

A Community of Grace

Readings

Psalm 133 (NIV):

- ¹ How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!
- ² It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.
- ³ It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the LORD bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore.



John 20:19-31 (NRSV)

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' ²⁸ Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹ Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Acts 4:32-35 (NRSV)

³² Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³ With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵ They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Hear what God's Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God

Reflection

Christ, who bears the marks of love, grant us peace and open our eyes to see you among us. Blessed One, whether we see or don't see, may we believe, and through that belief grant us life in your holy and mighty name. Amen.

Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Easter 2, 11 April 2021, p.118

So imagine this... A community...
Of one heart and soul;
No private ownership;
Everything held in common;
People telling their stories, their experience of the risen Christ;
Grace;
No one in need.

Can you picture that?
Can we *be* that?
Can we *be* that?

Of course it is not as simple as it looks...

I'm not sure that the early Christians had it as together as these brief verses might lead us to believe - it is only a few chapters on in Acts (Acts 6) when the Greek members of the community come to the leaders and complain that their widows were being overlooked in the distribution of food - which led to them figuring out how they could ensure that everyone was taken care of (the beginnings of the diaconate as we understand it today in the Uniting Church).

But they certainly attracted the attention of the people around them. And they also attracted the attention of the Jewish leaders who continued to try and suppress their enthusiasm (Acts 5). So they were obviously being and doing, living in ways, that was different enough to set them apart.

Is that us?
Can it be us?

Jesus appears to the disciples,
breaking into their locked room,
breathing the Spirit's life over them,
inviting them to forgive and set free.

What's that about?

We talk a lot about forgiveness in the church, but do we practice it?

When someone hurts us, it is so tempting to withdraw into our cave, our locked room, and lick our wounds and plot our revenge. And yet we know that the only person that hurts more is us, and perhaps the people who love us who have to watch us digging ourselves in deeper...

Or we pretend that all is well until that person presses our buttons again or, worse, someone else does, and we explode with the anger we have allowed to stew or kept hidden or both.

In a community of fragile human beings, it is inevitable that we will hurt one another or let each other down from time to time.

Our strength is not in never hurting one another, but in how we respond when we do hurt one another.

Our unity is not in always thinking the same or always agreeing with one another. Out is not even in always having everyone do the same thing. It is in our ability to stick with one another - even when we don't agree.

And a fundamental part of that, is our ability to forgive - to forgive others and to forgive ourselves.

When we hold onto hurt - our own, or that which is caused by another person, we bind each other.

But when we learn to offer the gift of forgiveness, we set each other free.

Another way to think about it is the way the community is described in Acts 4 as "great grace was upon them all" - offering grace to one another, growing grace in ourselves towards one another, and towards ourselves.

And whether we agree or disagree - our gathering place is around this table, where, when we are struggling to find the grace to forgive, we encounter the impossible grace of God: who embraces us even when we can't embrace ourselves, who reaches out to us when we have lost ourselves, who forgives, restores and renews; and who then sends us into the world to do the same.

The other part of the description of the early Christian community that strikes me is the comment that says, "With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 4:33).

As Thomas encounters Jesus, he declares, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

How do you tell the story of your encounter with the risen Christ?

How does your encounter with the risen Christ shape your living?

Is your encounter with the risen Christ so much a part of who you are that you cannot help but share your story with your family, your children, your neighbours?

Today and everyday, may you hear Christ's words of peace to you;

may you receive Christ's forgiveness for you;

may you offer peace and forgiveness into the world around you;

And as we do that together, may our words and our living declare to the world, "My Lord and my God!"

Response

In life, in death, in life beyond death,

Jesus Christ is Lord.

Over powers and principalities,
over all who determine, control,
govern or finance the affairs of human kind,

Jesus Christ is Lord.

Of the poor, of the broken,
of the sinned against and the sinner,

Jesus Christ is Lord.

Above the Church,
beyond our most excellent theologies,
and in raw quiet corners of our hearts,

Jesus Christ is Lord.

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

Wild Goose Worship Group, *Stages on the Way*, Glasgow, 1998, p.202