

2nd Sunday after the Epiphany, January 14, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton 1 Samuel 3:1-20, 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, John 1:43-51

Last week I put away one of several Christmas creche sets I keep in my office and at home. This one consists of the usual figures - the holy family, the wise men, a few animals – but in this particular creche they're all brown bears(!) - I have others where those usual figures are represented by cats. There's some humor to this, of course, though each year I find myself wondering whether this practice of substituting human figures for cute animals is a harmless part of the Christmas celebrations, or if it doesn't devalue the real significance of the Christmas event.

The creche I chose not to put out this year came from Bethlehem. It's made out of olive wood (so common in the Holy Land) and everything about it is traditional - Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus, the stable, the sheep, the three wise men are all present and accounted for.

The one difference is that right down the middle of the creche's 'barn yard' - separating the wise men from the stable and holy family - is a scale 26' high wall with a guard tower.

If you want to go from Jerusalem to Bethlehem today – undoubtedly the way Joseph and Mary would have had to have traveled if they had followed the usual route from Nazareth – you can't get there without dealing with the Separation Wall. Whatever you think about the Wall – whether you think it's terrible, or that it's a good way to address security issues – the undeniable truth is that it has been imposed on the landscape by the dominant culture in the Holy Land over the wishes of a significant part of that region's population.

The more things change, the more they stay the same: In the 1st Century, the foreign occupier – Rome – was doing what authoritarian Empires always do: direct and control its subject populations without regard to the consequences of their actions for those populations. Force a very pregnant woman to travel 100 miles on foot so you can count her? Sure! Why not?!!

The issue in the 1st and the 21st centuries – and, I think, every other century too – has to do with the human propensity to seek control. The Bethlehem's stories I've mentioned are one group's successful attempt to control another group against their will – but they're hardly unique stories.

I think it's undeniable that the reason, at its most basic, is self-interest. You can argue about whether that self-interest was and is in any way enlightened or not, but it's still self-interest.

Self-interest transparently doesn't look to the other – doesn't place much (or any) emphasis on what might be good or beneficial or positive for the other, only what might be good or beneficial or positive for the self.

We're all invested in this way of living in some way or another. And to elevate my own self-interest almost always means I have to expend my energy, talent, and resources to control what's going on around me for my benefit – and that likewise almost always means I'm going to try and control someone else.....or someone elses.

Sometimes that behavior is innocuous; often I'm not even aware I'm doing it. I'm not aware that I'm doing it because I'm privileged – privileged in multiple ways: I'm white, male, straight, for starters. And in a hierarchical denomination whose roots go back to the British Isles, I'm privileged in two more ways: I'm ordained, and I speak with an accent from the Old Country. All of that makes me a part of the dominant culture in this country. I don't even know what it means to be stopped by the police because I was "driving while black." I haven't experienced the sorts of negative, misogynistic treatment that my wife Rachel – and pretty much every other woman – deals with on a regular basis. And the list goes on.

It requires effort on my part to try and both recognize and understand all the different ways that anyone who's not privileged in the way I am ends up with the short end of the stick. And then there's that self-interest thing, and the attempts at control that go hand-in-hand with it, that unconsciously but actively work against doing just that.

Sometimes, I said, that self-interested behavior is innocuous. Sometimes it isn't. History is littered with examples of self-interest that were – and are – anything but innocuous. The Holocaust, the Soviet genocides, the Armenian Genocide – heck, all the other genocides – pretty much any war that's been fought, the enslavement of whole peoples by others, the obscene consequences of empire....the list of self-interested actions is endless.

This afternoon we're remembering one particular person – Martin Luther King Jr. – as a way of remembering a whole movement that was dedicated to the principle that all people are created equal, and each and every one of us has been endowed by God "with certain unalienable Rights," the chief of which is freedom, including freedom from the self-interested actions of others.

There should be no surprise that this movement was a religious one. At the heart of our faith is a call to us – as individuals and as a community – to live in a different way than out of self-interest and manipulation. Think of Jesus' words about self-denial and taking up the cross; of letting go; about the first being last and the last first; about being one who serves

The call of our faith consistently reminds us that attempts to exercise self-interest through controlling others, and an absent commitment to recognize in ourselves those ways in which our privileges blind us to the reality of others' lives, falls short of the standard our faith has set for us.

Today's scriptures focus on listening for that call, listening for the voice of God and God's movements within our lives. God is constantly speaking in our lives through insights, encounters, hunches, dreams, bursts of energy, and inspirational thoughts; calling us to live that different way: to let go and let God; to shape our lives around Jesus' vision of a community of compassionate love, justice, and mercy.

We've come a long way from "bear" Christmas creche! But it – as well as the wall-divided creche – has something to tell us. It's okay to look for the joy and humor and celebration in the events we remember, as long as we don't use them to forget the darker side of those events that had to do with privilege and naked self-interest.

And both creches also have something else to remind us of: that just as the word “remembrance” in Jesus’ words about the bread and wine, is a great deal more than simply bringing to mind some past event, so, too does that word – remembrance – mean a great deal more when we use it for other historical moments, such as the Civil Rights movement. In the case of Jesus’ usage, that word “remembrance” means “do this that I might be present with you again” – it’s taking the past and bringing it into the present. When we remember King, and the movement, we’re taking them and bringing them into the present again.

That will – does – change us. It calls us to act – to do something – not out of self-interest, or from a place of privilege, but out of our identity as individuals who are a part of an organic community of compassionate love, justice, and mercy: the body of Christ.