things like corruption, greed, anger and slander. If we only read a little further in Colossians 3 we would find that the antidote to such harmful actions and sentiments is this...

*12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>13</sup>Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup>Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. <sup>15</sup>And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.*

It sounds all good and sweet, doesn't it? Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. But...the reality is that we do feel anger. Anger at differing opinions. Anger at what we may define as greed, ignorance, or just plain hate. We feel the desire to shut down and shut out those whom we may feel are fueling the division in our country. But...when you feel that you have reached your limit of tolerance, when you feel you have reached your limit of understanding, when you feel you have reached your limit of patience....take a deep breath. Remember that that person whom you are angry at is also a child of God.

Now...that doesn't mean that any of us should condone hate speech or discrimination or violence of any kind. It does mean that we stand firm on what we are called to do as Christians...to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote in his book *The Dignity of Difference*, "The greatest single antidote to violence is conversation, speaking our fears, listening to the fears of others, and in that sharing of vulnerabilities discovering a genesis of hope."<sup>3</sup>

I want to leave you with a poem I read this week that is a powerful statement about where we find ourselves today. It reads...

### **AT AN UNEXPECTED HOUR**

**Andrew King**

Not yet is that kingdom come upon us:  
 not yet the peace that is God's loving will;  
 not yet the swords turned into plowshares;  
 not yet the wolves lying down with lambs;  
 not yet the lands where refugees  
 may dwell in joy and safety;  
 not yet the bellies of children  
 unswollen from their hunger;  
 not yet the world's enslaved going free,  
 not yet the poor finding lives of fullness,  
 the cities where the gun no longer sounds.  
 Not yet.

And so not yet can we turn our eyes from duty,  
 not yet can we turn from service to others,  
 not yet can we cease from seeking justice,  
 nor cease from a wide compassion;  
 not yet can we rest from kindness, from mercy,  
 from pursuing peace, from lifting up  
 all those who are trodden down.

Not yet.

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<sup>3</sup> Sacks, Jonathan (2009) "The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid a Clash of Civilizations,"

Not yet that banquet table,  
not yet that feast of the kingdom's  
completion where all are guests of love.  
Not yet the time to extinguish our lamps  
in the rays of a new day's sun.

Not yet.

And yet –  
hear what unwearied hope says:

Maybe soon.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://earth2earth.wordpress.com/2016/07/31/poem-for-the-sunday-lectionary-pentecost-12-yr-c/>