

May 3rd Sermon

This morning I want to have a look at our reading from Acts. In this section the author is speaking about what an ideal community could or should look like. Was this a historical account? Probably not - there might have been echos of "how things used to be" but scholars have found no proof of early Christian communities living this way. Where all things were shared in common and all were provided for. However, they were known for looking after the less fortunate - as of course Jesus was.

This passage should not be taken literally - if it is then the focus might become on numbers. And that would miss the point.

This is more of a guidebook or a goal to work toward. Look what we might be able to do or be....not nostalgia for what used to be.

The section begins by telling us what the new converts were doing and how community was being created.

The baptized devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching.

And fellowship.

And to the breaking of the bread.

And the prayers.

These four things are a particular set of practices or habits or priorities. What built up the faith of the early Church? What nurtured their lives as Christians and Church?

These things did.

In the Reformation of the 16th Century Protestants identified the true Church by the faithful preaching of the biblical message and the administration of the sacraments according to Jesus' institution.

What makes an authentic Church today? What makes a vital Church today?

A mark of authenticity and vitality in a congregation is the quality of people's relationships and their efforts to include others in those relationships.

I thought quite a bit about this in relation to Advent. Before Covid 19, before the state of emergency, before

virtual worship Council had put out a 4 question survey asking among other things about worship leadership, if worship met your spiritual needs and about community.

Over the past couple of years we have been asking about Advent's future. Where will we be? What will we look like? What matters to us? We did a dashboard that showed very clearly that worship matters to the people of Advent.

So how are we doing as a vital or authentic Church in these days of crisis, of physical distancing and of social isolation?

We are not worshipping in person - does this mean we are not vital or authentic?

I think our response to the covid 19 crisis has proved that we are in fact very very vital and authentic.

We are adapting to virtual worship - we might not like it very much. But the bare facts are we are getting more "views" on youtube - more people engaging with us than we were in person. What do we do about the numbers that will follow us from home - will they come through the doors once we are able to open them once more?

I do not know.

I hope that there has been something in this virtual worship that has provided peace and comfort and moments of joy.

I have found a great deal of faith in our future during this time of crisis. And I want to go back to an earlier point - one of the marks of authenticity is about relationships. Although we have been staying home and self isolating relationships are flourishing. We are staying in touch with one another - community is strong.

This crisis has shown us that we are indeed a vital congregation.

Lets look once more at what Acts had to say about an ideal community.

Devotion to the Apostle's teaching. I know from my conversations with you that you are continuing to read and study the scriptures. You are devoting yourselves to the Apostle's teaching. So we get a check mark!

What about fellowship? Devotion to fellowship means nurturing the habits of hospitality and it takes work. With

devotion to fellowship, people are made to feel at home, growing close enough for real rejoicing, encouragement and support. Well this time has shown me that we are all missing in person fellowship. We look forward to once more chatting at coffee hour and I am looking forward to the next potluck. Maybe when we are back together we will not take for granted our fellowship time and perhaps we will work a little harder to make sure that it happens. For all of our sakes.

But I do believe that we are maintaining fellowship as we continue to stay in touch by phone and email.

Advent is a place where there are relationships and cause for genuine rejoicing, encouragement and support.

The third piece of our blueprint for an authentic and vital community is the part about the breaking of the bread. This is in reference to Holy Communion but also has an added facet of fellowship. In the Eucharistic meal our spirits are fed. Are we devoted to this? Do we find richness and meaning in the meal? I believe that we do.

I have found that the experience of sharing communion with you is profound. It is emotional and I feel the presence of Christ at our table.

And finally the 4th thing - they devote themselves to the prayers. How are we doing here? I think here we are clearly showing that we are authentic and vital. We have been praying for one another, for the world, for people and places we do not know. We have prayed alot over the last number of weeks. I also know that the formal prayers of intercession and the Lord's prayer and the psalms bring comfort and structure to our lives. We are indeed devoting ourselves to prayer.

This time of pandemic crisis is showing us something very important. We care about our faith, we care about our faith life lived in community. We care about our community. The responses to surveys and dashboards may not matter as much to us once we are through this time of self isolation and fear and anxiety.

I believe that worship will still be important to the people of Advent. But this time has demonstrated that we can be creative to ensure that worship happens in some form. It has been a challenge for people without access to the internet or computers. However, members of Advent have helped out others by sharing sermons or the services.

I have continually said that I am deeply blessed to have been called to be your Pastor and that I believe Advent to

be a place of abundance. This pandemic only leaves me that much more convinced. There is hope in this time. If we judge ourselves according to the guidelines we see in today's reading from Acts then we can say we are vital and we are authentic.

AMEN