

“All are Welcome. None are Shunned”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
3rd Sunday after the Epiphany – 24 January 2010
I Corinthians 12:12:31a; Luke 4:14-21

All are welcome. None are shunned. That’s the good news from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Everybody belongs: rich and poor, young and old, brilliant and dim, mean and kind, stingy and generous, strong and weak; from every place and of every color; political persuasion irrelevant; sexual orientation not a cause for concern. The Body of Christ is for you and for you and for you, and for them, even when we find whoever them is threatening or distasteful or uninteresting.

Not only is everyone welcome, but each person contributes to the proper functioning of the whole. Like the parts of our bodies, which have a specific purpose, every man, woman, and child on this planet is endowed with spiritual gifts by their Creator, and like the parts of our body, we depend on each other to exercise those gifts, so that together we might fulfill our purpose as stewards of God’s creation, as vessels of loving forgiveness, and above all, as adoring worshippers of God.

Now some may say, “I have no gifts,” and to you I say this: whatever has led you to that conclusion, please forsake that attitude and discover yourself anew. If it’s false modesty you’re hiding behind, stop pretending and enjoy your gifts and share that enjoyment with others. If it’s a message you have internalized from a culture that constantly whispers in your ear that you’re not good enough, stop listening to those voices and start listening to what God has to say: you are fearfully and wonderfully made. If you don’t know what your gifts are, but suspect they might be there, start a prayerful process of introspection and discernment, and if you don’t know how, the number to call

is 566-0276. That's 566-0276. (If you turn on your television as you dial, and place your hand on the screen, you will feel a tingle. You can make of that what you will.)

We need you to be whole, in both senses of that sentence. Sometimes, the Church may not act like it. Sometimes we forget who we are, and some days we remember yet fail to be our best. But each in person in this room, and countless more not here, have been granted gifts, and some of those precious gifts are going to waste, and it's a terrible shame.

Maybe you have the gift of insight. If it lay dormant within you, we might stumble and break a toe, and apart from the tragedy that faithful toe suffers, the whole body loses balance and starts to limp. And of course, that slows everything down.

Maybe you have the gift of listening, a terribly undervalued and oft neglected treasure. We need your ear. So much goes unheard, and so much of what goes unheard comes from the tiniest voices: innocent children, frail elderly persons, the incarcerated, the homeless and those living on the knife's edge of becoming homeless, people that the judgmental in our world condemn simply for who they are.

There is much we can do to improve the condition of those who dwell on the margins of our society, but perhaps nothing is more desired by those who suffer than to have someone who will simply listen. And for those sitting here now gifted with sensitive ears and loud voices, you can be annoying, but I really do love you for it, and I beg you to continue serving as the Horton for all those Who's out there

All are welcome. None are shunned. That's the good news Jesus declared in his hometown synagogue, as chronicled in the Gospel of Luke. Reading from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus declared himself the fulfillment of the prophecy. Initially, people were

pleased, but as the implications of what he said sank in for them, they became murderously enraged. Why so, when we receive this passage with such calm?

Maybe it's because we think this passage quaint and its intent well-meaning, though largely harmless, but listen again to what Jesus is saying. The man is ready to take an arch torch to the bars of our prisons, where some rather unsavory people are held. Jesus is bringing good news to the poor, many of whom work long hours for minimal wages and no benefits. In the zero-sum game that our economy has become, we've been falsely taught that good news for the poor would have to be bad news for somebody else, like most of us, right? "Letting the oppressed go free," who could that be? On closer scrutiny, the only part of the whole quote we can appreciate without reservation is the part about giving sight to the blind. But remember that in Jesus' day, physical ailments were considered an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual malaise. They thought that sin caused sickness, and Jesus declared that he had come to relieve the suffering, even though it was widely believed that the suffering they endured was their own fault. Talk about a disincentive for personal responsibility.

All are welcome. None are shunned. That was the heart and soul of Jesus' message, as he consorted with marginal people on the periphery of respectable society. The holy rollers of his day criticized Jesus for it, but he shrugged their off their complaints, because Jesus knew that his purpose on this Earth was to reach the lonely, those who didn't belong; people who felt empty, who had been told "you're worthless, you have nothing of value to contribute, go away." If we follow in Christ's path, we will embrace his truth that in God's kingdom all are welcome and none are shunned and no child of God is dispensable.

We already do this pretty well at Hickory Neck. Saturday before last we put together a Requiem Eucharist for the people of Haiti. Many people thanked or congratulated me afterwards on what a touching event it was, but whenever those words of encouragement are offered, I remain mindful that I accept them on behalf of literally dozens of people, all of us depending on each other exercising their spiritual gifts, to make a liturgy like that truly special.

For each team effort, there are scores of individual gestures that can make an immense positive difference in someone's life: the authentic hospitality offered to visitors; the hand-knit prayer shawl lovingly wrapped around the shoulders; the low pressure invitation to share in something extraordinary that's taken root and born beautiful, delicious fruit at Hickory Neck. I delight – no, I revel – in witnessing your witness through conscientious deployment of your spiritual gifts. However, we need to be vigilant that our rightful joy does not molder into a sense of pride or satisfaction, or even worse, an attitude of superiority.

Every time we exercise our spiritual gifts, we get stronger, as a Body, and as individual members of it, but to continue getting stronger, we need to seek out and meet greater challenges. Otherwise, the power that has built up within us will begin to fade as spiritual muscles weaken and bones decay. But we do not practice a health club faith, where we exercise our faith solely for the sake of getting stronger.

Our exercise comes the old-fashioned way, by planting the seed, and tending the field, and harvesting the yield. Put more plainly, we keep cranking because we know, without needing to think about it, that there are obscene numbers of people who feel unwelcome in this world, who feel that they don't belong, that they aren't worthy and

have nothing to give. There are too many people who feel empty and shunned, and our job as a Body, and as individual parts of it, is to go out and fill them up with the good news, to convince them that the feelings of worthlessness foisted upon them by a sinful world bent on exploitation are a blasphemous lie against the God of love, and that they are welcome here, where none are shunned, and the gifts of all treasured.

We can do, because we are doing and have done this, but enough just never is, when there are hurting people in need of healing, people with a story to tell but no one to tell it to, people who have given up on God because they think God has given up on them.

But we know better, and so we will go door-to-door in the new neighborhoods sprouting up around us to bring a message of peace and hospitality with a short visit on the porch to do nothing more than to say, “Welcome. Me casa, su casa, come on over if you like.” We will wield our hope in God and in the people of Haiti as shield against the despair and lethargy that so often overtakes our response to horrible disasters. Those who want to find their gifts will be aided in their discernment, (566-0276) shown how to use them for the benefit of others, and along the way, we will have fun. That is a non-optional feature of this arrangement.

We will listen and share, show and see. We will walk the Way Jesus trod, and say and do crazy things that make really uptight people very angry. And throughout it all, as our focus moves outward, we will not forget or neglect each other. How could we, because we are connected together with the same intensity and mutual dependence as the cells and organs of our bodies?

All are welcome. None are shunned. Let's keep it real, and make that reality more generous than ever. Amen.