

Fourth Sunday of Easter

03 May 2020

In our Gospel reading today in John, we see Jesus present himself as the gate through which his sheep must pass.

Our New Testament reading in Acts (2.42-end), presents us with a description of the gathering of those who have responded to the voice of Jesus of those who have passed through the gate.

Luke presents us with an image what this gathered church is supposed to look like. We could debate whether we are presented with an idealized version of the church, but there is certainly evidence in the first century the growth of church was due in part to the sense of love, belonging and unity among the first Christians.

There is no doubt that Luke is presented a vision of a flourishing community gathered together rooted in the truth Gospel, the teachings of Jesus, preserved in teaching and guidance passed on through the apostles.

There are a number of aspects to this community which Luke draws our attention.

First, this was a community who was initiated through baptism. Baptism was sign of passing through the gate of Christ. While I want to be careful not to mix metaphors or imagery here but it is safe to say that this community self-identification is with linked with death and resurrection in Christ into a new life which is different from the surrounding society.

Second, this community is apostolic - The early church maintained a connection and relationship to Jesus through ministry of his disciples. The apostles are the trusted keepers or stewards at Gate of Christ teaching.

Third, this community is defined by the word we use for Fellowship is translated from the ancient Greek word *Koinonia* meaning Fellowship or communion. Later in our reading we will see the word (*Koina* in Verse 44) which is used. I do not think this is a coincidence, but reinforces that there is an intimate connection between the Fellowship (*Koinonia*) that flows into the social life and economy of sharing (*koina*) and distribution possessions and wealth in the community.

Fourth, the first life of this early Christian community is defined by the breaking of bread. While it is not specified that this breaking of bread is the practice of the remembering the Lord's supper or a common meal, I think the evidence supports that that it was both. Both were likely combined the Eucharistic meal at table during a community meal. I believe this is supported by references in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

¹and Jude 1:12² both which suggest that the remembrance of Lord's supper would be recalled during the meals among the first Christians.

It is also supported by the accounts of early Christian *Agape* meals, or love banquets which Christians likely practiced during first 200 years of the Church. During these meals the remembrance of Lord's supper take place at table binding together the whole community, it was only later that the Eucharistic practices and prayers was considered separately

Fifth, this is community of prayer, shared prayer. Indeed many of the prayers we recite together during liturgy find their origins from the first centuries of the Church.

Prayer Before of preparation before receiving the Eucharist-

Liturgy of Saint Clemente³

*O God, you are great,
great in name and counsel,
powerful in your works,
God and Father of your holy Son,
Jesus, our Savior.
Look on us,
the flock you have chosen through him to the glory of your name.
Sanctify us in body and soul
and purify us from all filthiness of flesh and spirit
that we may partake of the mystic blessings you now give,
and judge none of us unworthy of them,
but be our Supporter, our Helper, and Defender;
through your Christ, with him glory, honor, laud, praise, thanksgiving,
be to you and to the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.*

Prayers, like the one above were recited together and likely repeated and passed on as way of maintaining continuity and communion.

All of these elements taken together were the signs flourishing community: A baptized community, grounded in Christ through apostolic tradition committed to a Fellowship or communion characterized by love, unity, sharing whose shared life centered upon the act of breaking of bread and prayer culminating in the remembrance of the Lord's Supper.

¹ Bible Gateway: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+11%3A17-34&version=NRSV>

² Bible Gateway: Jude 1:12

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jude+1%3A12+&version=NRSV>

³ <https://acollectionofprayers.com/tag/clementine-liturgy/>

Today's readings provide us with an opportunity to remember Christ as the 'Good Shepard' and to reflect on how we are living as a church, as his gathered flock.

It is an opportunity to remember and devote ourselves more fully to Apostolic tradition, this history and inheritance of our faith. Our communion extends to one another, but does not stop there it connects church throughout the world and also the church throughout the ages, even all the way back to the first century community in Jerusalem that Luke describes for us.

Renewal in the church and for our own community should draw fully from the memories of those early first communities, drawing into a deeper fellowship and communion with the Church throughout the ages, with the generations of sheep who have passed through the gate and who have sought to devote themselves to living expression of the power of resurrection, a renewed community that testifies to new life and order in Jesus Christ.

As our fast from the Eucharistic table and from physical Fellowship draws slowly and hopefully to an end. I think all of us will more fully appreciate the importance and necessity of freely breaking of bread with one another in meals and the receiving the Eucharist.

With that understanding let us pray that God would instill a spirit of live *Koinonia* manifesting good will and generosity that results and sharing and stewardship by caring for one another, caring for our church and larger community by continuing and even increasing our willingness sharing our resources all the gifts we have received with one another.

For us at Christ Church Vienna, I do think we can say that we have these five elements, but how fully do we have, What elements of faith, of our faith do we need to allow to grow and develop? What is required of us to more fully become the Church Luke describes in our reading and more importantly how do we more fully seek to become the community that Jesus has called us to be.

Heavenly Father, *"Surely your goodness and loving-kindness will [us] all the days · of my life: and [we] shall dwell in the house · of the Lord forever."* (Psalm 23.6)

The Rev'd Mike Waltner