

The Rev. Ryan Fischer  
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 6)  
June 13, 2021

Lectionary Year B: 2 Corinthians 5:6-17

Back when phone books were still published, it was said that you're a real nerd when you get a charge out of reading the phone book. I don't know how much I want to admit to, apart from saying that, when things got a bit slow, the phone book beckoned me to pick it up and read it. So, one could say that, in years past, I was a phone-book-reading nerd, at least some of the time.

Or maybe just someone with way too much time on his hands...

I can very easily consume what many would call useless data, although as the years have gone by, my capacity for useless data has decreased. Maybe now there's actually important stuff occupying my mind. But the phone book was, for me, one of the vast repositories of data that I craved. Now, I know you might have to be a bit warped yourself to understand all this, but the truth is there are all sorts of people out there with unusual or peculiar interests. Before the days of the Internet, most people like me thought that they were the only ones on Earth with unusual or peculiar interests. Nowadays, that's different. We're able to network with one another and, to both our amazement and reassurance, we're not alone.

But what is it about books of seemingly useless data that would have such appeal to folks like me? My theory is that it has to do with the completeness of the particular volume or database.

Everything is there. In the case of the phone books of yore, there were the names of every person and business in town, with the exception of the few who desire to be unlisted. Or, for another example, take the encyclopedia, or its electronic successor, Wikipedia. In these, there's every living creature, event, famous person, nation, state, city, and concept one could possibly read about. All of these are examples of things that intentionally strive to be as complete as possible, and, given that single criterion, the results are impressive.

But back to the phone book. If you have an old one lying around, pick it up and see all the names and numbers of people whom you'll never meet and people whom you've never known. There's something about any overwhelming quantity of names...after a while, they don't mean much anymore. But we have to remember that each person there is equal to us in personhood and has a life and a story just as we have. And hidden from view are the names of any children or spouses who might go with each listing. Before you know it, there are a lot of people out there!

So if the word for a phone book is "complete" (or "complete as possible"), what would the equivalent word for God be? I'm getting a bit of a hint from today's Second Reading, and, while I realize that we can't reduce God to a single word, we can still see a recurring word that steers us in the right direction. The word, in this case, is "all." Second Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 6 says, "For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ..." All -- as in every name in the phone book? Yes, and then some. We are all accountable to God for the things we

have done in our lives.

That's the note of judgment. But just as the word "all" applies to God's judgment, so too does it apply to God's grace. We may hold harsh feelings toward someone whom we've never even met, but such a person is a part of the same "all" that applies to God's grace. Verses 14 and 15 of our Second Reading put it better than I ever could. Listen as I read them --

For the love of Christ urges us on,  
because we are convinced that one has died for all;  
therefore all have died.  
And he died for all,  
so that those who live might live no longer for themselves,  
but for him who died and was raised for them (5:14-15).

So what does "all" really mean? The text says "one [Christ] has died for all." I think that "all" means everyone we could possibly think of and people we really don't like...and then some. The only limits to God's grace are the ones that we ourselves place on it. What a text such as this calls us to do -- very specifically, I might add -- is to live not for ourselves but for Christ. And seeing as how Christ died for all, our mission is to let 'em all know just that! You see, the difference between living for ourselves and living for Christ is a difference between curving inward on ourselves and extending outward toward others. One takes an attitude of entitlement; the other takes an attitude of mission. When you live for yourself, you look only for that which you want for yourself. When you live for Christ, you look to offer God's grace -- and to offer yourself -- to others.

St. Anne's knows, for sure, that there's an all out there to which

we're called to minister. As evidenced by our many philanthropic and volunteer activities, we have exciting examples of what living for Christ looks like, whether it's St. Margaret's House (about which we heard last Sunday) or the Annual Sale and the many ways that ministry can touch lives in our community. This is why it's important to remember that coming to church isn't like getting filled up at some kind of spiritual gas station; rather, it's more like going to the service bay than the pump. Here, you let God work on you until your heart, your mind, your conscience, and your attitude reflects the message that's been proclaimed to you.

Thus, there aren't simply a bunch of people out there about whom we couldn't care less whether they lived or died...no, they are part of the "all" to whom God's love applies. Go ahead, read names out of an old phone book if you haven't yet caught my drift. Christ died for each and every person listed there...and for their spouses, for their children, and even for the ones not listed.

When we live for Christ instead of for ourselves, we will understand what it means to love someone unconditionally no matter who they are. Indeed, that's what the love of Christ teaches us to do. By all means, continue your work because that is the key to eliminating any ill will and letting the love of God enter in.

While I have encouraged parishioners to read the Bible, I haven't encouraged them to read a phone book. (It would be an even stranger instruction seeing as most of them are out of print!) However; for the purposes of illustration, you could look at all those names that stream endlessly from page to page, A to Z, and think of how, while many of them may be unknown to you, they

aren't unknown to God. There is no limit to how far God's love reaches and there is no person for whom Christ didn't die. And because of this, we now live -- not for ourselves -- but for every person from A to Z.

Remember, the Christian's phone book includes all.

Amen.