

“Draw Near to One Another”
Luke 1:39-45

Today we look at the importance of drawing near to one another. We are all born with a need to belong. Yet, this need is often one of the most difficult things in our lives because we often confuse it with “fitting in.” In order to fit in, we suppress the parts of ourselves that we deem unacceptable and thus develop a false self that is hardly every satisfied. An important part of the journey of faith is about learning to rediscover that self and to allow others to do the same. And so today we turn to three characters to help us with this: Rudolph, Mary, and Elizabeth.

Everyone knows the movie and song “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer”, but the context of the person who wrote the story is often not as well known. According to AdventScripts.pdf, “The year 1938 was another desperate period for Americans living in the Great Depression. But for Robert May it was a year of personal tragedy. His young wife, Evelyn, was very sick and would die before year’s end. His meager salary with Montgomery Ward’s barely paid for food and rent, let alone the medical bills due to Evelyn’s illness. The only joy in his life was the couple’s four-year-old daughter, Barbara. Each night he took his little girl into his arms and together they took comfort by making up stories of fantasy and hope. Drawing on his own awkward childhood and fairy tales such as The Ugly Duckling, Robert created a story about a little reindeer that faced difficulty and insurmountable odds. The story was so popular with young Barbara that Robert decided to share it with his coworkers. At a Christmas party on a cold Chicago evening, Robert May warmed the hearts of his friends with the first public telling of a misfit reindeer named Rudolph. The employees loved it, and Robert’s boss, Mr. Avery, wanted to share the tale with children everywhere. He purchased the story from Robert and the following year each child who visited Santa Claus at Montgomery Wards was given a copy of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. In fact, over 2 million copies were given away that year alone. Then, in 1946 after 6 million copies had been distributed, Mr. Avery did something extremely generous; he gave back to Robert May all publishing rights to the story, making Robert a wealthy man. By this time, Robert had remarried and his new brother-in-law, Johnny Marks, asked if he could make the story of Rudolph into a song. Johnny had a way with words and music, so he retold the story of Rudolph with simple lyrics and a catchy tune. Attempts were made to get famous singers like Bing Crosby, to record it, but no one wanted to take a chance on a children’s Christmas song. That is, until Ina Autry, the wife of movie star and singing-cowboy Gene Autry heard it and persuaded her husband to record it in 1949. The tune, like the reindeer, went down in history, and soon became the second best-selling Christmas song of all-time, just behind White Christmas.”

Knowing this background gives the story even more depth because it speaks to the pain of not fitting in and the power of finding true belonging. The shame of being imperfect or broken often keeps us from true connection with others and even with God. After all the rejection, shame, and bullying, Rudolph finds joy, especially when the very thing that made him feel broken becomes a part of what helps others. There is so much power when

our imperfections and brokenness are embraced by another and when someone helps us to see the light of God in those times.

Elizabeth provided that kind of belonging and guidance for her younger cousin Mary. When Mary gets the news of her pregnancy, the Gospel of Luke tells us that she goes to visit her relative/cousin Elizabeth for three months. This would have been a long journey of about 80 miles. One would not take that kind of journey lightly. Mary spends the first three months of her pregnancy with Elizabeth. We know that the first three months are the most critical in any pregnancy. Without the support of Elizabeth, Mary could not have made it through this challenge in her life. Her ability to carry out the mission of her life depended on Elizabeth's support and mentoring of her. Elizabeth was the best support Mary could have had. We know this from the story of Elizabeth herself and from the greeting she gave Mary when she first saw her. Let's listen to Elizabeth's words from Luke 1:39-45:

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Elizabeth knew about faith, life, and brokenness in her life. She was unable to get pregnant for many years and struggled with the shame of that in her community. She was especially ashamed as she was the wife of a priest. Infertility would have been seen as a sign of God's punishment. Her shame was great. Yet, her faith was even greater. As the wife of a priest, Elizabeth certainly would have had a long life of prayer. In fact, just before we are told about Mary's pregnancy, we are told about Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah and their mystical experience of a divine messenger. This made Elizabeth ready to believe Mary and to validate her vision of God. She saw in the brokenness of Mary the very Spirit of God.

We need people like Elizabeth in our lives and we need to be like Elizabeth for the Mary's of the world. These are people that draw near to our souls. Just like Rudolph needed someone to affirm and include him, we need others who see the light of God in us, affirm it, and help us to share it with the world. Drawing close to each other's souls is not about being perfect or about presenting our best selves to others. It is about knowing and seeing the divine in each other, especially in those places of deep brokenness.

What if the next time someone you care about does something mean or something you disapprove of, you tried to see the light of the divine in them and tried to help them see that too? What if you pondered this question with them: Where is God needing to be born in and through you in this moment? What if you were having a hard time and you went to a trusted friend and asked them to help you ponder the same question? What if we started

looking around us at the people of our lives and saw them as God bearers? What if all that others need for their shame and brokenness to be transformed is our blessing?

We are going to pray together a prayer meditation called loving kindness. Begin by settling into a comfortable position in your chair. Set your feet flat on the floor in a way that feels natural for you. Maybe take a moment to relax your shoulders and let the tension out of your forehead. Breathe deeply and relax into this time of prayer. Begin by offering ourselves a blessing. Create an image of yourself in your mind - you as you are now, or maybe you as a small child, and try to cultivate a soft, loving heart towards yourself. Extend grace and love to yourself. Now, imagine yourself cupped in God's loving, tender hands. Just let yourself rest in God's hands for a moment. (Pause).

Now think with me:

May I experience God's love.

May I experience God's peace.

May I experience God's birth in my life.

(Long pause for about 5 deep breaths)

Now extend your blessing to someone you love. Imagine your partner, a best friend, a sister or brother, or even a child or parent, someone who brings you deep feelings of love, tenderness, and care. Imagine this person in your mind's eye. Open your heart to this person and extend love and grace towards them. Now, imagine this person cupped in God's loving, tender hands. Just let him or her rest in God's hands for a moment. (Pause).

Now think with me:

May they experience God's love.

May they experience God's peace.

May they experience God's birth in their lives.

(Long pause for about 5 deep breaths)

Now extend our blessing to someone whom you just don't get along with. This is someone who causes tension, anger or negative emotions when you interact with or think of them. Imagine this person in your mind's eye, and try to hold them gently in your heart, with feelings of benevolence and gentleness. If feelings of anger or tension arise, try to release these feelings to God, by just letting go and opening your heart to set these negative energies free to God's care. Now, imagine this person cupped in God's loving, tender hands. Just let him or her rest in God's hands for a moment. (Pause).

Now think with me:

May they experience God's love.

May they experience God's peace.

May they experience God's birth in their lives.

(Long pause for about 5 deep breaths)

Finally, let us extend God's blessing to all beings, everywhere. All that is, all that has ever been made, all that is and was and is to come: it is all held by God, sustained by God's love, and blessed by God's Spirit. Imagine a beautiful, blue-green earth in your mind, full

of plants and animals and so many people, so many beings -- and this whole world is in God's upturned palm. The whole world rests in God.

Now think with me:

May all beings everywhere experience God's love.

May all beings everywhere experience God's peace.

May all beings everywhere experience God's birth. Amen.