

The Rev. Robert H. Malm
May 7, 2017
The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Community

Jesus knew he couldn't do it alone; he could not share the power of God's love with all the world by himself. So, in his life, at his death, during the 40 days of his resurrection, Jesus tried to form, to build, to empower a community of disciples, followers who would carry on his work and share the power of God's love with all the world.

Of course, we see this first at the start of his ministry in Galilee. I like to refer to St. Matthew's Gospel as the "High Church" Gospel because Matthew is so concerned to show us Jesus' mission to form a community. The early Church was to be the "new" Israel, chosen by God through Christ to change the world. Matthew is placed first in the New Testament because we see this special vocation of the community. Only Matthew reports that Jesus told Simon Peter that he would be "the rock" -- "On this rock I will build my Church" (16:18). Peter and the other disciples did not really understand at first.

St. John tells us that Jesus used many "I am" statements to build community. Jesus knew the Old Testament name for God, "Yahweh," translated as "I am who I am." So, Jesus empowers the community of disciples by telling them, "I am the bread of life," "I am the light of the world," "I am the gate for the sheep," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the way, the truth, the life" (the early Christian community was called "the way"), and lastly, "I am the vine, you are the branches... Abide in me..."

The Risen Lord Jesus appears a total of 10 times, beginning on Easter morning until his Ascension, 40 days later. Most of the appearances are with groups: two disciples on the road to Emmaus; the disciples gathered together that first night and then a week later; a group fishing on the Sea of Galilee; and even some 500 at one time. Jesus promises these groups that they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit to carry on his work as a community, as his Body in the world, the Church.

Four weeks from today we will celebrate this gift of the Holy Spirit's power on Pentecost. Today's first reading from Acts, chapter 2, summarizes what happened on that first Pentecost. The verse before today's reading records that 3,000 persons were baptized. We are baptizing two children here at Grace today, but I'm sure at least 3,000 new Christians are being baptized around the world today!

Today's reading should be very familiar to us since we are asked this question, a direct quote from Acts, at every Baptism and every time we renew our baptismal promises: "Will you continue in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread and the prayers?" These are the four "marks" of Christian community. This is what we are called to do as disciples, as the Church. We can "grade" ourselves as a parish and as individuals to see how we are doing with each one.

The “Apostles’ teaching” is found in scripture and in the creeds. We grow in our understanding of God’s love in Christ by knowing the Bible and understanding theology. Our “education” begins even before we are baptized. Formal classes here at Grace begin for three-year-old’s. We don’t stop our education when we graduate from High School, or college, or seminary. Being a Christian means attending the school of life-long-learning.

Fellowship for the early Church included many facets of life and ministry, much more than meals and celebrations. Fellowship includes a concern for hospitality, evangelism and newcomer ministry. Pastoral care and outreach define a community’s life together. Stewardship, the sharing of resources, is critical, necessary. The community of disciples is built upon mutual support and mutual accountability.

Of course, the breaking of bread is the Eucharist, Holy Communion. The Eucharist defines and nurtures the Church. This has been true for us at Grace Church since our beginning years in the 19th century. The entire Episcopal Church embraced the centrality of the Holy Eucharist 40 years ago with the publication of the current Book of Common Prayer. In the Eucharist, we know God’s love for us, we express our love for God, and we are strengthened to share God’s love with the world. You cannot be an active, committed member of the community of Jesus Christ without regular participation in the Holy Eucharist.

Our life of prayer grows out of the corporate prayer of the Eucharist and extends to every part of our life. Private prayer, intercessions, praise, meditation, silence, daily prayers at meals, prayers to start and finish each day, retreats and pilgrimages all help us to be “centered” in Christ.

When Jesus said that he was the “gate,” he probably had prayer in mind. Prayer is our gate into community and fellowship; prayer guides us each day; prayer brings us close to Jesus’ love for us. Those who do not enter through this gate of prayer are considered “thieves and bandits.” They endanger the flock, the community.

Today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, is often called “Good Shepherd Sunday” because the Gospel is always a reading from John, chapter 10, where Jesus teaches about community by using the symbols of the “gate” and the “good shepherd.” Today we celebrate two baptisms. Today we know that Jesus couldn’t do it all alone. Today we proclaim to Sophia and Leo and to all the baptized, “You will never be alone.”

Acts 2:42-47
John 10:1-10