

Sermon

Sunday, Sept. 30, 2018

Numbers 11:4-29, James 5:13-20, Mark 9:38-50

Preacher: The Rev. David Martin

Scooch over. We need more room.

In this community, there is room for everyone.

In a community, in a Christian community – there is room for everyone – at least there should be.

Today's Bible readings are all about people living in community

In the Old Testament lesson, the people of Israel are STILL complaining to Moses. They are unhappy – AGAIN – about the food situation. Moses is so tired of their bellyaching that he, in turn, complains to God. God handles the situation by bestowing the gift of prophesy on a few of the elders. But then the crowd is jealous of THAT. There is no pleasing those folks.

So, living in Christian community means that it is impossible to please everyone.

In the letter of James, the writer tells the early Christian community to whom he is writing that those who are sick or suffering should be prayed for. Those who are cheerful should sing. The writer says if any member of the community wanders from the truth, someone should help bring that person back from sin

So, living in Christian community means that people should help each other out.

In the gospel, today, Jesus has a lot to say about living in community. First the disciples tattle to Jesus about someone who is casting out demons, using Jesus' name. The disciples make it clear this person is NOT one of them. Jesus tells them to chill out. Jesus says "Whoever isn't against us is really on our side – no matter what they do."

So, living in Christian community means that you can't exclude someone just because they are new or different.

Later, Jesus tells the disciples that even giving someone a gift as seemingly insignificant as a drink of water will get them a great reward in heaven.

So, living in Christian community means that no act of kindness is too small.

Then Jesus gets heavy and tells the disciples they are to be examples for others – examples of a good and healthy spiritual life. And if they do something that would be a bad example they would be better to drown themselves in the sea. If their hand does something bad – they should cut it off. Foot? Chop it off. Eye? Pluck it out! Whoa, Jesus, that is heavy duty. How about we just take those examples as metaphors for giving up things which we do that do not benefit the community. Yeah, today we'll go with that.

So, living in Christian community means you might have to sacrifice something you really enjoy for the good of everyone else.

Finally, Jesus says several things about salt. Many Biblical scholars believe these salt sentences are probably not related to one another. When writing the gospel, Mark probably recalled Jesus mentioning salt several different times and just lumped them together. In the most basic of understandings, Jesus is likely referring to salt adding flavor and character to food. Indeed, what good is salt that has no flavor?

So, living in Christian community means you've got keep things lively – full of character and flavor.

Let's review. Living in Christian community means:
we can't please everyone,
we should help each other out,
we can't exclude someone because they are new or different,
no act of kindness is too small,
we may have to sacrifice something for the good of our Christian community,
and we have to keep things lively and interesting.

This past week Fr. Christopher, Rev. Pat, and I and about 100 of closest ordained friends attended the annual Clergy conference of the Diocese of the Rio Grande. We had the privilege of meeting and listening to our Bishop-elect, Michael Hunn, speak with us for two days. He had a lot to say about Christian community.

Something he said blew my mind. And I'll admit I'm embarrassed to say this was so startling because it's so incredibly basic to what I'm supposed to be doing.

Our Bishop-to-be reminded us that we are part of a Christian community for one reason: to ensure that every member of our community can draw closer to God and follow Jesus – because we believe that is the path to true fulfillment and salvation.

In the end, that is the only reason we are here.

Being part of a Christian community means we all help each other draw closer to God and follow Jesus – because we believe that is the path to true fulfillment and salvation.

Of course, we need people to help on coffee teams and we need social gatherings and parties, but coffee hour, social gatherings, and parties exist to further interpersonal relationships so that we can help each other draw closer to God and follow Jesus.

Of course, we need Sunday School teachers.... but that is to help our youth grow and learn so that we can help them draw closer to God and follow Jesus.

Of course, we strive for social justice and help those in need through outreach programs, but this to help every single person we encounter through those programs draw closer to God and follow Jesus.

Of course, we need ushers and musicians, artists, readers, and servants of worship, an altar guild and vestry members, a finance committee and office staff and people who keep the facility up and running, but that is so we can have and maintain this beautiful space and worship services so that we can help each other draw closer to God and follow Jesus.

Being part of a Christian community means we all help each other draw closer to God and follow Jesus – because we believe that is the path to true fulfillment and salvation.

And we must remember that goal is a journey and every single one of us is at a different place along that journey.

This morning we opened our time together with a favorite hymn here at St. Mark's – All Are Welcome. How we at St. Mark's pride ourselves on making sure everyone is welcome to join our Christian community. In fact, the entire Episcopal Church unites in that welcome. You see signs everywhere you go with the shield of the Episcopal Church, the name of a local parish, and the words "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You."

At Clergy conference this week, I had lunch with a priest from Los Alamos. She shared a heart-breaking story. She served at a parish on the East Coast. After a particularly contentious vestry meeting about how they might serve the local homeless population, she went to the corner and dismantled their "welcome" sign. When people asked why the "Episcopal Church Welcomes You" sign had been removed, she replied "Because it is clear that this parish doesn't mean it."

So, when we here at St. Mark's sing "All Are Welcome" do we really mean it?

Do we mean the displaced person who wears dirty, tattered clothes is welcome in our Christian Community?"

Do we mean the immigrant who doesn't speak English is welcome in our Christian community?

Do we mean the victim of sexual assault who didn't report it for several years is welcome in our Christian community?

Do we mean the perpetrator of sexual assault looking for repentance is welcome in our Christian community?

Do we mean the person who you felt was rude to you last week is welcome in our Christian community?

Do we mean that everyone – no matter their political affiliation - is welcome in our Christian community?

Do we truly mean that ALL are welcome and that we will help ALL draw closer to God and follow Jesus?

Those are, of course, rhetorical questions. The answer to every single one of them should be a resounding “YES.” “All are welcome” doesn’t mean “Some are welcome” or “All who agree with me are welcome.”

All are welcome means exactly that. ALL are welcome.

But is welcoming them enough? I believe we should also add, “All are heard,” and, “All are loved” and, “All are cherished” and, “All are protected” and, “All are respected.”

Just think what it would be like if all those signs around the country read: The Episcopal Church Welcomes You. The Episcopal Church Loves You. The Episcopal Church Cherishes You, protects you and respects you.

If all are truly welcome, we are going to have to scooch over and make more room in these pews. Because after the week we have just experienced, it is clear there are more people than ever who need to draw closer to God and follow Jesus.

And even though we would indeed welcome the people in power on both sides of the aisle who were responsible for the ridiculous and embarrassing circus we witnessed in our nation’s capital this week, that’s not really who I’m talking about.

I’m talking about all the people who are bewildered by that circus. The people who feel there is no direction and no safe place. The people who are so worn out by the daily litany of mean-spirited tweets and responses they feel helpless and adrift. The people who don’t know how to explain today’s society to their children. Those are exactly the kind of people looking to draw closer to God and follow Jesus.

In our Christian community:
we realize we can’t please everyone,
we help each other out,
we don’t exclude someone because they are new or different,
we acknowledge no act of kindness is too small,
we are willing to sacrifice something for the good of our Christian community,
We will keep things lively.

In our Christian community:
All are Welcome
All are heard
All are loved
All are cherished

All are protected
All are respected.

Wow! When you put it like that, this place sounds great. Let's make sure everyone knows what's going on here. Let's make sure everyone knows they can come here and we'll help each other draw closer to God and follow Jesus – because we believe that is the path to true fulfillment and salvation.

So, scooch over! I think we're going to need a lot more room.