



The Gifts of the Community

1 Peter 4:1-11

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In the midst of everything else that's going on around us in the world right now, we are using this book, *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything*, by Rev. Michael Mather, to ask the question, "Why does the church exist?" What's our purpose, as those gifted by the Spirit and driven out into the world as the visible and tangible body of Christ? It's a question that has both an eternal and a temporal response.

In last Sunday's reading of Acts 2, recalling the story of Pentecost, the author Luke gives us this first glimpse of the work of the church at its most prescient moment. Having been filled with the Spirit, the creation of the church was witnessed as the disciples filed into the streets to proclaim God's good deeds of power and love to all people. In this way, the church is given an *eternal* mission – to proclaim, or to witness to, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, through which all humanity is deemed worthy of God's love, and offered salvation through God's power in the resurrection, which conquers death.

This eternal mission is defined in many ways, by both local churches and denominational entities. For example, the United Methodist Church at large has this overarching mission statement, which says our purpose is to "Make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." Here at Washington Street, we have defined this eternal mission by saying, "We believe God is love, and so we're making a place for everyone to know that love." These are large, grand mission statements, that from a 30,000 foot view, should define everything we do below.

These eternal mission statements are intentionally broad in spectrum. So, to help define our work as the church in the present moment, to answer, "why do we exist as the church **today**," we have to break that grand mission statement down into smaller chunks to help us define our temporal response. *Temporal* means momentary, or, relating to time. We need individual and focused work, that, in the here and the now, helps us in *Making a Place for Everyone*. Our temporal response might last a day, or a week, or a month, or even a couple of years. What is it that the church is being called to do today, that it may not be called to do tomorrow? What is needed in the community right now to make God's love known, that might not have been needed 20 years ago? What is our faithful response as a church in the here and now, not in the past, and not in the future?

For example, I think we can say, without hesitation, that according to God's grand plan – according to the divine vision of humanity, as we are all created in the image of God – one could say, at any point in time, that indeed All Lives Matter. And yet, in the temporal, right now,

in the world today, as we mourn the visible death of three black Americans over the past couple months, we need to voice the truth that *Black Lives Matter*. This is not a statement that needs caveats or addendums. This is a declarative statement in this moment. Black. Lives. Matter.

To clarify, when we are mourning or grieving the loss of a loved one – let's use a made up family member, good ole' Uncle Terry – when Uncle Terry dies, and we remember his life in worship, we do not stand up and declare that all uncles matter. Our focus in that moment is not on all of our uncles, or everyone's uncle who had died in the past. Our focus is on Uncle Terry, and so we pray for, and declare, Uncle Terry mattered. And yet, on All Saint's Day, when we ring the chime and call out the names of the saints, we are, at that time, remembering all of our past uncles. On All Saint's Day, all of our deceased uncles matter.

The temporal response is the invitation to acknowledge that in the here and now, in this moment of life, in June of 2020, in our community, in our state, in our nation, in our world – the church is called to respond in a way that it has never responded before, and perhaps (oh that God would grant this) might never be asked to respond again. This is the call of the church – that for us to live according to our eternal mission of *Making a Place for Everyone to know God's Love*, we must, in the here and the now, offer this response of declaring Black Lives Matter, and we must work to have this not be just words – but that this might be truth.

As we heard last week, words are usually insufficient. 1 John very pointedly made it clear that we are to love one another, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. How does one actively respond to our eternal mission in this moment of time? For this, we turn to Peter, who offers us some applicable words in this temporal moment.

In 1 Peter 4, Peter begins with an invitation to all who desire to follow Christ – for all who call themselves a part of the church, “Since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same intention, so as to live for the rest of your earthly life, no longer by human desires, but by the will of God.” This is not a weak invitation, in fact, it's quite strong. Peter is calling us to *arm* ourselves, as if we are preparing for a struggle. We have to be prepared for a fight, because what we're going to be fighting is all around us ... it's even in us.

Peter continues by giving some explanation of the fight we're up against, saying, “You've spent enough time living as the Gentiles, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry.” This list of sinful behaviors that Peter says defines the life of Gentiles – those who were outside the church at that time – focuses on issues of personal gratification. Licentiousness is a focus on unrestricted sexual fulfillment. Drunkenness, revels, and carousing offer an emphasis on material gratification. Passions is a general focus on personal satisfaction. And lawless idolatry focuses on the Gentile religious examples that look at idol gods as commodities.

And don't mistake Peter's words, this is not a concrete list. This is offered as a list of vices generally associated with idolatry in Jewish texts, but any act that allows for one's

overindulgence or self-gratification as the expense of the community or faithful living should be understood as being implicated in Peter's writing. The Gentile way of life was defined by these personal satisfactions, which declare in action, that as long as I am able to consume what I enjoy, what else matters?

Leaving this way of life – turning from this self-centered way of living – is hard for any Gentile to understand. Peter continues in verse 4, saying, the Gentiles – those you've left behind – “are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme.” People will be so shocked at your change of behavior when devoting yourself fully to Christ; your friends will be confused as to why you don't want to join them in prior gatherings; friends, and maybe even family, will be *so* stunned by your lack of engagement in overindulgence, that they will speak ill of God, for it is God who has called you to leave these things behind.

This is why Peter begins in verse 1 with the invitation to arm yourself, because not only will you be fighting the internal temptations, but the sinful world around you will not let you forget the self-satisfying way you *could* be living. “Our warfare is not against other flesh-and-blood humans, but against the powers of sin and death that seek to enslave us,”ⁱ offering us the constant invitation to a self-focusing over-indulging life of grandeur. This is, sadly enough, the misshapen invitation of the “American Dream.”

In 1931, in his book, *Epic of America*, historian James Truslow Adams coined this phrase, the “American Dream,” as he wrote, that America was “a dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.” Idyllic, sure. And yet, we know that America was not created in a way that provided a better, or richer, or fuller life for *everyone*. We know that at the time of Adam's publication, at the time the phrase “American Dream” was coined, some 150 years after the Declaration of Independence, redlining limited housing options, toll-taxes limited voting rights, and segregation limited education. America was not a land for everyone to get better, richer, and fuller, regardless of one's ability or achievement. This dream has not always been possible for *everyone*, as Adams so declared. It was, and has always been, a place that gave privilege toward achieving the American dream to those with white skin.

It is this white-centeredness that has always defined America as a place for some to have access to the American Dream, while limiting others, that – in this temporal time, in the here and the now – has Peter screaming at us. Peter would argue, without hesitation, it is time we put down our allegiance to a flag, or to a 244-year old experimental nation, and arm ourselves with the same invitation as Christ – for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin. And you can bet, by making this declaration, there will be some, as the Gentiles did before, who are not ok with such a change in your life. And yet, Peter says, it's still a necessary change for those who choose to live by the will of God.

Douglas Harink, a professor of Theology at The King's University College, sums up Peter's call to a new life quite aptly for our modern proclivities, writing, “Where the powers of our age name

and control the means and meanings of peace, justice, security, success, health, fulfillment, enjoyment, freedom, and so on, our refusal of those means and meanings sometimes sets us outside the bounds of the benefaction and protection of the powers and at odds with their aims. When we refuse to trade our messianic loyalty to the cross for the anthems and flags of the nations, suffering is nearby. When we refuse to assert our rights for justice and liberation in the face of domestic, social, and political inequities, suffering is nearby. When we refuse to entrust our economic well-being to “the wealth of nations” and “the invisible hand,” suffering is nearby.” Harink continues, “Peter does not have just any old suffering in mind here, but specifically that suffering that comes about because loyalty to Christ and his way comes in conflict with a world that rules him out.”ⁱⁱ

This is a hard shift, because for so many, doing as the Gentiles do doesn’t seem out of place. To leave behind these ways of living, we have to make the intentional effort to acknowledge them as the normative way of life that needs to change. Such sinful habits have become “just the way of life” for so many in the world today. Greed is normal. War is normal. Violence is normal. Sexual exploitation is normal. Acquiring and using weapons is normal. Execution of criminals is normal. ... this list goes on and on, and yet, all of them are called out in the Biblical text as the ways of life one must leave behind to follow Christ. So, even if the politicians around you are doing them, even if your neighbors are doing them, even if your family members are doing them, even if your workplace is doing them – as a follower of Christ, as a member of the church, you are called to a higher calling.

You are called to maintain love – a constant love for one another. You are called to speak only in ways to reflect the very words of God; you are called to serve as one who has been strengthened by God; you are called to do all things to ensure the glory of God. Our task as God’s people – our call as the church – is to witness among the world with our own lives – the way we talk, act, and engage – to proclaim God’s glory and God’s love for all people – for all of creation. It means taking the focus off of us, giving up those self-serving ways of life, and shifting our focus to the well-being of everyone in the community.

And what better way to focus on the well-being of everyone in the community, than to declare the wealth and worth of every person in the community, especially those whose worth has for so long been denied. Of declaring that everyone – all of humanity, as all are created in the image of God – are worthy of the better, richer, and fuller life we theoretically believe in as a nation? Only, as the church, our call isn’t to prop up any one person over another – our call isn’t to focus on ourselves, or even on our people – our call is to ensure the shalom of everyone. So, coming back to Michael Mather in our focus book, he poses this question, “How can we make it clear to others that those who are often thought of as empty can be recognized as people overflowing with gifts?”

The reason the American Dream is such a farce, is that America started with a vision that not all people were created equal – regardless what the Constitution says. We have wrongly believed in our nation’s history that skin color is determinative of capability. We’ve wrongly believed that gender is determinative of one’s ability. And yet, the church ... regardless of how often

we've failed to live in to our Creator's intent ... the church was created with the women proclaiming Christ's resurrection and the voice of God being praised in a variety of languages, such that all were welcomed into God's love. When the church saw iniquity – like the Gentiles being excluded – the church was led by the Spirit's presence to extend invitation and inclusion, and instructed to give up of our selfish ways so that mutual love might be extended to everyone.

So how can make it clear that those who are often thought of as empty – or incapable – or dependent – or unable might be recognized as people overflowing with gifts? How might we give voice to those who have so long been silenced. How might we identify the gifts of those who have for so long been told they are only good at receiving? How might we center the capabilities of those who have for too long been called incapable?

How might we, instead of propping ourselves up and overindulging in the self-centeredness of cultural expectations, engage in the community to offer a voice, and to offer space?

How might we offer worth, or offer grace?

How might we offer life and opportunity?

How might we praise God in the midst of community?

How might we declare that until everyone is heard, there is still work to be done?

How might we declare the image of God in everyone?

This work isn't about us, it's about the glory of God's way,

And though it's tempting, it's not enough to just pray.

We've got to get to work, because there's work to do.

And may we not stop, until that work is through,

When we no longer need to define whose life matters,

because in God's glory, we are all one body. Amen. And Amen.

ⁱ Douglas Harink. *1 & 2 Peter: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: BrazosPress, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Harink.