



The Promise of Community



The Collect

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The First Reading *Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10*

All the people of Israel 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



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January 27th, 2019

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta

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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."

The Epistle *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.

Gospel *Luke 4:14-21*

Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about 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."



One of the more humbling stages on the odyssey of parenting is the day when you realize that your children no longer believe that you are a god. At the beginning, everything you do is a source of awe and wonder. No challenge is too great, such as driving a car, or successfully operating a remote control for the television, or navigating immensely taxing one-digit mathematical problems.

And then, as the glassy-eyed marvel of your offspring slowly transitions to the realization that all is not as it seems in the Emerald City, the curtain that had masked the great and powerful Oz begins to slip. *"If he has such apparent mastery behind a steering wheel, then why does he use such bad words when other drivers get too close?" "If she can change channels on the TV, then why is it so hard for her to understand how to operate my XBox?" "And why is it that now I am old enough to actually need help with my Math homework, that my parents tell me that it is better for me to 'work it out for myself'?"*



How hard it is to bear when our children realize that we are nothing more than taller versions of their own confused selves, when we can no longer mask the fact that we are not as wonderful as they had first imagined. There is nothing quite as bruising to the ego than the honesty of a child.

As much as this two-way exercise in the discovery of the self has always been with us in the development of the relationship between parent and child, our current era in time poses some peculiar challenges. For while it might be obvious that we are living in the most self-referential age in human history, we have little idea what this new reality will do over the next several decades, either to our sense of personal identity as individuals, or to our sense of identity as communities. What is clear, however, is that attitudes toward the self are changing rapidly. One study, quoted in David Brooks' recent book called *The Road to Character*, found that while in 1954 when psychologists asked 10,000 adolescents whether they considered themselves to be 'a very important person', only 12% said yes. By 1989, now some 30 years ago, the same question elicited a positive response from nearly 80%.



Similarly, when middle schoolers are asked how important it is to them that one day they might be famous, in 1976 they ranked fame 15th out of 16 life goals. By 2007, over half of middle schoolers named fame as one of their top life goals. My favorite study of all of these is the one that asks middle school girls who they would most like to have dinner with. Their answers were as follows: in first place was Jennifer Lopez, second, Jesus Christ, and third, Paris Hilton. On reading this, I wasn't sure whether to laugh or to cry, or perhaps to do both, in that order. At least Jesus didn't come in third.

In defense of these middle schoolers, reading our gospel this morning, it is easy to see how Jennifer Lopez and Paris Hilton might be mistaken for good dining partners for the Savior of the World, if being the center of attention is the qualifying criterion. Just consider the sequence of events we hear Luke describe. Jesus returns to Galilee, where he had been brought up. Reports about him spread throughout the surrounding country and soon enough everyone is singing his praises. And then, on returning to his hometown synagogue, most certainly with his family in tow, he reads



from the prophet Isaiah, with the eyes of all in the synagogue fixed upon him, saying: *'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'*. Next week, you'll hear how all of this went down with the folks back home. Suffice to say it involves a steep cliff and some unhappy congregants.

Taken in isolation, Jesus' announcement in the synagogue does look a lot like the culmination of a campaign of self-promotion. Yet herein lies the fundamental point of all of this: that Jesus' words here cannot be understood in isolation any more than his sense of self can, for Jesus' actions and identity only truly make sense when we can see them as part of something beyond himself alone. Indeed, put more strongly, in Jesus not only do we see a contrast in character to the self-obsessed narcissist who is so often the subject of our present day cultural fascination and desire, Jesus as the fully human divine person is the outright contradiction of such a self-contained life.



The first indicator that this might be is offered in where Jesus makes his declaration. Clearly, Jesus' presentation in the synagogue is not a speech, nor is it an imperial proclamation akin to the high and mighty voices of Rome. This is a Word spoken in the heart of community. Good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, the proclamation of the Lord's favor is all about community, about life together, a shared identity without which Jesus' own identity has no anchor to its Jewish heritage and his people's messianic hope that Isaiah's prophecy articulates.

Yet, there is more here merely than the fact that this is good news for community in general; it is good news for this Nazareth community in particular. As little as we know about Nazareth, we do have a sense that people did not think much of it. If you recall, in John's gospel when Philip tells Nathanael that he has found the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, Nathaniel offers the cutting reply, "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" Indeed, compared to its larger neighbor Sepphoris, Herod Antipas's cosmopolitan capital, Nazareth was low in the pecking order of towns in Galilee,



itself considered to be a backwater region in a backwater province of the mighty Roman Empire. Yet in Nazareth, among these people of whom nothing was expected, Isaiah's prophetic hope would be fulfilled.

The message here is not that Jesus has come back home to let them know how very marvelous their returning son has turned out to be. The message is far more spectacular, that God's salvation is breaking into human history, not among a far-off strong and respected people, but among them, the least, among the unnoticed, those most in need of favor from their God. And so, Jesus' proclamation shows us what the individual life is intended for: to live as a self poured out for the transformation of the lives of others, especially those whom the world considers the least.

We hear this other-oriented sense of the self articulated explicitly in the First Corinthians passage we read this morning, with words well-familiar to our own liturgical life, asserting that we, though many members, are one body. The theology of Corinthians declares that being made one in the Spirit means that the ways by which we might otherwise



differentiate ourselves from one another - Jew or Greek, slave or free - are in fact to be no barrier to our membership of the body. What's more, as a body, it is the seemingly less honorable, the less respected and apparently weaker members who are to be the honored, and the respected, the last who now shall be first.

The understanding of the self that a life in Christ might look like, then, is one that sees community as a way for us to live more truly as Christ. For you and I are made for community and it is this promise of community that enables us to move beyond merely a child-like fascination with the self, and our own apparent importance in the world, and into a space for being that has room for the centrifugal influences of others, the influences that take us out of ourselves at the center of life and into a more honest and life-giving place to dwell in the world.



Communities like ours have a very great deal to offer to the world around us in this age of the over-aggrandized self. In sacred community, people have the chance to learn how to empty the ego of its need for approval and recognition, and help one another see that to grow is to give oneself away, not only for the sake of self-discovery but the sake of the lives of others. In sacred community, we learn that we are not our own destination, but that our destination is always beyond who we are capable of becoming alone. In sacred community, you and I can learn how fundamentally we are loved by God, and intended to be people sent back out into the world to offer that simple, life-changing gift to others.

'Behold who you are, become what you receive', says Augustine. In this sacred community, constituted in Christ, the gift I am offered is that when I look to see who I am, I see Christ; and when I look to see Christ, I see each of you. May it be so for all who might wish to call this place home.