

August 24 2014. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland. The 11th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16. On the Epistle: Romans 12:1-8 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

I want to tell you the story of 22 families from Silvis IL. It's a small town on the Mississippi River near the Quad Cities - Davenport and Bettendorf IA and Rock Island and Moline, IL. These first appear in this country after the First World War when they were brought up from Mexico by the Rock Island Railroad to help strengthen their workforce on railroad construction.

They lived on a dirt road - unpaved - with no electricity or running water, unnamed. They lived in box cars, these 22 families - because they were told they couldn't live in the white part of town.

They were shunned by the local Catholic church, so they put two box-cars together and created Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church.

Then came December 7, 1941, and the call went out for volunteers. Now as is the way with close families, these 22 families got together to decide what to do. They could have gone back to Mexico - even though their kids were born here and were citizens. Instead, they decided to send a few of them off to war. Well, actually, 57 of them. One family sent seven. 57 children of Mexican Americans.

Why did they respond to the call? This is a classic American story. They responded because they understood what it was like to live under oppression, they knew what it was like to live without the benefit of real justice, they understood the vision of "one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all," a place of equality described long before, spoken of in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, even if others didn't want to recognize them as part of that one nation.

All but 8 came home. All of them decorated veterans. Back to this tiny little street now with a name: 2nd Street.

One day, some of them were at the local VFW having a beer and they said to each other "Hey, we're veterans!" So they asked to join. They were told "No, you're Mexicans."

So they formed their own VFW and built their own hall. And when, years later, the VFW in town had dwindled, and run in to money problems, and was closing down, these Mexican-Americans went over to that VFW and said, "Hey, why don't you come and join us." They were willing to include even those who had rejected them.

In 1968 the street was renamed, and if you go on-line you can find pictures: it's now called "Hero Street." That's particularly poignant, because those 57 fought for justice, equality, liberty, when they lacked it in the country that was their home.

The vision they fought for is one that has been woven throughout our planet's history. Again and again people stand up for the right to be treated with dignity, to be free. You can see it woven

throughout the Book of Judges and the Origin Story of the Chosen People.

It's Jesus' story.

Today, we hear Paul talking about it. This passage - repeated in 1 Corinthians 12 - is part of the working out of that passage from Galatians I mentioned last week: ***As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.***"

Here Paul spells that out: "As in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another." In the 1 Corinthians passage he also says this: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'"

Like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, Paul's vision for the new community is, today, as elusive as it proved for Rome and Corinth. We speak about inclusion and equality but we struggle to live the words. In part, that's what it means to be human.

It's how we struggle that's the most telling. We say that we need each other, but then we don't act that way - not intentionally, of course. We think we mean it. But when the rubber meets the road.....

The thing of it is that Paul's not talking about a religious community here. His vision is of a contrast community, one that stood in opposition to everything that Rome stood for. Against Rome's Patriarchy he proposed radical equality; against Rome's slave system, he proposed complete freedom; against Rome's self-serving law he proposed God's selfless justice.

It gets tricky for us when we understand that Paul wasn't writing about exclusively religious things but about everything. Paul wouldn't have wasted his time telling us that acolytes and lectors and priests have different functions but are all equal - that would have been self-evident. He' have agreed with John's gospel. About priests John only said this: there shouldn't be any! A priest is no more important than the newest baptized person - less so, in fact, as is any other priest (yet we have all met the pompous priest who stands on prerogative and privilege - denying the foundational equality of baptism). Paul was saying everyone is equally important, both within and without the community of faith - no hierarchy, no privilege, no special seats only functional seats. To that great list we could easily add "no longer priest or lay," no longer Senator or black resident of Ferguson MO, no longer white billionaire or Mexican-American from Hero Street Silvas IL."

Here's the trap: when we hear those lists the danger is that we'd be likely to say - out of a sense of generosity - "that person from Ferguson MO is just as important as me." Or "gays are just as important as me." Or "women are just as important as us men." but we're using ourselves as the standard. Paul's doing exactly the opposite; he's saying "think the other way around" - you, you're just as important as that person in Ferguson MO - she or he is the standard, not you or me.

That standard? Human Being.

It's all about how we look at it, isn't it? Those sneaky value judgments that are unconscious for those of us in the dominant culture.

“We are members one of another.” I wonder, how can we live that vision?