

April 13, 2008

Acts 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.

44 All who believed were together and had all things in common;

45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,

47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

NRS John 10:1 "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.

2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

6 Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.

9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Sermon: Koinonia

Loving Creator shine as a light before me that you may be seen and not I. Give me words that I may speak give us ears that we may hear and through your Holy Spirit help us understand.

Amen.

I really enjoy our confirmation process. I wanted to share some of their process with you.

The process of confirmation is one of getting an understanding of the Christian life. What is it to be a Christian? A church member?

When I arrived here in Monson, the confirmation process was not set, it had been changing as different pastors came through, but it was not set. With the help of a number of people on our confirmation task force we have developed a program to help young people ask some questions about their faith.

Our program is set around what are called the five marks of the Christian church. These are: community, teaching, service, worship, and proclamation.

Remember the criteria for life?

Breathes, grows, reproduces, eats there are a few others. We need to see them all to know that it is alive.

Crystals grow, but they are not alive. In the same way, each of these marks of the church is necessary to call a group a church.

I am going to take these one each week for the next five weeks, the last one being on Pentecost the Sunday when we celebrate confirmation.

This week we look at community.

The first actual gathering is to go bowling; our first official meeting takes place at a bowling alley. We go bowling.

The kids have fun, I have fun, Elaine Harris has fun. Bowling is a fun way for the group to get to know each other. Some of them may have been friends for years, others may have never met anyone else. I need to get to know them and they need to get to know me.

When we have our next meeting- the first meeting meeting- I ask: When we went bowling, was that church?

Some young people have the idea that church is what happens on Sunday morning. If I come and worship on Sunday morning that is church.

What is the church and how do we know?

Jesus used the image of a shepherd to teach the disciples. His listeners knew that sheep are communal animals, they stay in groups, they know their shepherd. At the heart of what goes on between sheep and shepherds is that they have a relationship.

This is where we begin today, just as we begin the confirmation process, with relationship.

Since we are starting at the beginning, if we go back to the beginning we know that before anything existed God was. God the creator, God the Logos – the Word of God, and God the Spirit which hovered over the waters of creation.

The triune God was before anything else was.

The Greeks have a beautiful image for the Trinity. They say the three persons of the Trinity are so close as to be dancing together, in this way the three become one. The image of dancing is helpful for me as I think about God as three that exist as one. God is in a community within Godself.

My Theology professor S. Mark Heim said it this way: God, as trinity is always in relationship, before God goes to work in the morning God is already in community.

So our triune God was a community and then created all that is, the universe with countless galaxies, our galaxy with just the right conditions on our blue world to allow life to exist, all the life that inhabits this beautiful world, God did all this to have even greater relationships.

God is all about relationships.

Humans have lived here on earth for a long time. We do not know all the details of our distant past, but the history we know is one of people gathered into communities. Early communities grew into villages and then into towns and then cities, this is because people need each other.

It is said the worst punishment is solitary confinement.

The movie shipwrecked shows what can happen if a person is deprived of human contact. Tom Hanks, shipwrecked on an island makes a friend Wilson, he talks to Wilson, he argues with Wilson, Wilson is his friend, his confident. Wilson is a soccer ball made by the Wilson sporting goods company. He needed a community even if it meant talking to a soccer ball.

The early Christians knew themselves primarily by being part of the community. The community was everything to these people. Acts describes a pure community where all things were shared, where all people were cared for.

That is how the early church saw itself, as community. They did not do missions work and send people out to feed the hungry, they shared among themselves; they took care of each other. They were a community set apart from the rest of the world.

These communities spread around the known world, sharing their story and welcoming others into the community as they went.

Quite early in Christian history, as early as the third century, groups of religious people were forming communities often based on the vision in the book of Acts.

One of the better known was Benedict. He tried to form a religious community with a group of men. After a failed first attempt he founded the monastery of Monte Casino and wrote the Rule of St Benedict. This rule for community life is used by every Benedictine community around the world as a guide for living as a community.

Benedictine community is based on promises or vows. Monks or nuns will make vows much the way a couple will make vows in marriage.

After they make their final vows, the brothers or sisters are essentially married to their community. They remain there usually, but if they do need to leave the monastery or convent, a brother or sister goes along, they never travel alone.

Community is not just part of monastic life, it is really a part of the Christian life.

Have you ever gone to other churches to visit and there seemed to be no sense of community?

I have visited a few churches like that over the years.

There was one church we went to for a few months when we had first moved to Winchester. We would go in and sit down and no one say anything to us. At the end of the service we all left and that was that. There did not seem to be any kind of community in that place. People did not linger to chat, they were there for church.

When we visited the United Church of Winchester, we walked in and were immediately greeted and invited to stay for fellowship. At fellowship, we were greeted as welcome guests. We could see that this was a group of people who cared about each other, and because they had such a strong sense of community they were happy to extend welcome.

The Greek word *koinonia* is what we translate community or fellowship.

It is also used to suggest partners when used in some forms and to contribute or to share in others.

We come together to share life, to be partners in life, to contribute to the community and to share with others.

Fellowship is not just the hour we spend gabbing after church, although that is one good sign of fellowship in the community. Fellowship as *koinonia* is deeper than coffee and cookies after the worship service, it is much more than that.

When someone in our community has a need, people come together to help.

When member found out about her cancer, folks from First Church took meals over and we began a prayer circle for people to gather as much to lean upon each other as to pray for the person who was ill.

When people hear that someone from the church is having difficulty, I often get a call asking if there is anything they can do.
People in this community reach out because we care about each other.

Fellowship may be best seen in the ways we spend time together. Committees, while they involve work are an opportunity to spend time together. As people serve on committees together they get to know each other. I actually have found that committee work is one of the best ways to get to know the sisters and brothers with whom we share the pews.

We can see fellowship in the choir, the Nomads, the prayer shawl group, the Sunday school, the church picnic and in so many of the things we do.

Community has been harder to find in recent years. Towns and neighborhoods are not as connected as they once were. Many of the relationships that exist in our society have become superficial.

The online communities that are replacing face to face relationships are a good example.

Many people are now able to avoid real relationships by having connections with lots of people in online chat rooms.

They can find people who agree with them and who like the same things they like. Gamers find gamers, movie buffs find other movie buffs, and it seems like for any interest you might have a group exists for that thing.

It is not to say that connecting with others with common interests is a bad thing, it is good to find others who share our interests, but it seems like these other communities are taking the place of real contact with real people. Real relationship is not about just finding others who agree with us, it is about loving each other even when we disagree.

I heard a statistic recently that baby boomers have a high rate of depression, and one reason is the lack of community. A mobile society where people are chasing the best job, the best activity may also leave people feeling lonely, even when they are surrounded with lots of people. That is because superficial relationships do not carry us through our tough times.

If your main community is your yoga class, or aerobics group, or book club, if you come in contact with other people only on a surface level, what happens when you loose a job, or a loved one, can a yoga class offer the kind of support that a family member might?

The church offers a different kind of relationship. The church binds us as family, we are joined in one body through Jesus Christ. We become the sheep of his flock, we know his voice and we are together as one.

We come together and we become the body of Christ bound together in our baptism. This is then manifested in the local church.

I have heard so many people say “I can be a Christian without going to church.”

What I think they are saying is that they can feel close to God without going to church. That is true enough, but we need to be balanced, and connection to community is part of that balance.

To be a Christian is to have all five of those marks. To be a Christian requires of us a connection to the body of Christ. We become a part of the community of Christians.

Now this is not always easy, because when we are open to others, we may be challenged to grow. Someone may ask you to read scripture or join a Bible study, or attend a music event.

Community challenges us.
Community holds us accountable.
Community helps us find our voice.

Living as a Christian in a Christian community changes us.

Yes, you can find God walking in the woods or driving down the street, God is everywhere, but knowing that does not replace being a part of the community.

The power of community has been demonstrated. As one, we can do little, as a group we can do amazing things, the sum is often greater than the parts when we join together.

The power of community was seen in India as Gandhi organized the people as one, it was seen in the Civil Rights movement as a bus boycott eventually brought historic changes, community was seen as the Solidarity movement won freedom for Poland.

Community is even more important today as communities are becoming more and more fragmented and people are more and more isolated. Just think few of us know all the people in our neighborhood. We may know the cashier at the gas station in Ludlow, but not our neighbor.

This makes our essential communities even more vital. We need our families and close friends. We need to bond to God's people as well.

An ancient Eucharistic prayer says as grain was scattered on the hills and then gathered in to become one loaf, bring us together into one body. Individual grains of wheat are ground up and fused into one loaf, the Body of Christ.

We are one body, that is the message.

When I ask the confirmation class if bowling was church, it usually begins an interesting conversation. Some say yes, some say no.

When we arrive at the bowling alley for that bowling outing, we pray. We ask God's blessing and presence as we gather in Jesus' name. Once we do that, once we gather in Jesus name, it is the church. Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am also.

A living thing has criteria to be called living.
For a church, or for a Christian, community is one of those essentials.

First Peter chapter 2 verse 5 says "you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

We are what makes this church, the connections of person to person, spirit to spirit, heart to heart, these connections, not the wood and the heating system and the pews and organ that make the church. If all of that went away tomorrow, God forbid, this church would still be here, because the Christian church is built on community and love, not bricks and mortar.

I love the old song, I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together.

Next week didache.

Thanks be to God,
AMEN.