



Pastor Gwen's Sermon
7th Sunday of Easter
"Community"
Sunday, May 12, 2024

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN!

Christ is Risen. . . . He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!

Well, today is the 7th and last Sunday in the Easter season. The Gospel text for today is always taken from the long prayer Jesus prays for his followers in John's Gospel. This prayer was spoken to His father on the night before his death. It includes a message to us about His desire for all his followers to be one, as He is one with His Father. Last Sunday we talked about joy and how we find that in abiding or being one with Jesus. Today we shift our focus to another way to find His joy and that is in community, the fellowship of all believers.

I believe that the oneness Jesus speaks about is not merely doctrinal agreement or institutional unity, but rather a way of life that He wishes for his disciples, all of his disciples, even us today. It is a wish for us to experience mutual love and joy in community with each other. It is a wish for more than just not living a life of fighting and conflict. It is a total, unreserved sharing of everything with one another. It is a life of fellowship with other like minds. It is for our church to exhibit the kind of unity when we act as Christ's presence in the world.

For a moment let us look at the part of the prayer that is our Gospel reading today. Jesus knew that he was on his way to the cross. He could have prayed for himself, prayed for strength to overcome, and withstand the torture that was in his future, but he did not. He instead is thinking of us, thinking of you and me. Jesus is praying on our behalf. v. 9 "I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours." Jesus is asking his Father on our behalf, asking for us to be protected. v. 11 says, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." And in v 15, "I ask you to protect them from the evil one."

It is just like Jesus to forget about himself and rather pray for us. Always thinking about his disciples! What an awesome Lord!

So, what is this oneness Jesus is speaking about? I think it is teamwork. I think it is support for one another. I think it is sharing in God's kingdom. I think it is building up our relationship with each other and with Christ. This whole prayer John reports in his Gospel is a prayer for Christian unity. Jesus experiences complete joy when all of his followers are united as one. He wishes for us to experience that joy, as we are one in His name here on earth.

Jesus prays for the unity among his disciples to be like the unity between Jesus and God. That is a powerful image. Just imagine what we could do if we were linked together that closely. If we would only let the Holy Spirit empower us to live in total community with each other.

Those of you who are baby boomer are probably familiar with the Hippie movement of the 60's and 70's. Love was in the air as flower children walked around saying, "Peace". Hundreds of people lived on a single property together. The idea of commune took hold. They grew food together; they ate together, they all worked for the common good. But ultimately one person was in charge of the commune and the finances. Things fell apart when people living in them found that they could not all really be equal. These communes were probably a great idea in a perfect world of perfect people, but one that would not work where sinful humans were involved.

Today more than ever community life is on the decline. Robert Putman a Professor at Harvard wrote a book call Bowling Alone. In this book, he talks about the decline in community life in the last four decades, since the Hippie days. Since 1960's the percentage of people who belonged to a bowling league is less than 20%. That was an interesting statistic to me. In 1983 I was commissioned to do a study on bowling from Brunswick Corporation. I used the opportunity to research why people did not return to a bowling league as my master's degree thesis topic. And after interviewing thousands of bowlers, the number one reason they did not return the next year was because their friends did not come back. A communal activity! We have moved away from joining lots of things.

Most organizations I have belonged to in the recent past have the 10/90 rule. You know it too. 10% of the people do 90% of the work. This shows that less people, even if in a group, are truly invested in the mission. Why do we have this climate of non-participation in community? Some blame TV. Others blame dual career families. Or could it be the electronic media age of emails, texting, and twitting. Here at CTS, we have made it easy to find out what is going on in our community. We have the monthly newsletter, Pathfinder, on our website as well as my written sermons . Our church secretary posts our Bible readings and my sermon on facebook each week. Big events can be read on the sign outside. So, you don't have to even enter our doors to know what is going on here at our church.

There seems to be many reasons that are pulling communities apart. I just know that it is more difficult to come together in community than it was decades ago. I see society today continuing to move away from concern about family and community and what is good for society as a whole. Today, we accept a culture that is concentrating on what is good for us personally as individuals. It is the "you have to take care of yourself first mentality".

Our society rewards being able to go it alone. Just think of the heroes in our favorite movies, Rambo, Dirty Harry, the Terminator, Jason Bourne, James Bond and even one of my favorites Lee Child's, Jack Reacher. They go it alone to solve the crime, to make things right in a not so right world. And then we can think of ourselves. When you get a new phone book, what is the first name and number you look up? Come on admit it, it is your own. Or when you received your first yearbook in high school, remember back that far. What was the first face you sought out, yep, your own. We have a preoccupation with self. We are human.

The philosopher Schopenhauer once told a story about a group of porcupines. They were marooned in the middle of a frozen field during a terrible blizzard. There was no way they could

escape the biting wind. They could not borrow into the frozen ground. As they huddled together to keep warm their sharp quills began to pinch and hurt each other. The closer they moved together the more the pain increased. Some of the animals could not bear the pain and drew apart to sleep. In the morning those who left the group had frozen to death.

Not a pretty story and not the story Christ wants for us either. Although there may be a temptation to withdraw and isolate to keep from getting hurt, it is not the plan for unity that Jesus wants for us. For our spiritual wellbeing and inner joy, we need to be in community.

Man was created to be God centered. That all got turned up-side down when Adam and Eve sinned. The fallen nature that we inherit from them is a self-center nature. But Jesus is praying in the 17th chapter of John for us not to be that way. After all he came to deliver us from that fate. He came to do more than to forgive us of our sins as wonderful as that is. He came to deliver us from our obsession with ourselves. He prayed to get help from the Father in making us see how unity with others can build up our community in His name.

Hebrews 10:24-25 says, "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another." We must be intentional about meeting together.

Each spring large churches wrestle with the question, "Should we go to just one service in the summer?" I have been a part of many of these discussions and my thought is why would we want to give the impression that it is ok not to come to worship during the summer. Going to one service and expecting less people to attend is like giving permission for members of the congregation to stay home. We have to be intentional about our expectations as well. Here at CTS, we are fortunate to often feel like we might need another service as we receive our friends who return to the beautiful lakes around us.

Some of you have heard me tell the story about the Downing's policy of getting my two teenagers to church every Sunday. I always gave them a choice. 8:00 or 10:30. There was no other option. At least not while they were living in my house!

And we hear that wish for us in this prayer from Jesus. He wished for us to be in community in order to feel the joy of discipleship. And how do you do that if you do not come to worship each week? I would say that the most important thing a Christian community can do together is to worship God together. To meet at the Lords table and join in the feast He has prepared for us. It is there that we are filled with joy to go out and do the work that God calls us too.

My Christian mentor, Pastor Larry Westfield gave me a little book once written by the Christian martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It is called Life Together. It is an excellent book about Christian community. I think it was Pastor Larry's way of telling me that I cannot do this ministry thing alone. We are all in it together. I would like to read just a bit of a paragraph from his book, "God has willed that we should seek and find His living Word in the witness of a brother or sister, in the mouth of a man or woman. Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation."

Fellowship, community in Christ is very important for our faith and daily living. We need each other's faith as we journey down the road of life.

There are three things I would quickly like to lift up about Christian community this morning.

First, is that Community means unity in love. It is not that we live in a community where we all just need to believe core doctrine. The purpose of our unity is that the world may believe that Christ is real. Jesus loved everyone and He is our example. We need to love all, even those who think differently than us, even those who act differently than and even those who look different than us. He made no distinction, and neither should we. God's family must be a place where we are committed to each other in love, where we can have lasting friendships. Jesus prayed for us to be in unity with each other. To have the freedom to be who we are without judgment and condemnation. To be loved and nurtured in Christian community, just as Christ loved the least, the lost and the lonely.

Second point is that community means we keep our eyes on Jesus together. If we place our trust in other people, ourselves or being right we will be disappointed every time. Hebrews 12:2 contains advice from Paul and says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus". What great advice he preached as he wrote letters to the new churches growing up in the Mediterranean region. Keep your eyes on Jesus.

Lastly, Community means losing ourselves in service. We should look at what we need to do to bring the message of Jesus Christ to the greater community. To demonstrate our love for them and each other as to what it means to be a follower of Christ. When we lose ourselves in ministry, we somehow find it easier to work as a community, next to each other for the common good. Here at CTS, we have many service activities that you can participate in. Yesterday, Sleep in Heavenly Peace built ___ beds for children in our community that are sleeping on the floor. I worked with several of you at the Lord's Cupboard yesterday to sort and shelve the food from the Postal workers, "Stamp Out Hunger." In September we are encouraged to find another community project to get involved in during the ELCA weekend of "God's Work, Our Hands". Our women make quilts, kits, and prayer shawls year-round. Folks, we have a passion for ministry here. Our focus unites in a new spirit of service in the name of Jesus Christ. And with that attitude, the possibilities are endless. There is a great big world out there right here in the Park Falls area that needs to hear and see the message of the love of Jesus Christ. With Christ in our hearts all things are possible in His name. Who would have thought that 50 or so children did not have a bed of their own in our own community. We don't know until we ask where we are needed to share God's love. I hope you have all experienced the joy that helping others gives. I also pray that you have found strength and love in our community of faith here at Christ the Servant. When we love one another like Christ first loved us it is special. It is that love and joy that Jesus puts in our hearts when we follow him in community. (first ending)

AMEN

And I would like to close with a short illustration that I read by Richard Tow, who I think is a Methodist minister. I asked my daughter, Leigh, who is a forester, if it's details were really true, and she said you bet! So, I would like to share this image with you.

The huge redwood trees in California are amazing. They are the largest living things on earth and the tallest trees in the world. Have any of you seen them? Well, some of them are 300 feet tall and more than 2000 years old. You would think that trees that large would have a tremendous root

system, reaching down hundreds of feet into the earth. I think Leigh called this a taproot. But that is not the case. Redwoods have a very shallow root system, only 15 to 20 feet deep. The roots of these trees, however, reach out 100 feet in all directions intertwined with other redwoods. They are tied in with each other: interlocked which increases greatly their stability. When storms come and the winds blow the redwoods remain standing. Their roots locking together to support and sustain each other. They need one another to survive. And so do we! AMEN

Christ is Risen. . . . He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!