

10-31-21
Pentecost 23
Reformation
Romans 3:19-28

No Distinction!

Our country, like most others, has seen several attempts at creating what we sometimes call Utopian communities, places where everything is like it's supposed to be, places where everyone plays on a level playing field, places where there are no distinctions between the haves and the have nots, those who matter and those who don't.

One of those communities is not far from where Deanna's folks live, up where the Frozen North begins. New Harmony, Indiana looks pretty much like any other small, Midwestern town these days. Homes, churches, schools, grocery stores and all the other things that support life in a very small town. But New Harmony started out as something much different. In the early 1800's, a group of Lutherans set out toward the Midwest from Pennsylvania in search of a place where they could live the life they envisioned. They settled along the Wabash River which divides Indiana and Illinois and created a place where everyone was valued, and opportunity was available to all. They established schools that both boys and girls attended. They created a library open to everyone. They set out to create a place where all could work and thrive. It didn't take long, however, for reality to set in. Some of the newcomers who arrived were not as interested in hard work and education as others were. The experiment in communal living ended when its founders decided to go back home to Pennsylvania. Like similar efforts at Brook Farm in Massachusetts, Oneida in New York, the Shakers in Kentucky and, even many years later, communities like the one Jim Jones founded in Indianapolis and moved to South America, all these experiments were well-intentioned in the beginning.

They tried to make a place where everyone could thrive, where everyone could find peace and prosperity, where there was no distinction among the people who lived there.

In a broad sense, that was a principle on which this whole nation was founded. Whether people came here seeking religious freedom, freedom from rigid social systems that determined more of people's futures than hard work and determination did, or simply greater financial opportunity, this was the Land of Opportunity, the place where Abraham Lincoln, who grew up with none of the advantages of the Washingtons or the Jeffersons or the Adamses, could become the President of these United States.

I'm not ready to say that experiment has failed, but we are all aware of the many bumps in the road we've experienced as we've tried to keep it going. We strive to believe that all of us are created equal, but we need only stroll around our own community to see how that equality has turned out for too many. We strive for liberty and justice for all, but that's a lot easier to stand and recite than it is to accomplish. Some by their own failure to seize opportunity and some through no fault of their own have failed to thrive and live with little that is hopeful. Whatever efforts we have made to adjust the intentions of this grand experiment may have helped for a while, but, for the most part, we do not all experience the same opportunities and certainly not the same outcomes.

Way back when I was in elementary school, we had three reading groups: the red birds, the blue birds, and the yellow birds. Mrs. Beatley, my first grade teacher, never told us that the red birds were the best readers and that the yellow birds struggled, but we figured that out by the end of the first week of school. When she called the red birds up to the front of the room we read out of one book. When she called the yellow birds up there, they had another book altogether, and we worked on other things while it took them a long time to read through their lesson. For those first few years, we took recess together, and mostly played games and had fun. By the time we were a few grades further along, those who were better at those games were

obvious, and those of us who were not natural athletes found other ways to spend our recess time. There were no New Harmony-style teachers and coaches who took the non-jocks and turned them into little Michael Jordans or budding Drew Breeses. I don't remember anyone from the Yellow Birds reading group ever advancing up to the Red Birds. All our efforts at equality sounded good in theory, but in reality, those who excelled did well, and those who didn't didn't.

We've gotten a lot more egalitarian in our approach to most things since then, but we really haven't changed much. Neighborhoods differ in most people's minds, and we all know which ones are more important. The right schools. For some, even going to the right Church is a matter of preference much more than of theology or heritage. Whether we like it or not, there is a lot of distinction between us.

So what are we to make of Paul's words in Romans today? Writing to the Romans, Paul insists that there is no distinction between us, that we all stand as equals before God.

On this Reformation Sunday, this truth demands to be heard down through the ages. Reformation Sunday is a time for us to remember people like Luther and Calvin not because they gave the Catholics what for, but because they acted on their convictions in an effort to bring the life and work of the Church in line with Scripture. Today is not a day for us to bash our friends up the street at St. Al's, but it is a time for all of us to carefully examine the life we live both in and out of the Church as it compares to the life to which Scripture calls us.

A careful reading of Paul's letter confronts us with the truth that we do, indeed, all stand as equals before God. But what unites us in that standing is our sin. There is, as Paul insists, no distinction between us because we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. This may not be the equality we strive for, but it is the equality we experience. It doesn't matter whether we are red birds or blue birds, whether we play for the varsity in eighth grade or we're still the last one chosen when they choose up teams in the rec league. It doesn't matter if we have our name

on the door or we're the one who polishes that plaque. When we stand before God, we stand as equals, equals who have failed to measure up to what God requires. Equals who cannot right what is wrong by our own effort.

But the difference between Scripture's understanding of no distinction and the way we experience it in other areas of our life is powerful beyond our understanding. Yes, we all stand before God as sinners, powerless to correct what is wrong. But we also stand to receive the same offer of redemption and hope from God. Whoever we are, whatever we have done or left undone, it is the grace of God and that grace alone that gives us hope and a future. That grace is not apportioned based on ability. The red birds don't get to it first and the yellow birds get what's left. The starters don't get a full measure of it, and the scrubs settle for what's left. Those who can afford it don't get any more of it than those of us who can offer little return. Grace comes at a price, but God has already paid it in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, our Savior. The grace of God is, first and foremost, the answer to what ails us, but equally, if not more, important, the grace of God is available to all who will receive it and God will continue to offer this matchless gift and all its benefits regardless of how many times and how many ways we try to reject it.

This is the faith and the gift we celebrate on this day to remember where we come from and to consider where we are going. People like Calvin and Luther and Zwingli looked at the Church they knew and envisioned the Church God was calling into being. Some of their Reforms were extreme. Some of them we still hold to. Others we have rejected. But the reason we celebrate them and the movement they began is because they rejected a system in which some thrived and some struggled, some found peace and some searched for it all their lives.

Much that caused the Reformers to take bold stands makes little sense to us. The sale of indulgences was a primary issue that made people like Luther speak out. Next Sunday we will celebrate another big occasion in the life of the Church. All

Saints. We will remember and give thanks for those in our church family and those in the community beyond this one who have died since we celebrated this day a year ago. Many of us have remembered these we knew and loved, these with whom we worshiped and served in a variety of ways. Some of us have made memorial gifts to the Church so that their faithfulness here will not be forgotten. But we don't think that our gifts made their journey to Heaven any quicker or smoother. All those we will remember next week and all those who have gone before them live with God by God's grace, not because our gifts made God pay more attention to them. That kind of giving to ensure a place in the afterlife makes no sense at all to a bunch of Protestants like us. It sounds a lot like the way the world beyond these walls sometimes works, but we refuse to believe that God's love can be bought and sold like college admissions or promotions at work. That was exactly how things worked before people like Luther took a stand. And what prompted Luther and Calvin and everyone else who has ever spoken the truth to power in the Church was careful reading of Scripture. Luther was not just someone who appeared at the door of the Church in Wittenberg. He was a priest and a scholar, a man of deep and abiding faith, a man who saw one thing going on around him and another thing altogether called for by Scripture. And so he spoke. And he continued to speak until someone heard.

We are here today because we heard that same truth. That there really is no distinction between us when we stand before God. That we all stand as sinners in need of redemption, redemption that comes only by the grace of God, made known most clearly to us in the faithful life and witness and the glorious Resurrection of Jesus the Christ. There is no distinction among those who receive that grace. It is freely available to all who will call upon it.

No distinction. Beyond these walls, that still sounds like a foolish dream to many. But for those of us who carry what we find within these walls beyond them, it is not foolish; it is our hope and our salvation. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

God whose grace called the Reformers to action, we hear your call to us again today. We have wandered so far from your intentions for us and have turned away from your commandments. Violence scars our communities, division identifies us rather than unity, suspicions about motives make it difficult for us to trust one another. Greed calls for all our energies. So we ask that you give us peace, hope, love, and courage to replace these things and show us ways to be the people you created us to be. Our nation and the nations of the world need you, O God. Systems that were created to protect and defend us now divide us and push us into competing corners even though we hear you call us to love one another and to do good even to those who despise us. Remind us, O God, and empower us to be people of hope and reconciliation, people who stand for what is right, for justice, and for peace. The Church needs you, O God. We don't know your Word well enough to allow it to guide our own lives, let alone to share and teach it to others. We fail to read your Word enough so that we can turn to its most precious parts when we need its guidance. Give us a hunger for your Word and its truth, Lord. Then satisfy that hunger as we gather to worship and to learn and grow together. Remind us, O God, that you hold all the things we need and that you desire to share them with us. Then send us out to be your Church in the world all the time, everywhere. As we feed people here in our community, we respond to your call. As we support those who serve you in places we may never go, we respond to the same call. As we give of ourselves to help others find peace, it is that same call that guides us. We all need you, Good Lord. Help us to believe the Good News that you are available to us in our need. We pray in the assurance that you hear our prayers and answer them. You continue to call us to draw near to you and to find you drawing near to us. Help us to draw nearer to you even when it reveals things we need to correct. Hear us now, as we pray as Jesus taught us to pray when he said: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.