

# The Nazareth Manifesto



## The Collect

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

## **First Reading** Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

All the people of Israel gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

## **Second Reading** 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body,

giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.

## **Gospel**    Luke 4:14-21

Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In April of 2020, as the world had shut down at the start of the Covid pandemic, Pope Francis offered an address from St. Peter's balcony challenging the world not be indifferent to the suffering of others, especially the poor. He said, *'May these, the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters living in the cities and peripheries of every part of the world, not be abandoned.'*

The Pope's address inspired the late southern California artist John August Swanson, to paint his last significant piece of art, entitled 'The Boat', representing a world newly finding itself 'all in the same boat' facing a global pandemic. Beneath a swirl of ambiguous color, leaving the question open as to whether there will be storms or sunshine ahead, Swanson depicts the boat brimming with human life. The waves may be high, yet five oarsmen resolutely paddle forward, together. The boat may be overcrowded with the world's people, yet in the midst of them hope is clearly present in the form of a mother dressed in blue, holding a babe in her arms: the Christ child and his mother, Mary; the incarnate Word at the heart of the life of the world.

The Pope's address and John August Swanson's glorious image both point to the same truth: that God is manifest in every single human soul and that because of that truth, all of us count, all of us belong.

That may seem to us like a self-evident claim of Christian theology, yet as Paul's letter to the Corinthians reminds us today, *that we all count, that we all belong to one another*, is a truth that was hard fought for. In Paul's time, the central struggle was between Jews and Gentiles, between the first followers of Jesus' own people in Judea, and non-Jews whose claim to having a full part of the Jesus movement was less clear to Jesus' followers in Jerusalem. Gentiles lacked lineage. They were not descendants of the chosen people of God. They did not practice circumcision, nor did they observe the law. Yet for Paul, those forms of belonging did not account for the transformation of human relationship inaugurated in Christ, in whom all life finds its abode. In Christ, argues Paul, it is as absurd to say that one person does not belong to another as it is to say that the hand does not belong to the arm, or the eye to the head.

Belonging lies at the very heart of the value proposition known as human society. Belonging is how we come to share a social contract. It is how we crawl out of the hole of our egotism and into the open land of real human relationship; relationship that is not simply the projection of our selves onto the world but a reciprocation with it. Belonging is one of the ways we learn to be human.

Now, I don't know precisely how you feel about the state of our belonging to one another in this country today, but it feels to me that we are living in the midst of a fissure. Something is breaking apart, and may already be fully fractured.

Our belonging to this planet, to the whole human family and future generations is profoundly under threat. While we live in real time through the disastrous consequences of the anthropocene as human behavior warms the planet, this country once again has forsaken its responsibility to be a leader in combating global warming, the clear and dominant existential threat to human flourishing of this century.

Our belonging to those who all too often put their lives in danger so that you and I can enjoy a country governed by the rule of law is similarly under profound stress. While over 1500 families are rejoicing at being reunited with their loved ones this week, I find that my heart breaks for the families of Brian Sicknick, Howard Liebengood, and Jeffrey Smith, who died as a result of the attack on the Capitol on January 6th 2021, and it breaks also for the 138 other officers injured that day. My heart breaks for them because while people who perpetrated acts of grotesque violence are set free, those families will forever live with the burden of that loss and trauma.

And our belonging to those who fled for their lives or out of despair looking in hope to this nation's long-standing love of the alien and the outcast is in danger of reneging on its promise. Now, people will stay behind closed doors fearing arrest and deportation, and there will be children who will go to school not knowing if this will be the day that they come home to find no one there because their parents or grandparents have been taken away.

Each of these losses of belonging that this past week alone has witnessed are part of complex and nuanced socio-political realities, yet they are also distinguished by a common simplicity: they lack an appreciation of the inherent integrity of the human family. The Way of Jesus that we follow in places like this one is clear about that integrity. We are called to be one. We are called to love. We are called to see dignity in others' lives. We are called to honor and respect human life as God honors and respects it. We are called to see in each person the image of the glory of God. As followers of Jesus, all of our convictions about the world, about this nation, about ourselves within it, are to be seen through that lens. As Bishop Mariann Budde (Buddy) reminded us in the National Cathedral this week, mercy is how we are called to come to know one another on this earth; how we learn to belong.



If mercy is a gift, belonging is a choice. We have to choose to live into the belonging that is the truth of who we are. And to choose belonging is also to choose to speak of that which we see holds back our fellow human beings from full and abundant lives. Politics may be the business of legislators and lobbyists, but the state of the human condition is the business of the church.

If we see the moral limits of market capitalism's ability to provide for the thriving of all human life and not simply for the wealthy and the otherwise privileged, then let us develop an economic theology that would promote the dignity of every human being. If we see that there are those among us who long to be set free from their captivity to poverty and a lack of opportunity for a decent shot at life, then let us talk in places of moral imagination like this church about what keeps them captive.

Let us talk about why over the past 50 years the number of food banks and soup kitchens in America has risen from 200 to 60,000, or why in the world's largest economy 17 million children grow up undernourished.

Let us talk about why it is that in this state of Georgia someone earning the federal minimum wage would have to work 140 hours a week to afford a one-bedroom apartment?



Let us talk about why one in five adults in this country is illiterate, a full century since every state in this union required elementary education for all?

These are, no doubt, political questions, but they are so very clearly also moral questions, and the church is needed to offer some sort of moral framework to that conversation lest we be left to a politics whose moral economy is in danger of defaulting on both sides of the aisle because these are not questions our political leaders have been prioritizing for many years now.

Let us be clear, though, that our own moral framework as people of faith will not be one, especially in the tradition and culture of the Episcopal Church. One of the beauties of Anglicanism is that it doesn't ask us all to agree in order to be the church - not on matters of belief nor of political conviction. It does, however, invite us to engage. Perhaps some of you agree with what you've heard in this pulpit this morning, and perhaps others of you take exception to it. I welcome your engagement of me and of one another. Let this parish be a place where we talk about our differing visions for this nation. One of the things that ails our country so deeply right now is the paucity of places we have to air our differences. What better place than an all sorts kind of church to start to redress that balance?

If we are to talk, let us also act. If you have found any hope here for yourself in this community of Christ's mercy and love, I implore you to extend that hope to others. Get involved in our refugee ministries or at Threads, at the Midtown Assistance Center or Covenant Community. Join your fellow saints at the State Capitol; advocate for the needs and welfare of others. Tell trans children and adults, queer folk, people who fear that their legal status places them in danger, and anyone looking for hope in times such as these, that this is a community that wishes to be in their lives, and for their lives to be in ours. That is what it means to set a welcome table for all God's people.

In the synagogue of his hometown, Jesus read these words:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

In Jesus, Luke tells us, the hope of that scripture is fulfilled. As Christ's hands and feet in this our place and time, the fulfillment of this prophetic imagination now lies with us. Epiphany is the season of the manifestation of God's light in the world. The road of our future lies open before us. Do not be afraid. Be the light.