

Let me tell you a story: In the wee hours of one hot Eastern Montana night, my uncle came into the room I was sharing with my cousins and yanked our covers off. “Get dressed and grab your gloves,” he said rather flatly. “Meet me at the truck.” My uncle did not waste words. We did what he told us.

Ten minutes later, we were climbing into the bed of his 1949 Ford Apache pickup and heading down the county road into the darkness. When he finally pulled over and stopped, we looked over the cab of the truck and saw what looked for all the world like some alien invasion. Dust and chaff kicking up into the headlights of combines and trucks crawling across an alfalfa field and maybe two dozen men and boys hard at work cutting, baling and loading. My cousins and I took our place behind my uncle’s truck and we bucked hay for two or three hours with no sound but the machinery. And no explanation.

I guess because I was the city kid, my aunt told me maybe a week later that the rancher who owned the alfalfa field had had a heart attack that night and would be laid up for a few weeks. That was all the explanation I got and all I needed. If you don’t cut alfalfa when it is ready, there are severe consequences for future harvests and if you don’t get your alfalfa cut, baled and stacked, you face financial disaster from which you may not recover. Each rancher in that field that night knew that they utterly depended on every one of their neighbors and every one of their neighbors depended on them.

They knew that misfortune comes for everyone at some point, and when it came for one of your neighbors, you didn’t ask questions or make excuses—you got up at 3:00 in the morning and hit that four-hour harvesting window with everything you had. Not because you were a swell guy or because you liked your neighbors that much or even at all. You did it because they would do exactly the same for you.

Ironic, is it not, that we get this reading from Luke on the weekend just before Independence Day? The day that we remember people and events that liberated this country from England. And we are right to celebrate freedom with gusto. But we can sometimes over-emphasize independence in ways that border on false self-reliance,

even invulnerability. And I wonder if that doesn't cause us to miss the incredible insight of this Gospel story.

The Europeans who came to this land were acutely aware of their dependence on each other for survival. Some of them were even aware of their dependence on the First Nations people who were already living here. British colonies were called "commonwealths" in recognition of the fact that the well-being of any individual was intimately related to the well-being of the whole.

But ancient Mediterraneans were not individualistic *at all*. They could only understand themselves as part of a collective, not as a singular, separate entity. Each person was embedded in a group of other people. We can easily romanticize our grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith, imagining them to be self-confidently aware that they could accomplish more in teams of two than they could do alone. But the reality was that to be alone was terrifying; to be sent out on your own was the equivalent of stripping away your very identity as a human being.

And so Jesus sent people in pairs with the absolute bare minimum: no purse, no bags or sandals. But also with no agenda, no preconceived outcomes. Instead, they went with just enough company to maintain their identity—to keep in mind who they really are: children of God whose names are written in the book of heaven. And, in pairs, they went with just one other thing: they took the peace of Christ with them to give away.

Now it's true that the disciples had to rely on the hospitality of the towns where they were sent for food and lodging. Most of us would find that kind of dependence deeply uncomfortable if not downright unsafe. By the same token, most of us would find opening our doors to these strangers to be an absolute inconvenience if not an actual intrusion.

But, remember, ancient Mediterraneans were not individualistic. Hospitality was a way of developing relationships between communities. There were rules of conduct for both parties who were definitely both vulnerable. Strangers had to be tested to make sure that they were safe to be in the community and that they would subscribe to the community's norms. Only when a stranger passed these test could they be "received" and transitioned into the role of guest.

In the United States at the beginning of the 21st c., most of us understand ourselves to be responsible for making our own decisions, forming our own opinions and cleaning up our own messes. That's part of what it means to be a healthy individual.

But we are surrounded by a national culture that holds up the self-made, self-reliant individual as the ideal. We are awash with scarcity thinking and fear, and seem to be increasingly inhospitable to anyone or anything that feels unfamiliar. That's independence beginning to recognize its own limitations; independence beginning to recognize that no matter what we do, we are all vulnerable. It can be a kind of in-between stage called "counter-dependence."

Relying entirely on their own independence will drive people to great lengths to create and perpetuate illusions of control and invulnerability. But all it takes is a debilitating illness, the death of a loved one or a random tragedy to pierce those illusions and remind us just how truly vulnerable we are.

Fortunately, there is another perspective available to us—one that can engage the best of both dependent and independent worldviews. When people begin to realize that each one of us is both unique and also intimately connected with others, the perspective of *interdependence* can emerge. American poet e.e. cummings described this perspective in one of my favorite poems: "we are so both and oneful," he wrote, "night cannot be so sky; sky cannot be so sunful; i am through you so i."

The perspective of *inter-dependence* allows us to see that our hope and well-being are inextricably linked to those around us. When one of us stumbles, another can help us up. When one of us is lost, another can find the path. When one of us is discouraged, another can hold faith for both for a while. That's why we come here each week to be refilled with the presence of Christ: to remember to carry each other's burdens, to console and encourage each other, or to trust God on behalf of those in the midst of spiritual dryness.

That is the peace of Christ—the peace that we carry out into the world. *You* and the peace you carry—*you are* what is ready for harvest, do you see? To pray for laborers is to hope many people will come to take in the peace that God has planted *within and between you*. If anyone shares in the peace you bring, your peace is not diminished in the least. God's peace rests with you both. If anyone does *not* receive

the peace you bring, your peace is *still* not diminished in the least. God's peace is still with you, but they have rejected the peace that God has intended for them. The results are always between God and the people who have been offered God's peace.

And so, we do not rejoice in our authority to overcome evil and hatred with peace; we rejoice in the peace that abides with us. We come together to take in the Real Presence of Christ for healing, for the renewal of life and for faith, and we carry the peace of that presence out, praying for people to come and reap the peace that God has planted in us for them.

Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple once said that the Church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members. We are interdependent on each other, and also on the people where we live and work and study and play. God's grace is nurtured in our inward ministries as a manifestation of the Body of Christ here at St. Elizabeth. God's grace yields fruit in our outward ministries on behalf of God's people outside these walls. God's grace enlivens the interplay between our inward practices and our outward practices.

The peace that God plants within us here is the peace that we empty out into the world as part of the in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven. And we return here with the world's emptiness to be refreshed and refilled. The many interdependent with the one and the one with the many.

"we are so both and oneful; night cannot be so sky; sky cannot be so sunful; i am through you so i."

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