



## BLESSED COMMUNITY

May 21, 2017, The Sixth Sunday of Easter

John 14:15-19; 15:9-13

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Theme: Church community is different from other communities.

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*May your Spirit bear the ancient words of Scripture across the gulf of time, O God. Plant them in our hearts, and there may they bear fruit – delicious and nourishing – in our individual lives, in the lives of our families, and in the life of our church. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

When folks join Brick Church we ask them to attend a series of new member classes. At the last of them we invite them to introduce themselves. Instead of the typical “where from, current job and number of children if any” format, we encourage folks to offer a word about their faith journey and how it led them to the third floor of the Old Parish House of the Brick Church on a Saturday morning.

There’s a consistent theme to the stories. That theme is the longing for community. Like every one of us, many new members are seeking community. I listen as a pregnant couple reflects about wanting a community of faith in which to raise their child. I listen to the anxious mother of a thirteen-year-old boy reflecting about church and values. I’m guessing she’s concerned that her son is being pulled into the Upper East Side fast lane. I listen to a young single woman who just moved to New York from Peoria as she remembers how much growing up in her home church meant to her. She’s now living in a two-room apartment in the forest of high-rises in upper Yorkville and works 60-hour weeks as an admin at a hedge fund. She’s naturally longing for the kind of friends she’d found in her church back home.



They – and we – are right to ache for community. It’s right because life *together* is essential to our very humanity. Our world tends to imagine personhood in isolation, as a solitary reality. But the truth is that our individual personhood is invariably shaped in relationship to other persons. These relationships – family, community, church – are not a nice option added on to a fundamentally private self. Relationship creates us; it makes us ourselves; it makes us who we are. The Scottish philosopher John Macmurry phrased it well: “*I need ‘you’ in order to be myself.*”

When I first saw the assigned Gospel reading for this Sunday after I announced my retirement plans – a passage from Jesus’ long farewell speech spoken the night before his crucifixion – I said to myself, “*Well, this is going to be a little awkward to preach about!*” I may be leaving, but it’s *not* tomorrow morning. And I’m *definitely* not Jesus. And I am not going to the cross, only back to the Midwest! (Although some New Yorkers seem to think it’s about the same thing.)

But after I got past this clunkiness, I thought to myself, “Jesus’ long goodbye speech to his followers is really about *them*. It’s all about them, the nascent church, being an empowered, abiding, faithful community. And that’s just the right word for the day.”

If you listen closely to what Jesus says about community, you’ll hear that the community he’s talking about, the church, is unlike any other. There are lots of places you can find community. You can find community in polished New York Clubs. You can find community at a golf club in Millbrook. You can find community in your building. You can find community at the health club. You can find community in a bar on Second Avenue. But Jesus’ last words to his disciples make it clear that the kind community he envisions is utterly distinct. It’s very different in three ways.

First, the church is a community of moral purpose. Time and again in the three chapters of His farewell discourse, Jesus charges his followers to “keep my commandments.” Those commandments are nothing less than Jesus’ imperative to live lives of integrity and to love and serve others. This is to say that the church



does not exist simply for the sake of community. The church is not an end in itself. The church has beyond-itself moral purpose, a “mission.”

Brick Church works to be faithful to this aspect of being church community. A goodly percentage of our resources – both financial and human – leaves the corner and Park and 91<sup>st</sup>. This is not just a nice thing to do, a little genteel Upper East Side philanthropy; it’s our struggle to be faithful to Jesus’ commandments – the imperative He spoke and lived – to love and serve the world beyond “just us.”

Second, church is different from a country club because it draws its strength from God. You might say that church-as-community has both a horizontal *and* a vertical dimension. In this farewell speech, Jesus promises time and again that God will be with them. In the first part of today’s reading, He promises an “Advocate,” a reference to the Holy Spirit, the “Present Tense of God.” That’s the vertical dimension. Of course we need each other – the horizontal: community, family, church. But unlike other kinds of community, the church is also empowered “from above” as it were, by the vertical, by God with us.

The hard and precious truth is this: We need both the horizontal and the vertical. All by ourselves, you and I really don’t quite have it in us all alone. We don’t have all we need inside ourselves. We don’t quite have it *in us* to face the surgery, the divorce, the career change, the difficult kid. You don’t have it *in you* alone to be the person you want to be. I don’t have it *in me* alone to be the man I want to be. But the point is that we’re *not* in it alone. We have each other, the horizontal. And..., and we dare to trust that God is with us – the vertical – empowering us to be what we could never be on our own.

The third and last thing that Jesus says is different about church as community – what makes it altogether different from your club or the Second Avenue bar – is that the church is called to practice a radical, accepting, even sacrificial mutual love. At the end of the verses Don read, Jesus lays it on the line; “...*you shall love one another as I have loved you.*” And how did he love them? He loved them in spite of themselves. He loved them in spite of their fickleness. He loved them in spite of their thick-headedness. He loved them in spite of their betrayal. And how



deep was his love? “*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*” Bluntly put, the community that is the church is called to a radical mutual love, love without limits.

Tom Long is one of my personal favorite preachers. He once told me the perfect story to unpack this point about church being a *radically* loving and accepting community. Tom began by saying that he and his wife spend summers in an old farmhouse on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, a part of the Delmarva not yet discovered by the eastward march of D.C. gentrification. The only church in town is the struggling little Antioch United Methodist Church. Tom’s very much the Presbyterian, but becomes a default Methodist June through August. There are maybe 20 people in church on a good Sunday. Antioch Methodist is as loosey-goosey as Brick isn’t. Tom said they used to leave their building unlocked so people could stop in and pray. It’s one of the two things Antioch Methodist is locally famous for. But the insurance company said they’d cancel the policy if they didn’t lock up. So the church bought one of those fake rocks to hide the key in and put the rock next to the front door and painted the word “KEY” on it.

The other thing the church is famous for is the annual August Peach Fest – fresh peaches and ice cream and crab sandwiches to raise a little money and have a great time together. Kind of like the Brick Church Strawberry Festival we’ll be enjoying in a few minutes, except peaches in August and no neckties. Tom said that the Peach Fest is quite the scene. The church sets up folding tables in the cemetery under big old trees right amid the headstones, the only spot for outdoor dining, their 92<sup>nd</sup> Street. It is a whisper of the Kingdom of God, Tom said. Black and white, young and old, summer people and locals, the living and the dead, all eating crab sandwiches and peaches and ice cream in the summer shade.

One Peach Fest was especially memorable, Tom said, but for another reason. The congregation has a faithful member, a woman handicapped by a birth defect that robbed her of both arms and legs. She has hands and feet, just nothing between them and her body. She’s smart as a whip, drives a specially equipped van that accommodates her wheelchair, and is deeply loved by the congregation. Then one day she disappeared. Some members of the congregation tracked her down and



discovered she'd gone to Tennessee to marry some guy she'd met on the Internet, a man who made a living selling used CDs on eBay. Antioch Church was worried sick. Nobody thought marrying a CD broker you met on the Internet was a good idea.

She came back in a few months when the marriage crashed, actually arrived right in middle of the Peach Fest. Her big handicapped van rolled up to the cemetery. The side doors opened and wheelchair lift whined as it lowered her to the ground. Tom said the whole Peach Fest crowd was on their feet in a flash, all running to the van. The next day, Sunday, she was in church. During the greeting, the part-time minister, whose greatest talent is to love well, went up to her, put her hands on her shoulders, and said, *"We love you; we missed you; and we have been praying for you."*

The blessed community of the church is like no other community. (Guess that's why it's lasted for 2,000 years when all the others come and go.) In the coming season of change that lies before you and me, remember that the church is blessed because it does not exist merely for itself. Remember that it's blessed because God is with it. Remember that it's blessed because its love is unbounded.

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*