



“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” Proverbs 15:1 NRSV

Dear Friends,

July, a summer month here in Fairbanks, is surely meant to be enjoyed. But if there was a theme for this month, it would obviously be the Fourth of July, commemorating The Declaration of Independence, declaring that we wanted to be a sovereign nation free from the rule of Great Britain. When you think about it, the Declaration it is an amazing document. Thirteen fledgling colonies were declaring their independence from one of the most powerful countries in the Western Hemisphere.

In my former congregation of St. James in Phillipsburg, NJ, there were revolutionary war veterans (along with veterans of most of our other wars) buried in the cemetery across the street. During my time at St. James I decided to read the names of veterans buried in that cemetery from each of the wars our country fought on Memorial Day Weekend during the church service, starting with the revolutionary war. There were thirteen veterans from that war buried in the cemetery. What struck me was how diverse these thirteen were by age and occupation. Their desire for independence brought them together for the common good.

I don't think I would be too “out of bounds” by saying that coming together when necessary has been an important part of our nation's story. Perhaps a high-water mark for that coming together was the struggle to fight against Germany and Japan in World War II. More recently I think we saw a bit of that “coming together” after 9/11. Sadly, however I think this “coming together” has been difficult to achieve in recent times.

From my viewpoint, it began with the Vietnam War. Some who opposed the war, went far beyond reasonable protest, by using what I would call “flame thrower rhetoric” to make their point. This caused others who supported the war not to “hear” what those who sincerely opposed it had to say. I also remember an adult Sunday School Class I attended at the time and those who attended were sharply divided on the subject. It was hard to talk to one another. Harsh words spoken by both sides at the time highlighted the discussion, but looking back it never helped us to get together and “hear” each other, when I think we really needed it.

I wish I could say we've learned our lesson from the Vietnam War debate about the need at some point to hear each other, and try to find a way to come together. From my view point the exact opposite is true; it has gotten much more difficult. Part of it I think is driven by the natural desire to stand out, to make your point. I can relate in a way because of my own reactions to things I either disagreed with or didn't like (especially when I was younger) with angry words or actions. Yes, it made me feel good and “righteous” for the moment, but in the long term it caused hurt especially to those close to me, and any good in what I might have had to say was lost.

What makes it worse today is the news media who sees its bread and butter in following those who would use sensationalistic, “flame throwing rhetoric” (or images) in their mad dash for ratings and to “stand out from the rest” of a very crowded arena of many news outlets in our internet age. These headlines or sensational stories tend to inflame people on different sides of an issue driving people farther apart.

I have seen signs in the church as well contributing to a lack of “coming together”. The most difficult situation was in one community I served in, a poor community that needed all the help it could to deal with the serious problems it faced. But because of a divide between traditional “mainline” and “conservative evangelical” churches, over some issues it seemed to stop needed dialogue between all the churches, which would have been helpful in dealing with the community wide problems.

The important process of respecting and listening to one another to try to come together reminded me of something that was said at a conference I attended in New York City. Kofi Anan, who was the head of the United Nations at the time, talked about his work as negotiator in conflicts or wars throughout the globe. He said that no matter how horrific one side may have acted in the conflict, he refrained from judgments, or typifying one side as evil because if he did there would be no negotiations or ending of the conflict.

Is it possible in this time to come together? Am I unrealistic? Let me leave you with a few “hopeful” observations. One of things I have observed about Alaska, especially our city of Fairbanks, is how ready we are to help one another. Bill Murray the actor made this observation when he had a vehicle breakdown in the area, and not only did he get help, but was invited to dinner by the people who helped him. He emphasized that the folk who helped him didn’t know who he was.

Secondly, of all the churches I’ve served you folks here at FLC make sure people from all different places and viewpoints are welcomed here. No matter how hard that might be for us to do at times, let us continue in the name of Jesus who reached out to all.

I also enjoy working with the various churches here because there seems to be a desire to work together for the needs of our community. Our Easter Sunrise service for example models both racial, ethnic, and denominational oneness in proclaiming the Resurrection of our Lord.

I sometimes think we may have something to teach those in the lower 48 regarding “coming together.

The bottom line is, I believe we especially, as people of faith, need to turn to God and find or model a way to come together for the sake of going forward in the 21st century as a nation, so that we might affirm the words of a beloved national song:

***“America, America God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.”- Katherine Lee Bates***

Your brother in Christ,
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