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**All Together Now!**

**By Rev. Sheryl Stewart**

Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10 1 Cor. 12: 12-31 (a) Luke 4:14-21

Summary: Jesus, who includes us all, died at the hands of those who would exclude Him and gives us the same advice He gave Peter: “If you love me, feed my sheep.”

 One of the most compelling musical refrains I know appears in “All You Need is Love” by the Beatles and is simply the repeated line” “All together now!” “Love is all You need—*All Together Now* – Love is all you need – *All together now*—Love is all you really need” The song, of course, invites everyone to sing along, together. This is also the theme we preach when we speak of Universal salvation. And, this is also our greatest challenge because it demands that we include those who would exclude us.

 The Rev. Dr. Benjamin L. Corey wrote an article on this very subject, which I found on the internet. He said, “I believe, and always will, that [**the most radical part of the message of Jesus**](https://www.amazon.com/Undiluted-Rediscovering-Radical-Message-Jesus/dp/0768488907/) is the reality that God’s table has room for *everyone.* There are not a limited number of invitations to this banquet, nor is it a situation where one sincerely shows up only to find that there aren’t enough chairs, or they didn’t meet the entry requirements.”

 That is a good summary of the lectionary today! In Nehemiah, all the people hear the Covenant, interpreted and explained, and are encouraged to celebrate and share with each other in order to provide the means for everyone to rejoice. This message of complete inclusion is repeated in Psalm 19 and in Paul’s acknowledgement of differing gifts, but one body: a metaphor for the Church. This fact is the heart of Jesus’ Gospel: “Now” is the acceptable year of the Lord, the time when anyone and everyone is made acceptable by God’s gift of His Son.

 The problem is not someone’s horrible ideas or terrible deeds that keep them from the table. The difficult part about including the excluders is that they do not want to be with those they feel should be excluded. One of the biggest reasons so many people never truly accept the Kingdom is simply because they object to whoever they’d have to sit next to.

 Some people have left churches because they didn’t want to hear me, see me, sit next to me, or take Communion with me, much less have me offer them Communion in Jesus’ Name. Because I have experienced this, I can appreciate the strain it puts on a soul to worship near someone who is so opposed to you that they are actively campaigning to get you thrown out of church.

 I recall being a candidate at one church which expressed a desire to be open and inclusive to migrant workers. When I asked how many migrants owned cars to be able to come to us, it was obvious that most did not. My suggestion of providing bussing was challenging enough, but when I suggested that we, as a church, might go to the farms and orchards to present an hour of common worship, there was immediate fear that we would offend powerful employers who would campaign against us. I was not chosen to be their pastor.

I assure you, the biggest barrier to entering God’s Kingdom isn’t a refusal to repent of sin: the biggest barrier to people entering the Kingdom is a refusal to give up control over the guest list. The difficult task of including the excluders is that they don’t want to be included if it means the rest of us are, too.

I think God’s solution can be found in Nehemiah at the point where the prophet encourages the people, “Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

I heard a story about Heaven and Hell which may apply. A man dreamed he visited both Hell and Heaven. In both places, everyone was gathered around a huge stewpot full of marvelous food, but everyone also had spoons with very long handles strapped all the way up their arms, locking their elbows in place so none could bend their arms to put their spoons into their mouths.

In Hell, everyone was thin and starving, angry and miserable. Stew was spattered all around where people had tried to eat but simply spilled stew and made a mess. As the man watched, a terrible fight broke out and people started hitting each other with their spoons and even trying to push each other into the stewpot!

In Heaven, everyone was happy, clean, and well fed, even though their reach was hindered in the same manner as the people in Hell. “How is it,” the dreamer asked an angel, “that conditions are so different for the people here?”

“Ah,” the angel replied, “It is simple. In Heaven, they have learned to feed each other.”

As I look at the escalating anger and intolerance in our world and in our nation, I must think that this parable has a lot to teach us. There are many who exclude many others, who fear the very people they are called to feed. Now is the acceptable year of our God, and that means not only that we are made acceptable to God, but it is time for us to accept each other, also. This means we must feed each other to be fed ourselves.

When faced with exclusion, Jesus died for us, feeding us with His own body. There is no limit to His acceptance. So, let us go forth, even if excluded, and love the same way. Only then will what is rapidly becoming Hell on Earth be transformed, instead, into Heaven.