

“Life Together” – Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter

Texts: Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; I John 1:1- 2:2; John 20:19-31

The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson, St. Francis, Holden

I don't know when our bulletins here at St. Francis first started declaring that the ministers are “every member of the congregation” but it pre-dates my arrival here more than eleven years ago. And it is good theology, so I'm grateful to whoever started that. More importantly, I've found that it is something taken seriously here. These aren't just words on a piece of paper or some abstract theological cliché. Going back to the first days of this parish's founding it something we are intentional about trying to live out and enmesh. You see it at work in the way we make decisions and do the work that God has given us to do. It's an extension of the claim that ministry really is rooted not in ordination but in Holy Baptism, which means the work we are called to do is *shared*. That doesn't mean that there isn't a role for clergy but it means the ordained here have an opportunity to do what the Prayerbook says priests are called to do: preach and celebrate and provide pastoral care and oversight that helps build up the body of Christ.

Last fall the vestry appointed a task force with an unimaginative but descriptive title: *The Discerning Our Future Task Force* (DOFTF for short.) Membership in that group spans the generations from high school age to a founding member of the parish. The Rev. Paul Taylor has been helping to guide us through this process, which began with an historical reflection night last fall organized around the publication of Alice Carr's memoirs. Then at the Annual Meeting we had table conversations to try to assess some of our strengths and weaknesses as a parish.

The committee has since been interviewing community leaders including the Town Manager of Holden, the Chief of Police, the Principal of Wachusett High School and persons who work directly with children and youth and seniors and the economically vulnerable. Two weeks from now members of the committee will be leading us in something called a “norms inventory”—more about what that means as it gets closer. Ultimately the vestry will receive a report from the DOFTF sometime later this spring that will help us to set some strategic goals. Our prayer is that those goals will keep us on track for the next five years or so. Stay tuned...

Ultimately the Church is not a building or a steeple, but a *people*. We need buildings to fulfill our mission and we have a responsibility to care for those buildings so that future generations can continue to be formed here. But first and foremost we are a people journeying together toward the Promised Land. First and foremost we are living and breathing members of Christ's resurrected Body, a Body called to serve the world. (That is why those interviews with community leaders are an important part of this process of discernment.)

On this Second Sunday of Easter, what do the readings for this day suggest about how we might go about all of that? Psalm 133 is one of the “psalms of ascent.” (What, you may ask, is a psalm of ascent?) It was one of those psalms used by pilgrims traveling up to the temple in Jerusalem to pray. Here the psalmist offers two similes for healthy mission-focused communities. First, when people dwell together in unity it's like precious oil running down the beard. Remember the 23rd psalm? God, the poet says, *anoints my head with oil...* Here the image is a continuation of that blessing—oil running all the way down the beard, which the psalmist sees as a good thing. The other is a more familiar metaphor for us: when God's people dwell together in unity, it's like dew on the grass.

It's no fun to be in a family or a congregation that is conflicted and divided. That doesn't mean conflict itself is bad. Sometimes I think that in our families and in congregations we make the mistake of *avoiding* conflict, which only allows things to fester and get worse. You don't get oil

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running down the beard or dew on the ground when you settle for “not rocking the boat” or hiding stuff under the carpet.

On the other hand, though, it’s very easy to lose perspective. If you haven’t read C.S. Lewis’ *The Screwtape Letters* in a while, then I commend it to you this Easter season. Lewis is right, I think, that the Evil One takes great delight in getting Christians to fight over petty things and making mountains out of molehills. When we are focused only on meeting our own ego needs and getting our own way then conflict can become corrosive and destructive—the very opposite of oil running down the beard or dew on the grass. The larger challenge is the point of the DOFTF: to discover our deeper *shared* calling so that we can keep first things first; only then can we find the courage to work through our differences in order to discover and rediscover that deeper unity that is already ours in Christ.

In today’s gospel reading we see how Christ’s resurrection can bring about hope and transformation for that kind of community. The disciples have gone into hiding after their leader is crucified. The disciples are locked in that room, scared and paralyzed; fearing that the authorities might come looking for them next. They are going through their own “Discerning Our Future” process. What will happen next? Unlike Luke’s telling of the story in Acts, where it will take fifty days before the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost, John has the Spirit coming as a new creation on Easter night. The Holy Spirit is the key to that new beginning. The first step toward that new life is to learn to put their trust in God.

As you know, the disciples didn’t do very well in Holy Week: we heard once again on Palm Sunday about their failures and about how they betrayed and denied and abandoned Jesus. When he asked them to keep awake, they fell asleep. But fortunately discipleship isn’t contingent on our perfectionism but on God’s mercy. Our God is a God of second chances. And forgiveness offers a path forward.

Whether the Spirit comes on Easter night, or fifty days later in Acts 2, the point is that the Spirit shows them a way forward and equips them to be signs of God’s new creation in the world. In Acts 4 and throughout the rest of Acts, we see the disciples doing infinitely more than they could previously ask or imagine as they continue in the work that Jesus began: preaching and teaching and healing until they become themselves signs of God’s reconciling love at work in the world. We are called to nothing less.

The Spirit’s work in the early Church had profound implications for how they related to their “stuff.” I suspect this makes most of us a bit nervous. We are accustomed to thinking of *our* stuff as just that: *that it is ours*. The key to understanding this reading from Acts 4 and taking it seriously, though, is to realize that Acts 4 isn’t ultimately about arguing for one economic theory over another. It’s not like the disciples have discovered Karl Marx. It’s that they have discovered Jesus has been raised from the dead and they really believe that and choose to live from that place rather than a place of fear. They are trying to live out the prayer: “*all things come of thee, O Lord; and of thine own have we given thee.*”

We live a good part of our lives not really believing those words. Our consumer culture tells us that the wealth we accumulate is due to *our* hard work. And if that is our premise then we *may* come to believe that it is prudent to share *some* of it with others: to those to whom much is given, much is

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expected, right? We may share a very small percentage of what has been given us or the Biblical tithe of ten percent. We may make a sacrificial offering of our first fruits or we may cautiously wait to see if there is anything left at the end of the month. We may share it begrudgingly (out of sense of duty or obligation) or with a glad and generous heart. Obviously the goal of growing in faith is to move towards a higher percentage of first fruits offered with a happy heart, but sometimes we lapse back into begrudgingly offering a lower percentage of what is left over. Life is a journey.

But there is a still more radical transformation that I think Biblical faith calls us toward. By the grace of God and through the Holy Spirit we sometimes see as the disciples did in Acts 4 that none of it is really ours in the first place; *it is all gift*. Whether we then keep 90% or give it all away like St. Francis did the whole approach of Easter giving is turned upside down: we begin to see that all that we have—our time, our talents and our treasure—is on loan to us. It’s been entrusted to us; but it is God’s not ours. It is very hard to live out of that reality and to make our financial decisions from that place of radical trust, especially in precarious economic times. Acts 4 seems very strange and foreign to us. But what I hope we can see, even if we are not yet quite ready to live it that way, is that this witness in the early Church of their radical expression of love for both God and neighbor made them especially mindful about the most vulnerable members of the community, those whom the Bible refers to in shorthand as “widows and orphans.” Luke tells us that *there was not a needy person among them*. That is an extraordinary statement. The temptation during our own times of uncertainty is to share less, at a time when those who are hurting are hurting more than ever. It is a powerful witness to what the Easter life is all about to allow the Holy Spirit to unleash compassion and generosity in times like these. The larger theological point (whether times are good or bad) is that you can’t separate your faith from what you choose to do with your stuff. Show me your checkbook and your calendar and I’ll tell you what you *really* believe.

Finally, today’s reading from First John gives us a glimpse at a first-century Christian community that reminds us that we are called to declare to the world what we have been told and what we have seen with our own eyes. We are called to testify, that is to bear witness, to who Christ is and why Easter matters. Now this may make Episcopalians even more nervous than the reading from Acts that asks us to share our money. (I remind you that I don’t write this stuff by the way; I am just trying to preach on it!) We Episcopalians don’t want to be confused with televangelists! But for most of us that’s not a very great danger. It is very true that too much of what passes for “evangelism” in our society is really about hocking a product by using the same tactics that the marketplace uses: fear and deception and false promises. But we need to reclaim that word: *evangelical* actually means “good news.”

We promised in Holy Baptism to proclaim the good news. In fact we are meant to become “good news” for the sake of the world: to preach the gospel at all times, and sometimes even to use words. But always we are a word about the Word before we ever open our mouths. I think Episcopal evangelism tends to be magnetic: if we are practicing and living our faith with integrity people will see it in our eyes. They’ll get glimpses of Easter in us and as in Acts of the Apostles (or Field of Dreams) people will most definitely come. In a deeply divided world, it really is a pleasant thing to find a community where people dwell together in unity; it’s like oil running down the beard or Aaron or dew on the front lawn. It’s a pleasant thing to find a place where forgiveness unleashes missional energy and generosity and hope, and Easter is palpable.