

## **The Faith Required for Unity**

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

Psalm 19

Recently I found a documentary series on Netflix called 100 Humans. The producers took 100 random people across the United States, old and young, different levels of education and life experience, every kind of physical body, and they did experiments with them trying to better understand human behavior.

One experiment sought to determine if people respond better to praise or to criticism. Is it more motivational for people to receive affirmation or to avoid disapproval? They did this by teaching the people how to spin plates on a pole. They brought in an instructor, and everyone learned the technique and was given time to practice. Then they performed and were judged one at a time. Each human was numbered, and the judge was given a random list of those he should praise versus criticize. Ironically, and painfully, it turned out that the people he had to praise were almost always the worst and the ones he had to criticize were surprisingly good. After the first session, the humans were given more time to practice before being judged again. Interestingly, the people who were really good at spinning plates the first time, but were told they didn't do well, ended up performing worse after having additional time to practice. And the ones who were terrible to begin with, but told they were good, excelled in their second attempt. It was wild! The behavior specialists who spoke about the experiment afterwards noted the way our minds limit us based on what we think is possible. As social creatures, we play a significant role in the success and failure of those around us based on the way we treat each other. When we appreciate others, we increase their ability to excel.

Shame is a formidable force, and it is very human. Shame makes us want to hide from ourselves, from one another, and even from God. But God is the healer, the reconciler.

Since the beginning, in the Garden, humans have been suffering the results of shame both personally and corporately. We hide, but God is always reaching towards us.

Today's story from Nehemiah makes this point well. The people had returned from exile. They had rebuilt the walls of the city and were seeking to reestablish their connection with God. But they had not lived according to the Law in a long time. It hadn't been possible during captivity or while trying to protect their land and they hadn't yet rebuilt a place of worship. Having Ezra read the Law to them, while satisfying their desire to center God in their lives once more, highlighted their failure at upholding God's commands. Their shame threatened to cripple them. They had wanted to be reminded of God's Word. But when faced with their failure to obey God, their shame paralyzed those efforts.

Instead of rebuking the people for their failures, Ezra told them to celebrate. He defined the day as holy. In religious history, even in ancient Israel, holy has typically meant somber. But Ezra meant it as we would understand "holiday", festive, joyful, celebratory. Ezra understood the heart of God. God wants relationship, joy found in union, not our shame. Excessive penance can create distance. Ezra told the people to enjoy God's pleasure over their meager efforts, to eat the fattiest food, and drink the sweetest wine. Then, instead of shaming those who were unprepared to participate in the "holy" day, he instructed everyone to share so no one would be left out. God wasn't as concerned with their perfect obedience to the Law as with their joy with one another at their return to God. If they would listen together, not shame themselves or each other, God would speak to them and unite them under God's protection and love. That is something to celebrate!

When the Psalmist speaks about God's Law, he shares the same joy as Ezra. Rather than shaking a finger at people who didn't uphold it, the Psalm highlights its beauty. It starts out painting a picture of the protection and provision God's spoken word is for the earth and

then explains how that voice, translated into The Law saves us all. This Psalm says God's Law revives the soul, it lightens the eyes, it's more valuable than gold, sweeter than honey, and offers a great reward. The natural world, highlighted in this Psalm, speaks to God's freely given riches. God reaches towards us liberally through nature, even when we fail at upholding the Law. God loves us, the law is a gift, our inability to see it doesn't diminish it.

When Jesus stood in the synagogue to read for the people, their adherence to the Law had been perfected. Unlike Nehemiah's people who had lost much of their knowledge, understanding, and practice of their faith, the religious life in first century Israel was structured, clear, and consistent. They obeyed the law and waited in expectation of their Messiah. So, when Jesus read this passage from Isaiah, indicating that he was the fulfilment of that hope, the people were seriously confused. They saw themselves in relation to Roman governance as the poor, the captive, and the oppressed. Jesus, one of their peers, could not be the Messiah because they were looking for someone powerful. They needed a military leader or political giant, to rescue them. A fellow weak, oppressed, member of their own kind could not do for them what they wanted. Jesus positioned them, members of the middle, working class, on equal footing with the one who was claiming to be their Savior. This moment upended the way they saw themselves in relation to others, to the powerful, also to the needy, the prisoners, the infirm, and oppressed. It empowered them to collaborate as fellow agents of help with God to this world.

The message of the gospel can so easily be lost. As Christians, we feel comfortable with the teachings of our faith. It's easy to forget that the comfort we feel with our faith is the same comfort these people had with theirs. It can be difficult to hear such familiar stories with new ears. But I'm not sure, if Jesus stepped back into our midst, that the message he would have for us would feel different for us than it did to the first century temple-going crowd. If his words don't unsettle us, if the message doesn't make us squirm, then I'm not

sure we're hearing it. The message Jesus preached required the people to be willing to see themselves and the world differently. They wanted someone to pull down the Roman powers on their behalf. Jesus, as a fellow member of their community, taught them that the power of the kingdom of God is found in the hands of the lowly. They didn't need power, they needed love.

Paul helps clarify the message in his letter to the Corinthians. When he calls us the Body of Christ, he puts us together into a single organism, whose life is impacted by every single person. We live in a time of extreme polarization where we distance ourselves from those we dislike. But Paul does not approve. His concern is the health of our unity, the impact we have on one another, and the way we protect one another's vulnerabilities.... Our physical bodies do not always work perfectly. Even so, I don't think any of us are likely to take a saw and start cutting off the parts that hurt. We work towards the health of our whole self. Even if it's just an ingrown toenail, we tend it gently because we know that unaddressed pain can cause infection and infection will spread. Paul encourages us to care for the health of our human community, together as one.

We live in troubled times. Division has become a virtue in our world. We separate from those we see as threatening. We love critiquing those whose vision of freedom, love, morality, and political identity fail to align with our own. And in so doing, we risk forgetting that we are part of one another. Harm for any one of us will cause harm to us all. We must be faithful to our own convictions, but those convictions will never bring the restoration of God to this world if they fail to protect the weak, or worse still, seek another's destruction. Perhaps looking for the good, affirming the virtues we see in others rather than looking for and highlighting their failures, will bring unity, healing the world faster than critique.

God's work on earth is to restore and unify us. Loving others is sometimes our greatest act of faith. Loving others, in practice, means we trust God to deal with their offenses. May we be a people who love, encourage, and allow the gospel to revive our body into unity.