

## Newsletter Reflections for September

Have you ever noticed all the placards or signs posted at intersections that advertise folks wanting to buy “Ugly Houses”? For some reason, I have seen a lot of those signs lately. Not sure why. Not sure why there is suddenly a large market indicating there are folks who feel the need to buy ugly houses. Perhaps I am just frequently in areas where folks think there are potentially a lot of ugly houses that might be for sale. I guess these folks are wanting to buy them as investments, potentially restoring them for resale at a higher price. But for some reason all these signs made me think of a connection to some scriptures about humanity—about human nature. Sometimes the images we see of human nature are pretty ugly. In several places within scripture we are told that our body is a temple belonging to God. In many places, especially in the gospel of John, Christ says he will come to dwell within us. During worship two of our sung responses to our prayer of confession have lyrics that speak of God as being the potter while we are the clay to be molded. What is the connection between the “ugly house” signs and those scriptures? When we seek to be molded, it certainly isn’t to be formed as an “ugly” anything. Yet it seems from my observations about the public dialogue/conversations/discussions (or really the lack of those things happening around us) that our communities are now built of “ugly houses”. It seems that what is happening is not any discussion at all, but just name calling—finding derogatory things to say about the person, their background, or the place of their origin who represents the “other” side, idea or viewpoint. I saw and posted an apt illustration of how this is being manifested on Facebook awhile back. It read this way: “You are holding a cup of coffee when someone comes along and bumps into you, making you spill your coffee everywhere. Why did you spill the coffee? You spilled the coffee because there was coffee in the cup. Had there been tea in the cup, you would have spilled tea. The point is whatever is inside the cup, is what will come out. Therefore, when life comes along and shakes you (which will happen), whatever is inside you will come out. It is easy to fake it, until you get rattled.” It seems that our public self has been rattled by fear and distrust through all this public display and what is coming out is hostility and hatred. It seems that the atmosphere—the climate—of public exchanges has us looking at each other as “ugly houses”. Places that most of us want to avoid; places we have no interest in looking into or trying to discover there is worth inside. In fact, we see groups of them as places to fear. And on an individual level, when the person with whom you have a disagreement is an “ugly house”, not a child of God, then you have no reason to seek to understand them, to understand why they might have a different point of view or an experience which gives them a different point of view—after all, they are just an “ugly house”, not someone of worth. There is a major question being asked about the violence erupting throughout our society—about why violence seems to be such a quick and easy answer for many people to almost any event in their lives. I am sure that the answer is complex, but would suggest that the root may lie in this simple fact: too many people have begun to look at those not just like them as “ugly houses” instead of beloved children of God. Too many people have allowed what is inside of themselves, what is in their hearts and minds, to be fear and distrust. For if what is inside is

fear and distrust, what is likely to spill out is hostility and hatred. In preparation for teaching a course I have been studying two Hebrew words צְדָקָה and מִשְׁפָּט . Both of these words meant justice in their context to the Hebrew people. They have a slightly different nuance however. One is used primarily in a legalistic context, pertaining to a judicial matter. The other is used in the context of equity, of honesty, of being in alignment with God’s laws, and so is often translated into English as righteousness. These words have also been featured together prominently in the Hebrew Scriptures of the lectionary after Pentecost. If we look at one another through the lens the world is providing, we see “ugly houses”. Then when we look inside ourselves, it will be hard to find what God wishes to see in us. If on the other hand, we look at one another—and that one another includes the “other” whom our Lord calls us to care for—as our Lord calls us to see them—then it will be possible to be filled with kindness, to act with justice and righteousness as we are called to do. If seen through that lens, I wonder, would the violence which surrounds us cease to be such an issue?

Shalom,

Pastor Libby