

Epiphany 3, 2016. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA. Nigel Taber-Hamilton
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

Today is all about community, and, especially, Christian community. All the readings support this topic.

Nehemiah says that “both men and women and all who could hear with understanding” were included – not just men, but men AND women; not just men and women but men and women who could “hear with understanding” – most unusual in a time when women were not even second-class human beings. Here, and in the passages around each side of this one, is a description of how to structure a community; here, at the end, is a proclamation that whatever is done should be done not with sorrow but with Joy.

In today's gospel, Luke describes the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus' great teaching and preaching have not matured yet, but his focus is clearly in place. His ministry is to those who are imprisoned – and not only, we could say, those physically held in a prison, but those held captive by life's circumstances; those who are poor in all the ways human beings can be poor; those who are literally blind and also those who are metaphorically blind; those who are oppressed by fact of birth and identity. Compassion, love, humility and justice are to be the guiding principles.

With Paul, that maturity *is* present. After years of preparation following his Damascus Road experience Paul begins founding communities. And after years of founding communities we find him writing to the Corinthians.

This passage from 1 Corinthians is - with Galatians 3:27-28 – at the very heart of everything that Paul wants to tell the Corinthians – it is, in fact, the very foundation of how he understands a Christian community should be structured.

Galatians says: “*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.*” (3:27-28)

In contemporary language that reads: *If you have been baptized, there is no longer American or Russian; there is no longer Union member or CEO, no longer conservative or progressive, no longer ordained or lay, there is no longer illegal immigrant and citizen, no longer a glass ceiling for women and other minorities; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

It's a radical diversity of identity, all subsumed into one category only: the baptized. Or, to put it another way, unity doesn't mean we all have to look, think, and act in the same way; unity is the open embrace of difference, the welcome of divergence, the celebration of variety.

To be a Christian, to be a member of the Body of Christ, to be a participant in community - any Christian community - this Christian community - requires of us an openness that is not characteristic of human beings in general, it requires of us a willingness to set aside our own

biases, and see in the Other – in all others – only and always the face of Jesus.

That's where Paul starts, not where he ends. What he has to say to the Corinthian community is predicated on what he says to the Galatian community – another group of followers who just don't seem to “get it.” To understand what Paul says to the Corinthians you have to hold in the back of your mind what he says to the Galatians. The lists of body parts and their importance (or in Paul's example the absence of any hierarchical list) is absolutely predicated on that vision of unity-through-diversity in 1 Corinthians 12.

1 Corinthians 12 couldn't be clearer: no part of any body is more important than any other part; they differ in function, not in worth. All are due the respect that comes from being a human being; each deserves respect for their own role, no matter how insignificant it may appear.

We have not, as human beings and Americans, done a great job when it comes to this! I wonder if it's not simply because unless you've experienced the underside of life you can't really grasp what diversity and equality actually mean. It is possible to see that underside, but you have to look.

For example, I am a descendent of Irish immigrants – my great-grandparents were poor peasants forced through starvation to leave their homeland for England to find a decent life. They were treated on arrival in England the way some in our nation today treat immigrants legal and illegal whose skin-color is different than their own.

In the age of those stark social divisions reflected in Downton Abbey, my grandfather started his working life at age 13 as an office boy in a small potato supply company (no doubt because of his Irish accent they thought he'd know about potatoes).

In a nation that still had really sharp social divisions my father drove a bus; my mother was a home-maker. Both served in the 2nd World War – my father as a B-24 tail-gunner, my mother driving army ambulances in the East End of London during the Blitz. Both saw first-hand the consequences of appeasement; and as with previous generations of my family, both understood at a primal level what life was like if you were not born to privilege.

Growing up in London I went to a state school, rather than an elite private school.

I am the first in my family to go to college: a “red-brick” university rather than the elite version – Oxford, or Cambridge – because access to those schools was in the hands of the wealthy elites whose private schools acted as pretty much guaranteed pipe-lines into them.

My seminary was “Anglican/Methodist” – a “hybrid” or a “mongrel” depending on your social church background. The same elitist reality applied to the Church of England as it did to the rest of the country – preferment in leadership was predicated on going to the “right” private school, the “right” university, and the “right” seminary. And of course, being a male and white- let's not forget that.

I know about discrimination. Perhaps not quite in the way that gays and lesbians know about

discrimination. But I have seen how it works, what it does, how it oppresses. That's how dominant culture keeps everyone in-line.

On the other hand, I'm white, straight, ordained, a full-time rector, and from England. It's safe to say that as an Episcopal priest I have also seen, and benefitted from, privilege.

I have, in other words, lived on both sides of the track. I'm not always good about recognizing my own privilege, but I sure as heck recognize oppression, and I understand both how dehumanizing it is, and what it means for the oppressed when others don't recognize it and thus do nothing about it.

I'm willing to acknowledge that if you haven't truly been oppressed you have no idea what it feels like. There are lots of great people – compassionate, thoughtful Christian people – who just don't get it when it comes to oppression.

Take the Archbishop of Canterbury. Justin Welby is a socially privileged, straight, white, mega-ordained man whose aristocratic family ensured he went to the best, most elite private schools, and to the most elite of English universities. Before ordination he rose to be a "captain of industry." It is clear because the Archbishop (along with 29 of the other 37 Primates) voted to ban the Episcopal Church from participation in the Anglican Communion in any official capacity for three years. But their decision is our fault, though, because we decided to embrace GLBT Episcopalians because they are fully, completely, and equally human!

It's hard not to think that Abp. Welby has no understanding whatsoever of what oppression does to the human soul. .

It's also hard to square what Archbishop Welby has said and done with what Jesus said and did, and what Paul said and did! As Bishop of California Marc Andrus said last week, the actions of Welby and the other 29 Primates were "*antithetical to the way of Christ.*" He went on to say that the Primates have "*made peace among themselves by scapegoating the Episcopal Church, and even more fundamentally by further marginalizing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people. The political powers who plotted the betrayal and execution of Jesus,*" he said, "*believed that it was expedient to sacrifice one person for the good of order and 'peace'.*"

The actions of the Archbishop of Canterbury - a privileged straight male among other privileged straight males - is to me reminiscent of an iconic 1938 photograph I grew up with: a greying man in a dark coat is stepping out of a small, two-engined plane surrounded by a large crowd, waving a piece of paper. That was British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain returning from Munich holding up that piece of paper, saying "peace in our time." Well-intentioned? Of course! Sincere? Absolutely! Believing he had the best interests of his people at heart? No question. But my family – and the rest of the world – learned the hard way that the well-intentioned, sincere actions of leaders usually also means that someone is about to be thrown under the bus; appeasement never works. It's a lesson we keep needing to re-learn. The oppressed – the victims of the camps – including gays and lesbians – have never forgotten that lesson. Of course, it's because we've never given them the chance to forget because we have.

Perhaps that's carrying comparisons too far; but perhaps not. We are witnessing in our own time and within our own nation

- the rise of the language of bigotry and hate among some of our political class;
- violence is espoused toward those who really do represent an underclass, and violence has been committed and continues to be committed toward those same people. It used to be that some of my African-American friends, mulling over a traffic stop, would joke with dark humor that their offence was "driving while black." Now it's "shot while black." Should we leave the Statue of Liberty's famous welcome alone, or should we chisel off the words that welcome everyone, welcome the groups - some of whom were our own ancestors - that we'd just rather not welcome into our hearts and homes, with the same embrace represented by Lady Liberty's open arms? Are we tone-deaf to "the mystic cords of memory?" Where are "the better angels of our nature?"

German Lutheran Pastor Martin Niemoeller's poem about silence and the Nazis clarifies the stakes:

"First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."

The bigotry that the Communion's primates that Archbishop Welby did his best to hide with cheap platitudes in London after the event is a chip off of the same block. Within some of their own nations, people who "don't look like them" or act like them, who, according to them have chosen a "different lifestyle," are murdered – either officially or unofficially – by the state or by those who have been 'egged on' by the state. That bigotry – and the fear at its root – is infectious. If we don't speak out, and find some way to act, even if symbolically, then Irish philosopher Edmund Burke's famous saying will have been proved right again: "*The only thing that is necessary for evil to triumph is for [people] of good will to do nothing.*"

Yet how can we criticize them when our own nation suffers under the same narrow lash?

What's at stake for all of us – not only with regard to the Primates but to our own nation – is whether or not we're willing to embrace Paul's vision of diversity that brings unity, a vision of community that embraces equality. Do we stand with our GLBT brothers and sisters or not? Do we stand with the downtrodden and abused in our nation or not?

It's our integrity and the world's future that's at stake. Silence equals death for all of us. We must speak and we must act, even if those actions are symbolic; but then, it is often only through a series of symbolic acts that change happens. May the Primates' hearts be warmed and transformed, that they chose to embrace every human being, no matter color or creed, gender or

sexual orientation – it is, after all, what Jesus wanted for us.

And may we speak and act out of our convictions of the value, worth, and equality of every human being.

And the people said: AMEN.

