



September 9, 2018

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 8; Romans 12:3-21

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Dignity in Community

In two events bracketing this past summer, dignity was on display.

Megan Markle paraded down the aisle in simple flowing gown, surrounded by celebrities in full royal ceremony. A generation after bitter conflict and tragedy defined a most famous regimented family, each composed, determined, elegant, smiling, stately step broke boundaries in society proclaiming all people as worthy as nobility. A mixed-race American. Extraordinarily common upbringing. Brokenness in her own family. Previously married. Many characteristics deemed so unacceptable just decades ago. And Michael Curry, the American preacher Megan and Harry chose, urged an ethic of Divine Love to radiate far beyond that moment of pomp and even their personal lives alone. To define goodness and shape fullness of life for all people in society, a cause to which Harry and Megan prove so committed. Dignity in royalty and all of us alike.

John McCain lay in state for days as celebrities and common people paraded past with honor and respect. Bi-partisan speakers—Biden, Graham, Bush, Obama, Kissenger, Lieberman, and his daughter Meghan raised up the character of his life. Courage, decency, honesty. Valuing people and relationships above parties or positions. Service together beyond self. And consistently, speakers repeated variations on a theme: his “insistence on God-given dignity of every human being,” even “forgotten people and forgotten places.” He embodied “enduring human aspirations, as an advocate for the oppressed, as a defender of peace.” He affirmed

political “opponents were also patriots and human beings.... He respected the dignity inherent in every life, a dignity that does not stop at borders and cannot be erased by dictators.” “What greater cause could we hope to serve than helping keep America a strong, aspiring, inspirational beacon of liberty ... and defender of the dignity of all human beings.” He was (and we all are) ultimately not defined by titles or roles, but by love arising from a deep well of moral principle.

In time between a royal wedding and a hero’s funerals, and as summer transitions into autumn, of course, ordinary life goes on for all of us. Children and educators go back to school. Sports, marching band, theatre, so many activities begin again. Fields and orchards abound with a harvest to nourish taste buds and basic needs. Life flourishes in so many ways—in us, around us, through us, all ever in God’s grace.

Flourishing. You know how familiar words occasionally strike us anew? As I’ve read, heard lectures, reflected and planned church life in recent months, that word caught me as an expression of what God wants for all humans and creation. That’s the Bible’s vision from a lush garden in opening stories of Genesis, to that garden restored, entwined with city life, in final verses of Revelation. Flourishing. Hebrews long for it on the Exodus. Prophets protest when all people don’t share it. Jesus embodies that vision in all he says and does intimately with folks like you and me or facing leaders in powerful positions when necessary.

An early church leader, Irenaeus, wrote: the glory of God is a human being fully alive. I’d extend it to all creation fully alive. What helps make a particular person, an organization, our community, nation, all creation flourish, fully alive? As we begin our church year again, we’ll raise up in worship moral characteristics, ethical guides for living faith, as we encourage all life to flourish the way God wants. It all begins with dignity.

Psalm 8 envisions human life within symbiotic beauty and harmony with all creation. From the splendor in telescopic pictures of gas clouds, star clusters and distant galaxies ancient peoples couldn't even imagine to the coos and cries of infants cradled under loving parental gaze, some baptized right here next week. Psalm 8 praises life as grateful response to God's gracious life-giving power. An individual voice sings with others—like John reading and then the choir following in beautiful harmony—because we come to know and claim who we are in ever wider radiuses of relationship. We know, of course, that relationships in our families, work, or wider society aren't always praiseworthy. We are not always respectful and loving. We can be mean, petty, acting out fearful defensiveness and harmful self-interest. Beyond what we see for better and worse in all of us humans, we need a deeper source of hope.

Tradition imagines David wrote this psalm. He knew treating people without dignity hurts and alienates, separates loved ones, fractures community. Amid the dazzling universe far beyond our comprehension and control, who are we humans? Friends, Psalm 8 declares we all have dignity. Not because we earn it or prove to be worthy. Simply because God cares for us. And unceasing Sacred Grace extends to all people. No exceptions. No exclusions. No limits to how we care that way too. God calls us to share creative purpose—crowned with glory, fully alive, honored as heavenly beings. We act as divine deputies—hearts and minds channeling life-giving power to help all beasts and birds, frogs, insects and plankton flourish. That's our truest character.

Isn't that what's so beautiful each time we come to the font with an infant or adult? Isn't that what we're so blessed to discover at memorial services, to glimpse in another life and feel inspired in our own? Isn't that what we want whenever some issue arises, and we try to listen, empower every voice, hear every story, as much as

possible, knowing that beyond always agreeing, we all want to be valued? Isn't that why we come here so many other times throughout the week? To teach and tutor and study together, to wash dishes or bake cookies, answer phones or sing with friends or meet with committees, realizing over and over as we are welcomed and welcome others and work together ... our truest character as God's beloved and gifted child.

You see, dignity comes with responsibility. No one exists alone. Divine goodness in each person gets known, defined, fulfilled in community. So many personalities. So many special abilities. Everyone has something to offer. *Everyone* ... of any age or ability, any mental, emotional, physical or financial state ... with meaning arising in the contributions we make. Together we embody the Risen Christ, Paul says—Jesus' presence, holy purpose, loving power. Then Paul soars into what that looks like. Such confident security in grace that humility chases away all ego. Mutual affection and generosity in spirit. Weeping and rejoicing. Offering hospitality to strangers. Mixing with lofty and lowly alike. Living peaceably in the face of persecution and harm done. Ultimately overcoming any evil with good.

Early Christians had to define who they were and how to live faith amidst conflicting values of society and culture. Friends, how can we like ancient Romans be inspired, guided, so dignified amid daily realities we face? Teachers and administrators with children in their care. Owners, managers, and workers in business ventures they share. A loved one facing serious illness, and health care for all people. Persons without a home surviving so near our doors, and church staff and city leaders seeking immediate care and long-term solutions. Myriad ways we serve to reflect Christ's light, and a shadow of scandals in our wider church. Political leaders, pro athletes. Colleagues, neighbors, humans whose names we don't know with whom we're interlaced in all places and circumstances. The earth itself with all plants, creatures, and resources.

Maybe you heard this week about the poached slaughter of 96 elephants in Botswana with no dignity, left to rot, all except their ivory tusks. Such a contrast to Native American spirituality that revered buffalo and all creatures slain to supply their needs. Respect and gratitude propelled them to use every part of an animal for some purpose, nothing gone waste.

Dignity. The way I see it, here's a glimpse of how it guides life in our church. Each year we give new Bibles to children. This year Pat and Chrissy found a new picture and simple story Bible for young children that balances stories about men and women. Characters get depicted in a broad range of races, abilities and other expressions of life experience. So that as many as people as possible can find themselves reflected in the pages they read. Valued, honored, celebrated, dignified.

And here's a glimpse of how dignity guides our service in our community. For months church staff and Session members have explored possibilities after being asked to host two Head Start classrooms. All of us want to support children and families who'd benefit. Respecting staff we considered cleaning routines or extraneous business. Honoring other members and groups, we thought through shared use of space or parking or traffic flow. Stewarding the rest of our life together, we tried to estimate financial impact, and attorneys among us spent many hours clarifying and cleaning up paperwork. In the end, we are pleased pre-school children will begin arriving tomorrow morning. Surely it won't be perfect. Still we've valued staff, educators, other members, especially caring for children and families, helping them flourish as God desires.

The world belongs to God—the earth and all people. In this season and beyond, dear friends, we flourish by upholding divine dignity for all. It's what each of us is due. And it's what we do together. Like here at this table. See who gathers. Hear the

stories. Bring all joy and sadness. In bread and cup all our lives are blest. Come, share the feast that frees us to reach beyond our stone walls to heal and serve, to teach and live in community with all friends and strangers who bear the image of God's face. All are welcome! All are welcome in this place and everywhere in God's grace!

Thanks be to God. Amen.