



The Counter-Culture of Living as Equals

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan

The Third Sunday After the Epiphany. ~ February 3, 2019

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

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

Psalm 19

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| 1 | The heavens declare your glory, O God, *
and the firmament shows your handiwork. | 9 | The fear of you is clean and endures for ever; *
your judgments are true and righteous altogether. |
| 2 | One day tells its tale to another, *
and one night imparts knowledge to another. | 10 | More to be desired are they than gold,
more than much fine gold, *
sweeter far than honey, than honey in the comb. |
| 3 | Although they have no words or language, *
and their voices are not heard, | 12 | By them also is your servant enlightened, *
and in keeping them there is great reward. |
| 4 | Their sound has gone out into all lands, *
and their message to the ends of the world. | 13 | Who can discern unwitting sins? *
Cleanse me from my secret faults. |
| 5 | In the deep you have set a pavilion for the sun; *
it comes forth like a bridegroom out of his chamber;
it rejoices like a champion to run its course.
It goes forth from the uttermost edge of the heavens | 14 | Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins;
let them not get dominion over me; *
then shall I be whole and sound,
and innocent of a great offense. |
| 6 | and runs about to the end of it again; *
nothing is hidden from its burning heat. | 15 | Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in your sight, *
O God, my strength and my redeemer. |
| 7 | Your law, O God, is perfect and revives the soul; *
your testimony is sure and gives wisdom to the innocent. | | |
| 8 | Your statutes are just and rejoice the heart; *
your commandment is clear and gives light to the eyes. | | |

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

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—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the

sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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." On the contrary, 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; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.

Luke 4:14-21

him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Last weekend, I started reading a memoir, written by a African American gay man who was raised as a Roman Catholic in Houston, Texas. Early in the book, the author says the following, after an unexpected and surprising visit to a gay-friendly Baptist church in Harlem.

Yes, I was moved by what I had seen and heard, but I had already moved beyond needing a church and a member of the clergy to guide me to God or define my sense of what's right and wrong. [During my] years of separation [from church], I created my own idea of who God is and what God means to me. The same goes for my moral compass. I've become a solo act when it comes to how I process things and what spirituality now looks like—and I'm wary of walking back to the old band whose validation I have long moved past requiring, as I simply do not need it.ⁱ

I must admit: these words really raised my hackles. And not just because the author adamantly does not need the services of the *quote unquote* “professionally religious.” I, too, have had my fair share of frustration with “organized religion” over the years, so I can easily and sympathetically understand the desire to throw up one's hands and resort to DIY spirituality.

Yet still, these words continued to bother and sadden me. Most especially, because they seem to so fundamentally misunderstand the deeper purpose of the church. You see, the very truest thing I know is that we really can't do any of this alone. Even when I was trying to do the “faith thing” all by myself, I knew deep down that something very important was missing. That community is the secret sauce of the spiritual life, even when it's incredibly flawed.

Of course, the idea that church is a nice add-on to one's personal, individual relationship with the Divine is quite endemic to American Christianity. And perhaps, it's because the church hasn't often been very good at explaining exactly what it is we're doing here. But I think...I think if we're really honest, the primary difficulty is that being church is really, really hard. So hard that G.K. Chesterton famously declared:

The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting.
It has been found difficult; and left untried.ⁱⁱ (repeat)

We so often do not live up to our own ideals. But we *do* try. We *do* care. There is something here that really matters. But what...what exactly is it? What really is the point of being church together?

My quick elevator pitch for church, whenever members of my generation ask me how I can be an ambassador for such a flawed institution, typically goes something like this:

*...we are called into practice faith in community
because it's nearly impossible to love,
to really love in the crazy big ways that Jesus asks us to love,
without the support and challenge
of a faithfully counter-cultural community of practice.*

A faithfully counter-cultural community of practice.

If you look at American Christianity as a whole, though, there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of counter-cultural activity going on. Not all that much support or challenge, either. We've tried to make it as palatable as possible. Primarily a weekly “me and God” time, rather than a bootcamp for building audaciously loving relationships with others.

So imagine with me, then, what it must have been like to hear Jesus' words, spoken in the synagogue, upon his return to his hometown. Jesus says:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Now, as inspiring as these words may sound to us, the text suggests that their original audience wasn't too impressed.

In fact, Jesus' hometown audience in Nazareth had a pretty strongly negative reaction to his proclamation.

Just few verses later, we are told that:

When they heard [Jesus' words], all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

But why, why did they get so upset?

Well, more than likely, Jesus' friends and family were hoping for some special favors, were hoping for some VIP access, were hoping for some face-time with their hometown son turned Divine emissary.

But Jesus...well Jesus knew in his bones that he was called beyond Nazareth. Far beyond Nazareth...and even beyond Israel. To people and places where God's love may never before have been proclaimed. In the verses of this passage that the lectionary skipped, Jesus: "...upends [his audience's] desire for business as usual, aligning himself with [the prophets] Elijah and Elisha, [...both of whom] took God's message to outsiders: to the left out and the looked over, to those who were not counted in the small circle of the chosen ones."ⁱⁱⁱ

Here's how Jesus put it:

Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.

And this, of course, was all a bit hard to take. Jesus' friends and family wanted to be at the center of Jesus' burgeoning rise to fame. They wanted their fair share of attention and favor from God's newest star messenger.

But Jesus insisted that he was about something bigger. Because, as Jesus had come to know, God's primary concern is almost always *over there*, and sometimes even *wayyyy, wayyyy* over there: nearly always at the margins, among the castaways. Never quite where we think it should be, or where we want it to be. Never primarily about us.

Latin American liberation theology explains this as God's *preferential option for the poor*.

One contemporary theologian suggests that God has a much, much larger "economy of concern" than we do, that God includes and focuses on those people and places that we tend to ignore or reject.^{iv}

All of which can feel quite disconcerting. For our whole lives, most of us have been told that God loves everyone. Equally. That every person has *equal* share of inherent, God-given dignity.

So how...how could God have a *preferential option* for anyone?

Well...perhaps, because God knows that we humans have a deep proclivity toward inequality. That we have a really difficult time living together as equals. Even the disciples were jockeying for a seat at Jesus' right hand. On this side of the Kingdom, then, we are gathered as community, as church, **to practice living as equals. ...to practice living as equals.** Church offers a context, an arena, in which we can choose to learn, with one another, how to live as if the dignifying, equalizing love of God were true.

Not surprisingly, the Apostle Paul has some ideas about how to be church in this radical way. In today's reading from First Corinthians, Paul tells us:

...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; whereas our more respectable members do not need this.

Now one of the major challenges of Paul's prescription, I think, is that we are loathe to admit that we live in a world of hierarchies. Loathe to admit that even in the church, we don't always practice our God-given equality.

Now, you may want to challenge me on this. "We really *are* all equal here," you may want to insist. And yes, **to God**, we most certainly are equals. But to one another, we so very often are not.

In order to begin to imagine how to "honor those we consider less honorable," then, we must first recognize inequality among us. Indeed, admitting that we think and act as if some people are less honorable than others is the very first step toward beginning to live as if the dignifying, equalizing love of God is true.

But it's so uncomfortable. And it's so much easier not to. And so we don't.

We don't allow church fully become the faithfully counter-cultural community that it is called to be. And it's not just us.

Paul had so much to say about how to be church together because the earliest Christians struggled with it, too.

But the possibility is always before us, always available. We could live together so differently; we could be a community where:

If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. The kind of community that might very well offer healing to a cynical and hurting world. Indeed:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because the Lord has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. The Lord has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

May it be so.

Amen.

ⁱ Michael Arceneaux. I Can't Date Jesus: Love, Sex, Family, Race, and Other Reasons I've Put My Faith in Beyonce. Atria, 2018. Page 8.

ⁱⁱ G.K. Chesterton. What's Wrong With The World. 1910. Pagination unknown.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/january-27-epiphany-3c-luke-414-21>

^{iv} Benjamin Dueholm. Sacred Signposts: Words, Water, and Other Acts of Resistance. Eerdmans, 2018. Page 18-19.