

Homily – Together in 2022

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Today before we conclude this worship service we will have our annual business meeting. This meeting is an opportunity for us to examine the past year and an occasion for us to day dream about where we are going as a church in 2022. It is important for us to know where we have been so that we can chart a course that I pray is led by the Holy Spirit. Come Holy Spirit, Come.

I have said it before, and I will say it again, I think part of the work that we have to do as a church is to make space for those who are not already here. About ten years ago I went through some pretty intense training about how to lead a church, and one of the things that I learned was what makes a church relevant or irrelevant to the community around it. A church starts to become irrelevant when it no longer matches the demographics of its community. This may be age demographics or ethnic demographics, but a church stays relevant when it continues to shift and morph so that it matches the community around it. So for me, it begs the question, who is not yet together with us here at St. Barnabas?

In a roundabout way Jesus makes this same point in this morning's Gospel reading. Let me unpack the passage so that you can see what Jesus is saying. The beginning sentence was last week's concluding sentence. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." You may recall that last week I used that sentence as a leaping off point to remind us to live in the present, knowing that today is holy. Two thousand years ago, when Jesus spoke these words, those present that day "all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from Jesus' mouth." And then Jesus says some things that made the people grumpy. In fact it made them angry and "all in the synagogue were so filled with rage" that they went to throw him off the cliff. What had Jesus done to elicit this change? Jesus had retold two stories about Israel's greatest prophets, Elijah and Elisha. Both lived about 900 years before Jesus and about one hundred years after King David. The two prophets had many thing in common as they served God, and Jesus reminds the people of one of the common elements. Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon, and with Elisha none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. The common element with both the widow at Zarephath and Naaman is that they were both Gentiles. They were not Jews. Jesus reminds the people in the synagogue that day that they were not the ones to be blessed. It is others who will get the blessing. And just like the people of every generation, there is rage when others get something good and we don't. Or, more specifically the people were filled with envy and resentment at the words of Jesus.

According to Brené Brown's book "Atlas of the Heart" envy occurs when we want something that another person has. This is distinct from jealousy. Jealousy is when we fear losing a relationship or a valued part of a relationship we already have. Envy typically involves two people and occurs when one lacks some things enjoyed by another. The target of envy may be a person or a group of persons. Jealousy typically involves three people and occurs when one fears losing someone to another person. Envy and jealousy result from different situations, and produce distinctive emotional experiences. Envy also has another dynamic when it comes with hostility. Hostile envy is when I want something, and I don't want you to have it. I also want you to be pulled down and put down. So, there are two levels of envy, and this means we get to say "I'm envious but not the bad kind of envy." Envy and jealousy are two emotions that may arise when we compare ourselves to others.

A third emotion of comparison is resentment. Some might think resentment is part of the anger family, but it is actually part of the envy family. Resentment is the feeling of frustration, judgment, or hidden envy related to perceived unfairness or injustice. It's an emotion that we often experience when we fail to set boundaries or ask for what we need, or when expectations let us down because they were based on things we can't control, like what other people think, what they feel, or how they are going to react. You can recognize when you are going down the path of resentment when you are rehearsing a mean or critical thing to say to another person.

And here is a fourth emotion that may arise when we compare ourselves to others. Schadenfreude is a compound of the German word schaden, meaning harm, and freude, meaning joy. Today the world is full of schadenfreude, or the pleasure or joy derived from someone else's suffering of misfortune. I actually have friend who is a philosophy professor at the University of Virginia who wrote an entire book about this complicated feeling. It is a tough emotion. There is cruelty and insecurity in it. Taking pleasure in someone else's ills, even if that person is someone we really dislike, can violate our values and lead to feelings of guilt and shame. But make no mistake, it's seductive, especially when we're sucked into group think.

It's easy to build counterfeit connection with collective schadenfreude. I say counterfeit because when we see someone who we don't like, we disagree with, or is outside our group stumble, fall, or fail, it's tempting to celebrate that suffering together and to stir up collective emotion. That kind of bonding might feel good for a moment, but nothing that celebrates the humiliation or pain of another person builds lasting connection. Schadenfreude involves counter-empathy since our emotional reaction is incongruent with another person's emotional experience.

Now, I think it's important to point out, especially in this political and social climate, that when we feel relieved, grateful, or even happy that someone who has done

something hurtful, unethical, or unjust, when that person is held accountable, that is not schadenfreude and normally doesn't stem from counter-empathy. On the contrary, it can stem from empathy for the aggrieved. When we are relieved or happy to see someone held accountable for wrongdoing, we're not automatically celebrating their suffering, but more often we're grateful for the healing that accountability brings to those who have been affected by the wrongdoing.

And, on a positive note, as I was researching emotions for this sermon, I learned from Brené Brown's book about freudenfreude. This is another German-originated word which means enjoyment at another's success and it is a subset of empathy.

So, we have four words for the emotions that may have arisen two thousand year ago when Jesus' listeners compared themselves to the Gentiles, envy, jealousy, resentment, and schadenfreude. And, I am going to narrow it down to envy and the related emotion of resentment. These negative emotions were not just directed at two individuals who were blessed by Elijah and Elisha. Instead the envy and resentment were directed at all Gentiles. The people in the synagogue that day were so filled with envy and resentment that they wanted to throw Jesus off the cliff, "but he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

Now, there are times when we all feel envy and resentment. One might even say it is human nature to separate ourselves into insiders and outsiders. We divide into families, clans, communities, nations, and football teams. Are we all confident that the Forty-niners are going to crush the Rams this afternoon? Be that as it may, envy and resentment run rampant when we divide ourselves and envy and resentment are diminished when we connect ourselves. We were made by God to be connected in divine union with God, others, and the rest of non-human creation. Mystics and sages have always focused on the oneness that we all have. Mystical experience allows you to enjoy your own life and to stop creating enemies, people to fear, and nations you have to punish and kill. When you're enjoying deep union, you don't need to create divisions, mistrust, and separation. Conspiracy theories and tabloid gossip hold little interest for you. And, once you have one sincere moment of divine union, you will want to spend your time on the one thing necessary, which is to grow deeper and deeper in love every chance that you get. You can either discover divine union now or wait until later. You could be a lot happier and make a lot of other people happier if you would discover it now. It may not seem like it will make a difference. It is easy in these times to see the world as evil, angry, selfish, and violent—so much hate. But those are the loud voices. The quiet voices go softly about the world doing good whenever and where ever they can. They are the Christ light in the world. Remember, many small candles can light up the darkness.

Here at St. Barnabas my prayer in 2022 is that we add in our candles, so that we are the light of Christ in the world. I pray that we look around and treasure those who are here, whether in the room, or online. And, I pray that we make space for those who are not yet with us. We are all connected through Christ, and everyone is of value.

We have a good way of being the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement. We have a spirituality that is focused on love, love of God, love of others, love of self, and love of the rest of nonhuman creation. We have a vestry or governing board in which more than half the people were not here at St. Barnabas six years ago. We embrace social justice and the actions we need to take to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus here in the South County. We work to let go of envy, resentment, and fear, and the things that separate us. And, we have forged a way through Covid and whatever is to come 2022.

I end today with a prayer written by the Thomas Merton scholar, James Finley, a prayer that I will call Together in 2022.

May each of us be so fortunate as to be overtaken by God in the midst of little things. May we each be so blessed as to be finished off by God, swooping down from above or welling up from beneath, to extinguish the illusion of separateness that perpetuates our fears. May we, in having our illusory, separate self slain by God, be born into a new and true awareness of who we really are, one with God forever. May we forgive, and let go of any envy, resentment or fear. May we continue on in this true awareness, seeing in each and every little thing, the fullness of God's presence in our lives. May we also be someone in whose presence others are better able to recognize God's presence in their lives, so that they, too, may know the freedom of the children of God.