

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 3rd Sunday after Epiphany, January 27, 2019.

You're probably tired of hearing me say this, but I love our lessons this morning. I love them because they remind me of you, of us, of all who, in the words of Nehemiah (**Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10**), "gather together into the square before the Water Gate." It's not a stretch to adjust the sentence to read "who gather together in the little Church with the red doors that looks out at the Chesapeake."

Nehemiah is not the only one to address our gathering.

Psalm 19 reviews what we ponder and what we proclaim when we gather: "The law of the Lord is perfect and revives the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure and gives wisdom to the innocent."

St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians (**I Corinthians 12:13-31a**) describes both our diversity as people and our diversity as gifts: "gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues."

And the passage from Luke's gospel (**Luke 4:14-21**) reminds us of our common role in this diverse community, which is to "proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

We are the subjects of these lessons. No longer objects, people that receive, but subjects, people who transmit. We do so as individuals and we do so as a community. And we do so because we want to do so. Everything we do here is by choice.

Even the proclamation of the Lord is optional. But can you imagine your life without exercising this option? Can you imagine a situation where you never give credit to someone for the Creation, for history, for the future, for miracles, for Mystery, for love, for forgiveness? Can you imagine a situation where you never ask why or how or who?

We do all of that here every week, not because we have to, but because we want to. And even that reality is fascinating. Why is it that we want to gather to consider these issues? Yes, we are social animals and we enjoy social hours and

social activities of all sorts. But we're also curious animals. And it is this curiosity about really big things and really small things and everything in between that brings us together.

"Together." An interesting word, especially when you think about the first few words of the Nehemiah passage: "All the people gathered together." Is it an accident that "to gather" and "together" are so close to one another? Only a single space and a single letter separating the two?

How would you describe people who arrived at the same time to collect arrowheads or seashells or any other object? Would you say "They gathered together to gather"?

And, when we gather together, what is it that we want to gather beyond objects? Friendship, insight, assurance, reassurance, challenge, direction, all of the above? Yes, all the above and more. Big and small. Infinite and finite. From the whole Universe to a baby born in Bethlehem. Our Collect this morning refers to the whole breadth of subject matter as "the glory of His marvelous works."

I don't know about you, but what we do when we gather seems very satisfying. We can be serious and light-hearted. We can leave sometimes saying "Now, I get it," and sometimes saying, "What was that all about?" At all times, we can say, "We did it together." "We gathered" for a purpose, namely to accept the invitation of the Lord "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And a big part of this proclamation is intended for those who don't gather together, at least for issues of faith. We have a Story to tell. It was told to us, and it makes sense, not all of the time, but most of the time. And part of the making-sense is a responsibility to share the Story. We like having responsibility. Maybe without realizing it, that's one of the reasons we like to gather.

We know that there are marching orders that go with the Good News, and a part of us likes to march. We like to share. We feel better when we do so. We think fondly about the people who shared with us, and we believe that their hope, maybe even their expectation, is that we share with others. We might not jump at the chance to read aloud Scripture in the Temple, as Jesus did, but we love to hear the Story and take it in.

Think about the “pay it forward” option that more and more people are exercising. Repay kindness with kindness. It feels good to repay by paying. And in our case, the repaying doesn’t take the form of dollars as much as Good News. God loves you. We heard it from someone. Now we get to tell it to someone, or, better, show it to someone. We “share it forward.”

Our final hymn today is “We three kings” with its familiar refrain:

O star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright;
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light!

Consider the phrase “still proceeding.” That’s what you and I do. We “still proceed” by “paying it forward,” by sharing the Good News.

Hometown fans are sometimes called an additional team member. The fans at Ravens Stadium are the 12th man. Orioles fans are the 10th man. The fans of the Wizards are the 6th man. The fans of the Capitals are the 7th man.

Well, you and I are the “fourth king.” Not just “we three kings,” but the three kings, plus those who “still proceed,” those who keep the Story alive, those who guide new generations to “thy perfect light,” those who “pay forward” the blessing of the Christ Child. Kindness for kindness. In the case of the Christ Child, Extreme Kindness.

St. Christopher-by-the-Sea. This place is special. This place is fun. This place is challenging. This place is comforting. This place is a privilege. All places of worship are. Why? Because, in the words of Nehemiah, “We gather together into the square before the Water Gate. And we “read from the book, from the law of God,” and “the joy of the Lord is our strength.”

Amen.

