

Patrick Keyser  
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14), Year B  
12 August 2018  
Ephesians 4:25-5:2  
Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria, VA

*'Be imitators of God...and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us'*

In the name of God: + Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

On Tuesday, Mother Fanny, Jenni, and I went with a group of high schoolers from Grace into DC to visit the Church of the Epiphany and participate in a ministry called Street Church. Every Tuesday a group from Epiphany goes to a park near the church and celebrates the Eucharist and then serves lunch to the homeless community. In addition to worshipping and serving at Street Church, our group from Grace also had the opportunity to discuss and think critically about the issue of homelessness. Our morning included conversations with a number of people who work in agencies that seek to combat homelessness, and I was reminded of the complex web of factors that contributes to it, including mental illness, racial discrimination, lack of affordable housing, and poor public transportation, to name just a few. These conversations were both enlightening and afflicting. It was helpful to be reminded of the efforts of those who work so hard to serve some of the most vulnerable among us, but it was also difficult to be reminded of the magnitude of the issue.

The most valuable experience of the entire day for me was the conversation we had with individuals who either had experienced or were currently experiencing homelessness. They were very candid in sharing their stories and experiences with us. It's remarkable what happens when instead of speaking about a particular group of people you actually speak *with* them. Stories and personal witness have a way of challenging deeply held stereotypes that often oversimplify a much more complex phenomenon. There was so much shared in our time together, and I've been

sitting with a lot of it. Homelessness is incredibly complex, and it is very easy to feel completely helpless in the face of such an issue. I have been thinking especially about one particular part of our conversation. At one point Jenni asked the question that I think was on all our minds ‘what can we do to help in the face of such a large issue?’ One gentleman who had experienced homelessness immediately began to speak. I had my own thoughts about what we might be able to do, but I was surprised to hear his response. He began to speak about the erosion of community in our current world. He looked at us and asked, ‘how many of you know your neighbors? And I mean really know them. Do you ever talk about the real things in life? That’s where the problem starts. We don’t even know each other, and if we don’t know each other it’s a lot harder to solve our big problems.’

Throughout the week I’ve been thinking about that conversation and his question– ‘do you actually know your neighbors?’ There is undeniable truth in his words. Sociologists have for several decades noted how social and communal ties are breaking down in rapid and significant ways. Fewer people are involved in political, civic, religious, and volunteer organizations. Feelings of isolation are strongly felt in our current world. I imagine these feelings may resonate with some of you. As I thought about this increased isolation and lack of community, I was especially interested in what it might mean for church communities. Of all the places in twenty-first century America that could possibly demonstrate what it looks like to be in real genuine community the church is surely one of them.

For the past several weeks we have been reading from the letter to the Ephesians, and throughout we have heard about the importance of the community of faith. Last week we began a section of the letter that focuses on the importance of unity. The language is both beautiful and foundational for our baptismal liturgy: ‘there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called

to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all' (Ephesians 4:4-6). Though unity is central to the community, the writer of the epistle also acknowledges the presence and importance of diversity. Each member is given gifts, but they all differ and are uniquely given. Collectively we are the body of Christ, and as such we need each other to function fully. We are on the way toward '[growing] up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ' (Ephesians 4:15), from whom the entire body derives its very being and structure.

Today's reading from Ephesians continues this theme, focusing especially on how the community of faith is to be in the world. The central claim is summed up in the command to 'be imitators of God' (Ephesians 5:1). This command may seem bold, intimidating, and completely ridiculous. How could we, sinful and broken humans, possibly imitate God, the creator of all that is, the source of all being? Yet at the same time it is the Christian conviction that this same God who is beyond all knowing and all praising became human. We believe that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus lived among us and showed us what it truly means to be human in all its fullness. Perhaps that can help us understand the idea of imitating God just a little better. Jesus sought out the weak, the sick, the lonely, and the lost, and he loved them. The way of Jesus was never about self-gratification but was always an outpouring of love for the sake of others. To follow Jesus, to truly seek to be people who are imitators of God, we are called to 'live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God' (Ephesians 5:2)

The call to imitate God and walk in love is certainly something each of us is called to do individually, but it is also a call to a communal way of being. As Christians our understanding of God is grounded in the Trinity. We believe that in God's very self there is community— one God

in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To imitate God is to be in community. Today's reading from Ephesians tells us to 'speak truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another' (Ephesians 4:25). We need each other.

I was deeply challenged by our conversations on Tuesday at the Church of the Epiphany. In the face of such brokenness and complexity it is tempting to do the easy thing and simply ignore the problem. Instead of giving into this temptation, I have tried to think about that gentleman's question 'do you even know your neighbors?'— and what that might tell us about a path forward. It was his conviction that truly addressing homelessness must start with the recovery of a sense of genuine community within cities and neighborhoods. This vision is not just wishful thinking. It is in harmony with the vision of the life of the church, a body of people rooted and grounded in mutual love and care for each other.

So what can the church, the members of Christ's body, do in response to such brokenness? As many of you know, this parish does amazing work in the local, national, and international communities. Last week I was able to attend a meeting of the outreach community and I was so impressed by the number of ministries this parish is involved with— the food pantry, brown bag lunches, the Haiti Micah Project, VOICE, numerous mission trips, to name just a few. We have good reason to give thanks for these ministries, for the sharing of God's love and mercy, and for the real impact they have on the lives of countless individuals. Yet, the gentleman's question remains— how well do you, the people of Grace, know your neighbors?

As a community we are situated in a particular place. The church is called to be deeply invested in our community, caring especially for those who are most weak and vulnerable. We do this not because our engagement with the marginalized and poor might remind us of how fortunate we are and how grateful we should be. No, engagement with any person whose life

experience is different from ours is an invitation into relationship. We need to be invested in the community, because we need each other. We are members of each other. So, how might this process start? Again, the gentleman from Epiphany has words of wisdom to offer. He told us, ‘what if you just start with a conversation? Open up your space. Invite your neighbors in. Serve them some tea. See what happens.’ I wonder what it would be like for this community to do something like that. I wonder what we might discover if we simply start with the goal of meeting our neighbors. Once we begin to know our neighbors, then we can begin to actually see what need may exist. And that need will of course vary in each place. In one place homelessness may be the most pressing need. Another context will present much different issues. Downtown Washington is a very different context from that of Alexandria at the corner of Russell and Glebe.

The church is much more than this building where we gather. We gather here week by week to worship and feast at the Eucharistic banquet, and it is in this gathering that we are most fully ourselves, the body of Christ. But we also leave this place to be the church in the world. What we do here is not a private affair that can be bounded by the walls of this church. No, we come here to receive the bread of life, the very presence of Christ, so that we can be his body in the world. As Jesus said in today’s gospel reading, this bread of life is given ‘for the life of the world’ (John 6:51). So let us recommit, both as individuals and as a community, to be imitators of God. Let us commit to be a community that is always listening to the movement of the Holy Spirit and seeking out our neighbors. Let us live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us and for the life of the world. Amen.