

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Resurrection Community”
Thomas G. Speers, III
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Lessons: Acts 4: 32-35, Psalm 133:1-4; 1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31.

“How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along!”¹ That might sound like some parents I know, but actually those are the words of the Psalmist as translated by Eugene Peterson. How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along. It’s like costly anointing oil used extravagantly so that it flows down over the head and beard of Aaron.

A number of years ago, Bessie gave me as a present, a facial. I gather that more and more men are experiencing this sort of thing, but it was a first for me. I sat back for about an hour as a skin care professional cleaned and massaged my face with creams and oils. She also massaged my hands and feet and I never quite understood how that was related to a facial, but it was wonderful. I went away feeling incredibly renewed. Unified communities are like that. They are like the dew on a mountain in a dry climate where any hint of moisture is a special gift and reason for celebration. Our lessons today all speak of life in the resurrection community, life in the community of faith after Easter, life in what we call the church.

But when you’ve been to church does it feel that way to you? Does it feel as good as a facial? Does it taste like water when you are parched? Maybe on rare occasions, yet an honest look at the church today would suggest that we have a long way to go to enjoy the goodness and delight of a unified community. We are not yet what God hopes we might yet be.

You’ve heard me talk about my continuing dream in this place. I think that we have the possibility of showing the world that in a time of fear, of distrust, discord, and difference we actually have another way to live together. It is a way that is grounded in the power of resurrection. It is a way that recognizes that because Christ lives, we too can live and live together. “How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along!”

Of course our unity is not to be found in denying our differences. That is not the answer. We are different and we ought to celebrate our differences. There are varieties of gifts, all given by the same Spirit. Unity does not mean the absence of diversity, far from it. God has made us differently, and that is something to celebrate. Unity does not mean that we all should think, act, look and believe in the same way. Think for a minute about the disciple Thomas, so often known as “doubting Thomas.” The disciples were gathered and Jesus came to them and proclaimed peace and they were overjoyed. For some reason Thomas wasn’t there. When the disciples told him what they had seen, he wouldn’t believe it. He had to see for himself, just as they had seen for themselves. It is an example too often overlooked. In the resurrection community we don’t have to take someone else’s word as law. We are permitted to have doubts. We are expected to use our own powers of intuition. Just because the elders tell you something does not mean you have to believe it. Search for yourself. If you have doubts, if you aren’t quite sure what to believe, then you are in good company. Sometimes it is the doubter who becomes, like Thomas, the greatest of believers. Again, our unity does not mean that we all have to think, act, and believe the same way.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. NAV Press © 2002. Psalm 133:1

Our unity is also encouraged by a realistic humility. In the first letter of John it says that “if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Members of the resurrection community know that we all of us sin, every one of us. We are sinful people. None of us is worthy of belonging to the community, yet by the power and grace of God, we do belong. When we are not too sure that we are right, when we are open to the possibility that we might be wrong, when we listen carefully to what God may be saying to us in and through other people, especially those who are different from us, when we exercise “mutual forbearance” toward those with whom we differ, then we nurture the unity that comes from Christ. Our unity grows when we maintain an honest humility that recognizes that we are all sinners, and remembers with Professor Shirley Guthrie that “the church is the only ‘club’ in the world that accepts as members only those who are not qualified to belong to it!”²

Our unity is also built up when we share. Part of the early church community, we are told in Acts, “were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common... There was not a needy person among them.” Some people read this passage and say that it sounds like communism: “We’ve tried that and it doesn’t work” and they move on. I wonder if maybe we still need to hear the words of this passage. Self-interest is altogether too alive in the world today. The chasm between rich and poor is one we can ignore only at our peril. It is interesting that one dictionary gives as its first definition of community “joint ownership.” We are called to be incredibly generous with what we have to alleviate the suffering of needy people. There is no question that we are called to be generous as God is generous. Our unity in the resurrection community is built up when we share what we have.

Most importantly, our unity is to be found in Christ, who calls us together to be the church, to be the resurrection community. We are not the ones who decided to belong to the church; we were called by God. We don’t get to choose our sisters and brothers in the faith any more than we can choose our sisters and brothers in our immediate families. We don’t get to decide who belongs and who doesn’t; that is God’s job. That is the most important step toward understanding the unity of the resurrection community: It comes from God. It is a community that is formed by the peace of Christ, breathed onto the disciples as they huddled in fear. Jesus says to that frightened community: Peace be with you. Peace, in all its fullness--health, wholeness, well-being, prosperity, justice,--*shalom* be with you. Our peace comes from Christ who sends us out to share God’s judgment, forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal in the world. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

This is hard work. Some people will laugh at us as being naïve or simply out of touch with the world today. Perhaps the opposite is true. Perhaps they have lost touch with God’s vision for the world. Wendell Berry has written:

*...So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it...
Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,*

² Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*. Westminster John Knox Press © 1994.

*that you will not live to harvest...
 Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
 Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
 though you have considered all the facts...
 Be like the fox
 who makes more tracks than necessary,
 some in the wrong direction.
 Practice resurrection.³*

George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona Community in Scotland, once wrote, “Only a demanding common task builds community.” Is there any greater or more demanding task than being sent out into the world in the same way that God sent Jesus?

In a world and a church that are too split up, where differences divide, and diversity is feared, we are given another way. Our community is built up around the demanding common task of living and proclaiming the challenge and joy of God in Christ. We are built up around the demanding common task of encouraging and challenging each other to share what we have, to become the people God would have us be: lovers of justice and builders of peace. How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along!...Yes, that’s where God commands the blessing, ordains eternal life.⁴

Let us pray: Eternal God, we pray for the grace of magnanimity: the ability to differ and yet love, the beauty and tolerance of a large heart, the joy of a generous hand, the strength of an honest humility. Grant us the goodness and delight that come when we live together in the unity that comes from you. As you sent Jesus, so send us into the world, empowered and emboldened by your Spirit, to speak, to live, to work for justice and for peace. In the name of Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, we pray. Amen.

³ Wendell Berry, *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*” from *The Country of Marriage*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. © 1973

⁴ The Message, *ibid.*