

Once again it's that time of year when the Disciple Thomas gets top billing in the lectionary. I kind of wish we could rotate disciples for the Second Sunday of Easter. Every year we feel sorry for him, or we give him the benefit of the doubt, and call him a realist, just like the rest of us. But this morning I'd like to leave the individualism of Thomas behind and talk about the community of which he is a part.

Thomas gathers with the other disciples in an upper room that is locked. The group together supports each other in their mourning their beloved Jesus. The group is united in by their fear, for they might also be arrested and killed, and by their love of Jesus. They must have shared memories of the times spent with their rabbi and leader. They supported each other. And then they all together saw the risen Christ. This gave them the gift of unity in their present, as well as their past.

Each of our readings this morning speaks of a blessed community. And it highlights the joy and challenges of companionship, mutual support and worship.

Our oldest reading this morning is our psalm 133. It calls to mind the benefits of a holy gathering of brothers and sisters. It is good and pleasant. When in worship together they remember the priest of old, Aaron, who was abundantly anointed with oil in worship or sacred festival at which they all gathered. A vision of the unity God desires is given in imagining the dew from the north, where Mount Hermon is located, falling on Zion, where the tribes of the south are located. The psalm lifts up the whole community of all Israelites sanctified together by God.

Our reading from First John is a letter of sorts, written to new Christians. It is sent from the community of apostles, perhaps from the Church of Jerusalem, writing to those in outposts of the Christian faith. They desire to have the whole church know that we are all connected, both vertically and horizontally. Our horizontal connection is the fellowship persons share with each other, and the vertical connection is with God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Forgiveness of sins is highlighted as a necessary component to a community of faith bearing up each other. We all must acknowledge sin and wrongdoing in ourselves rather than just pointing out another's faults, and we all must confess these sins and become ready to be forgiven.

No community can thrive without a sincere willingness to admit one's faults. The community must learn that each will be forgiven; again and again, both horizontally and vertically, by each other and by God.

In the reading from the Acts of the apostles we hear only four little sentences. But they do get one thinking! Can you imagine everyone being of one heart and soul? Well, yes I can...sometimes. It doesn't mean we are necessarily all of one mind to be of one heart and soul. And it doesn't mean that we all have to be collected in one building, we have learned in the past year.

Think about all of us at Trinity Church, whether we live nearby or far away. We all have rallied around this church, our parish family. We have supported the ministry here, we have helped each other out when we are down. We have visited, emailed and called. Many have spent untold hours on church work to strive for God's kingdom come, and God's will be done.

But communities have challenges. Sometimes our experiments of working and worshiping together don't always turn out exactly the way we hoped. Back in the year 2012 our church began our own little experiment as a community, to save money for the parish and take care of our building. We decided that we would all clean the church ourselves. The vestry was strongly in favor of this. All agreed that they would sign up to clean the floors, bathrooms, take out the trash, dust and polish. Who wouldn't want to lovingly care for our spiritual home?

Well, it turns out it wasn't an effort that could be sustained. What started out as a grand experiment failed pretty miserably. We may highly value our church community, but many of us just don't have what we would now call the "bandwidth" to handle scrubbing and vacuuming on a weekly basis.

But we re-assessed the situation. People didn't point fingers at others and become angry. Instead, in the spirit of forgiveness, and recognizing that "oh well, we tried," we hired a new sexton to care for the church. If bad feelings are allowed to fester, this is the type of thing that can make a community fall apart. It is what we must call on Jesus to help us rise above the problem of the day.

(By the way, we have an upcoming opportunity for some community-building on Saturday, April 24. We will have an outdoor clean-up day which is usually a once or twice a year event. Remember, even Jesus was a gardener as he was found in the resurrection story from the Gospel of John!)

This passage from the Book of Acts may give us the impression that the disciples were better at this community thing than we are. It makes me wonder if the picture painted of everyone sharing everything really was possible. If this is what God wants us to be, the beloved community, then how are we to do so in the face of human frailty and imperfection? The answer is because God

would like us to risk being generous, and living an open handed life. We are to try our best, and remember who it is who leads us, guides us and supports us in our communities.

Jesus taught us this. We hear in the Gospels that Jesus sending out disciples two by two and not alone. He preached about who was his family. They were those in his community of disciples. And He talked about forgiving one another in community.

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. (Matt. 18:21-22 NRS)

Our calling as Easter Christians is to live with joy...together; with one heart and soul, being ready to support and bear one another up both in times of difficulty, when one needs to mourn or forgive, and in times of joy, like Easter Day and in the dawn of a new day in our country. Soon, the pandemic will succumb to our efforts to be vaccinated and masked, and soon we will gather together in safety, God's beloved community. With both vertical and horizontal love.