

January 8 All Are of Worth

Matthew 9:9-13

One thing is certain. Everyone has an opinion concerning the election of Donald Trump as president. Everywhere I have gone since the election people have been talking about it. His election, if it has done anything, has made it clear how polarized we are as a people. We really do not see or understand the other side. Even when we think we are in the middle we find ourselves surprised at some of what both sides are saying. Probably since just before the civil war, we have not been so divided as a nation.

Most of you can probably guess, from listening to my sermons, that I tend to come down on the liberal side of things. So I was appalled and fearful about the future when Donald Trump was elected. Imagine my surprise when I read this just a few days later. A woman wrote, "I can put my children to bed tonight without fear for the first time in years because Mr. Trump is going to be president." That statement was so far from my frame of reference that it got me reading more from conservative writers. I wanted to understand the great fears so many had that helped propel Trump into the presidency. I came to understand very quickly that most were not voting for him as much as they were voting against progressive policies. The eight years under President Obama was seen as a time when government had taken away their rights as parents to raise their children with certain values, that forced them to accept lifestyles that they were not comfortable with, and to make accommodations for migrants instead of the other way around. They were fearful about what another four years of such policies would do to their core values. When progressives now talk about their fears for the future conservatives can, without malice say, "Welcome to the reality I had to deal with for all these years." We are a divided people.

The internet and social media now allows us to mostly get news and information that conforms to our preconceived opinions. It makes a difference whether you listen to Glenn Beck or Rachel Maddow as to what you think is news. We are not challenged to hear the other side. This has led to the polarization of our population where neither side really understands the other. How do we break down these divisive walls? I hope we are all in agreement that we need to figure out a way to work together, to value one another and see all people as being of worth.

I look to the actions of Jesus to begin to see how to deal with divisive issues. When Jesus encounters Matthew the prevailing wisdom was: here was a tax collector. Tax collectors were assumed to be notorious sinners and collaborators so different from the rest of the people living in Israel. The gap was assumed to be even greater than the one we think exists between tea party republicans and mainline democrats! Jesus, when he saw Matthew, did not see a label, he saw a person and even more he knew that here was one who would make a great disciple. So the call went out from Jesus to Matthew, as he had done earlier to the fishermen, to leave everything and follow. Matthew did just that and became a part of the group surrounding Jesus.

I hear Jesus telling us through this decision that we need to see all people as of worth. Think about how hard this decision to invite Matthew would have been for the other disciples to process. Now they were going to be forced to live daily with a former tax collector. At least one of the disciples was called a Zealot and this was an extremist group that pledged to do everything possible to rid themselves of Roman domination up to and including assassinations. The group that came in for the bitterest rhetoric from the Zealots was; you guessed it, tax collectors because they helped the Romans to oppress the people by collecting those hated taxes. Yes it would have been hard to have Matthew join the group. As hard as it would be to host a luncheon with a tea party republican and a Bernie Saunders democrat present and, just to make it interesting, lets add in an independent libertarian. Yet somehow the disciples overcame their initial reactions. Matthew became a beloved brother in Christ and they worked together and ultimately supported one another.

Jesus was continually trying to get his disciples to see beyond labels to the person. We see scenes being acted out throughout his ministry that challenged the normal expectations of groups. A woman was brought to him for committing adultery. She was supposed to be stoned, Jesus offers her forgiveness. Jesus stops at a well in Samaria and has a conversation with a woman. The disciples return and see a woman and a Samaritan, while Jesus saw a hurting soul. Zacchaeus, another tax collector, is found in a tree, the source of jokes by others. Jesus invites himself to his house because he sees a lonely man in need of grace. Jesus reaches out to lepers, to Roman Centurions, demoniacs and the list goes on.

These actions seem to be telling us that we need to get to know those who see life differently than we do. We need to see every person as a person of worth. We should imprint upon our minds, “No more labels!” This is hard to do when both sides have become really skilled at labeling and vilifying the other. Both sides need to stop the divisive “us them” rhetoric. We may not be able to do anything about what comes our way from news sources or from the highest levels of the political spectrum but we do have control over our actions. We need to stand against actions that perpetuate the divide.

Whenever we hear “All those....” (and you can fill in the blanks) we need to stop the person and say we are not comfortable turning groups of individuals into categories. It is no more fair today than it was in Jesus’ time. People called Matthew a tax collector but we celebrate him as a beloved disciple who used his learning to help bring us the Gospel that bears his name. We have to see the good in all people, to celebrate what gifts they have to offer. This can only happen when we quit using labels. It is hard, but doable.

I think about a young child that wanted to invite her new friend over for a play date. It was arranged and her mom was surprised, when she went to pick up her daughter and friend after school, that the friend was black. They were white. The kids had a great time together. Later she asked her 8 year old daughter why she had not mentioned that her friend was black. She said, “I didn’t think it was important.” That got mom to thinking and mom realized that she was right. Mom saw a category, she saw a friend. So be strong and stand up and against labeling, wherever it comes and wherever it is directed. It is wrong because no group is homogenous.

And we need to celebrate what unites us instead of focusing on what divide us. There is always much to celebrate. I got thinking about what is there to lift up that is positive at this time. Here are a few things I am celebrating.

We will soon be experiencing again as a nation the peaceful transition of power from one group to another. We forget at times what a remarkable thing this is. For those who voted for Donald Trump this is a moment of rejoicing and excitement. For those who did not, it is a time to organize and see about changing things in the midterm elections and

especially four years from now. This willingness to strive to change through the ballot instead of bullets is something to celebrate.

I am also celebrating that we live in a robust democracy where we can criticize our leaders. There has been much name calling and vilifying of the press, but only when people have a voice are we healthy. We might strive to ignore things we do not want to hear. We might be angry that some people print or say the things they do. But ultimately we need to celebrate that we live where such a healthy and lively conversation, debate, can take place. During the election cycle when the news was pretty disparaging of both political candidates I recall a note from a friend in Australia. She was surprised that both candidates were even being considered but even more so that they were being slammed in the press. She said, "We would never do such a thing here." She saw that as a good thing while I celebrate a snarky press. I hope it continues as strongly now as it has been for the past eight years at least.

I also celebrate all the good that people do. One of the special things about the Christmas season is how many stories you hear about kind, generous and loving actions by people and groups. It does remind us that we have a good heart, that we are a good people. It is something to hold onto instead of the negative chatter we so often hear.

Finally I am celebrating how faith groups are already stepping up to help because of the perception that the federal government will be reducing support for many marginalized people in the upcoming administration. Instead of just wringing their hands and complaining they have already begun to do more as a witness and testament to our faith.

If a Zealot and a tax collector could learn to get along, we can find ways to come back together. We need to value all people, listen with openness to what others are sharing, see the good in all, work on things that unite us, and stand up when we hear labels and an unconcern for the marginalized. If we do this we will be a stronger and better people as well as grow as people of faith.