

Fellowship With The Risen Christ (Acts 4:32-35; I John 1:1-2;2); John 20:19-31)

I want to begin with two little illustrations from the life of our church family. See if you can find the thread that holds them together. First, someone expresses a preference, and yet doesn't end up getting his way. No doubt his feelings are hurt. Yet he doesn't leave the church family. He continues to be an active part of the life of the church. Second, someone else who, again, doesn't get her way at church leaves the church. Nonetheless, she seems to periodically be drawn back into the church, showing up at worship services, at dinners, at celebrations. Can you guess what it is that keeps the person who didn't get his way an active part of the church and what it is that brings the disgruntled person back? It's fellowship, that blessed tie that binds all of here to our Risen Christ and to one another.

Just this past week I received a letter from someone who left the church several years ago because she wanted to hear longer sermons—at least an hour long, she told me. (Clearly this person was in the minority here, right?) She wrote to be sure that I remembered that she wasn't upset with me or any of you. And I answered her by saying that I never had any negative feelings toward her about her leaving—only confusion, since I believe the commitment to church family is so important. I told her that in the early church this was called "stability," and it was a major cornerstone in building the faith—a testimony to one's own family and to those outside the church of the love that the Christians had for one another and of the importance they placed in 'being there' for one another—the importance of their commitment to one another.

We see the importance of committed fellowship in all of our scripture lessons for today. The psalm for today says, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore" (Psalm 133).

In our gospel lesson, we hear the Risen Jesus encouraging his disciples to have peace and forgiveness, both of which are essential to creating and maintaining fellowship. And we note that Thomas missed the opportunity to be in fellowship with Jesus because he was not in fellowship with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them. Thus we understand the impact of Jesus' earlier words, "For

where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20).

In our epistle lesson, we are told that the reason Jesus' followers wrote the New Testament scripture was to "declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another...." (I John 1:3-7).

And in our lesson from the Acts of The Apostles, we see what that fellowship with the Risen Christ and other Christians actually looked like—how it was lived out. "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them...." (4:32-35).

It's interesting that these are the scriptures this Sunday. This is the first Sunday after Easter. It's traditionally called "Low Sunday." Our parking lot is not as full as it was last week. Our pews are not as full as they were last week. Yet today's scriptures are all about the importance of being here. To some degree, it seems like "preaching to the choir," right? The people who need to know about the importance of being here in fellowship aren't here to hear the message. But maybe we have these lessons today to strengthen and encourage and bless us for being here—to remind us that we're doing the right thing in being here in fellowship on this Low Sunday--and on every Sunday.

Many Christians get all distracted by the latest Oprah book. They think they can be "Robinson Crusoe" Christians, working out their own spirituality. They're wrong. Christianity is a faith based on relationships. It would have been significantly easier for Jesus to have just come and done his thing, but he took the time and energy to build a community. He chose 12 disciples, and patiently lived with and worked with them, showing them the importance of fellowship with God and with one another, as well as the importance of constantly bringing

others into the ever-widening fellowship. Jesus was committed to this fellowship.

The early Christians understood this. Thus they too were committed to one another—in every sense. They weren't concerned just about one another's spirituality. They were also concerned about one another's physical needs. Furthermore, they were so concerned about one another that they couldn't just put the equivalent of a \$5.00 bill in the offering plate on Sundays and then smugly sit back, satisfied with themselves. They remembered how Jesus had said if we have two coats, we ought to share with those who don't have any. They remembered the story of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus, announcing that he was ready to follow Jesus. But when Jesus told him that he first needed to go and sell all that he had to help others, he couldn't bring himself to do this. So he turned his back on Jesus. The early Christians understood what Jesus was trying to point out. They understood that money and possessions, while not evil in themselves, have a way of tearing fellowship apart. So the early Christians took all of their property and shared it with one another. And the result was that they became of one heart and one mind.

"A couple of years ago there was a woman in Oklahoma who had to be rushed to the hospital. But as she was being prepared for the operating room, it was discovered that she had a rather rare blood type, which the hospital did not have in stock. And so the hospital began to consider its options. They knew that if they had to wait for the blood to be flown in from a distant hospital, that that might be too late. So they decided to call the church where that woman was a member. And it turned out that the secretary of that church had just completed computerizing all their membership information, which included the blood type of each member. Within seconds, the secretary was able to identify three members in the church who had the same blood type. And upon calling those members, one of them immediately headed to the hospital, where they performed a direct transfusion that saved the patient's life. That's really what the church is to be like. To be there for each other, no matter what the need is."¹

H. George Anderson was the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the ELCA. But some years before he became bishop, his wife suffered with and died from cancer. He later spoke of what a difficult time this

¹ Bowen, C. Edward, "To Tell The Truth"

was for him. He questioned his faith, and he became angry with God. Nonetheless, he continued going to church, being part of the fellowship, even though he couldn't bring himself to sing the hymns, especially the upbeat, joyful hymns. He couldn't even join in the praying. But the others members of his church family could sing and pray, and, he later said, this was powerful because he felt as if they were singing and praying for him, during this time when he could not do it himself. As time went on, his wounds healed, but he said he would never forget the power of being surrounded by the faith and voices of his church family, people who loved him.

It is our responsibility as Christians to care for one another. Creating and nourishing community are crucial elements of our Christian discipleship. We are reminded of this each time we have an infant dedication. After the parents have promised to nurture the child, the congregation is called upon to nurture the whole family. Same thing with a baptism. The congregation pledges to "be there" for the newly baptized.

If I were to ask you to make a list of what you're most afraid of, you might respond "the death of a loved one," or "nuclear war." And most of us would probably also admit to a fear of being alone, unloved, uncared for. That's why it's been said, "To love and be loved is the greatest gift of all." We all want to be cared for and cared about—loved. Thus the Lord founded his church—to be a place where all are cared for and about and loved. And this is a major reason why Jesus sends his community out to lovingly bring others into the fellowship.

The early Christians had a saying. They said: There are two ways to live. There is the way that leads to life. And there is the way that leads to death. And those two ways are quite different. But so often we try to get ourselves to believe that there's some gray middle ground in between there. After all, we figure that there a lot of people that we know that aren't 100% committed to Jesus and the church, but they're still good persons. But being somewhat committed to Jesus is like being somewhat pregnant. Either you're pregnant or you're not. And eventually, if you're pregnant, that fact is going to become obvious to everyone. And it's the same with being a Christian. If you are a Christian, then it's going to show, largely in your faithful, loving fellowship.

A Presbyterian preacher named C. Edward Bowen has said, "When I was in Egypt a couple of years ago, meeting with some church leaders there, I remember

asking them what they did about the problem of inactive members. But they looked at me like I was crazy. In their churches, there's no such thing as an inactive Christian. Either you're a Christian who's actively involved in the faith, or you're not a Christian. There's no middle ground. To them, the idea of saying that someone can be an inactive Christian would be like saying that some squares are round. It's just impossible."²

It would be easy for me to stand up here each week and tell that you it doesn't matter whether you come to worship or not. But that would not be the truth as shown throughout scripture. Our faith is most strongly lived out and most dramatically visible in our fellowshiping. For when we faithfully fellowship with one another, we also fellowship with the Risen Christ, through whom we can do all things. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; April 19, 2009

² Ibid.