

Sermon Text – Sunday, April 7, 2024 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**1st Reading: Acts 4:32-35; 2nd Reading: John 20:19-31
Scripture for Message: I John 1:1-2:2 “A Life of Faith”**

A question for us to ponder this morning is, do we consider ourselves a community and if so, are we an open or closed community? That question has been on my mind this week. Psalm 133, the basis for our call to worship this morning, in the Common English translation begins with “Look at how good and pleasing it is when families live together as one.” I look around and see that as true in this community of faith as well. It is good and pleasing when we gather to worship in unity of faith. It is good and pleasing to me when I can look on your faces and see God’s love reflected there.

That message of community and unity in fellowship is one thread that weaves through our scripture readings this morning. Reading from Acts 4 makes that fact clear. “The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul . . . there was not a needy person among them.” The Greek word used is *Koinonia* which refers to concepts such as fellowship, joint participation, partnership, the share which one has in anything, a gift jointly contributed, a collection, a contribution. In Christianity it is the idealized state of fellowship and unity that should exist within the Christian church, the Body of Christ. In stories from Acts we can see illustrated for us Christian fellowship and their building a life of faith – with all its ups and downs.

I think our reading aptly illustrates what Jesus intends for the kingdom of God on earth. The whole body of Christ in fellowship. Serving as Jesus served, loving as he commanded us to love our neighbor. Our reading from the Gospel of John also illustrates this – maybe they were gathered in the home of Martha and Mary in Bethany, and we can assume they shared meals and prayed together. Then Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” They were a community who shared their story with Thomas when he returned. They gathered the next week as well; this time Thomas was with them when Jesus came and stood among them.

That thread of unity in fellowship also runs through our scripture reading from I John. These words from John, probably the same follower of Jesus who wrote the Gospel of John, are the message of good news. Maybe these first few verses can be considered an appendix to or even an introduction to the beginning of the Gospel of John. The stories are similar, and we can consider these words a reference tool for living a life of faith. We are hearing John’s story as an eyewitness to Jesus – this is a testimony to the reality of Jesus in the flesh, fully

human. The apostles saw the risen Jesus in the flesh and touched the risen Jesus with their own hands, the good news is their testimony to those facts.

General consensus is that John writes this message to a community that may have had doubts about Jesus' humanity – maybe he wasn't fully human but only appeared that way. In the story of Thomas from John's Gospel, we hear that Thomas wanted to touch the wounds of Jesus before he could believe what the others were telling him. I wonder if that would be how a lot of people would respond, is this real or just an apparition?

We give testimony to the reality of Jesus in much the same way, but people want to experience Jesus with their senses. We make that happen through fellowship with each other. One commentary on this scripture tells us, "When we have fellowship with one another, the words we speak can be heard as Jesus' words, the love we witness can be seen as Jesus' love, and the comfort we give with touch and maybe holding hands in prayer can be felt as Jesus' touch." We affirm Jesus' humanity through our presence in fellowship with others. Unity of fellowship with God also includes unity with other believers – the two go hand in hand. There is no sort of 'mystical' fellowship with God unless it includes the whole community of God.

Another part of fellowship in a community of faith is how we deal with sin, both collectively and individually. Just as John testifies to the reality of Jesus flesh, he testifies to the reality of sin as darkness. He gives us a contrast that God is light in whom there is no darkness at all. When reading this we can think of 'light' as goodness, warmth, understanding, divine revelation and salvation and darkness as ignorance, fear, evil. Darkness is not only equal to sin but also when we do not acknowledge our sin we live in darkness. John writes about walking in light which could refer to the way we live – if we claim to have fellowship with God who is light yet in our lives continue to walk in darkness, the latter proves the former false.

Our claims to "walk in the light of the word" are proven false when our behavior is inconsistent. We need not only to talk the talk, but also to walk the walk. For Jesus to be real, in today's world, the community of faith must be real in words and deed. Our testimony of faith must be authentic, walking in light must be authentic, warts and all. We need to let the world see our wounds so they too can believe the good news.

In our reading from I John, verses 8, 9, and 10 are critical to our walking in light. Just as denial of sin is rooted in lies, according to John, confession of sin is rooted in truth and therefore dependent on the work of Jesus Christ. As a community of faith, we must be mindful that even though we walk in light and live in light we are not necessarily without sin. Sin does exist in our world even when

we don't want to see it. But, read I John 2:1 again – “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. BUT if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. Christ died for sin, not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”

The stories that come from a community of faith, like the one John refers to and writes to, are what enable the faith of that community to grow. Through these stories we are enabled to live with the reality of a resurrected Christ and a freedom from sin. We draw our strength and the courage of our convictions through fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. Surrounding ourselves with a community of believers in the body of Christ enhances our strength. Fellowship with the whole family of God strengthens us to complete Jesus' mission to the world. The Holy Spirit's work strengthens us in our everydayness. The church – the community of faith – endures, enabled by the power of the spirit.

Going back to the reading from John's Gospel, Jesus exclaims to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” How that belief happens is through the testimony of the community of faith. Testimony from the church that began more than two thousand years ago and is written about in the book of Acts, from which we read a part today. When we read through that account of the early church, we do not see a perfect transition and perfection of community – you see everyday struggles. You see imprisonment of the innocent, you see liars and cheats, you see grace and forgiveness. The reality of the church becomes clear through those struggles. Uneven commitment has been the life of the church since its beginning – but the church endures on the strength of the testimony of its believers. The reality of Jesus humanity and Jesus' death is what makes walking in the light, or a life of faith, possible.

So, what does this mean for the church? What is the message to each of us or to all Christians for that matter? I wonder if, when we combine the common threads in each of our scripture readings this morning, we can see the possibility of genuine community grounded in recognizing, embracing, and appropriating the life God has given. I believe what all of this leads us to is a life of faith, helping the community of faith grow and deal with the everyday struggles present in each of our lives.

We believe in one true God and Jesus Christ the only Son who we proclaim as Lord and Savior. That is a belief we hold in common with all Christianity – so we must agree we have a shared faith even when we are not in solid agreement in all things. There is no basis for us to be in conflict with other Christian groups, there is no basis either for us to be in conflict with other

religions such as Judaism or even Islamic religions – they too believe in one true God [even if the name they use for God is different from ours].

The common goal of all Christians is for the world to come to faith through Jesus Christ. It is not a goal for forced belief, it is not a goal to exclude some of the world. Jesus tells his followers to “Go and make disciples of all nations.” This is our mandate, our Great Commission as written in Matthew’s gospel.

How does the church do that? I believe it is by becoming the embodiment of Jesus for a world seeking Him. We do that by walking in the light as Jesus himself is the light. We do that by having fellowship and sharing our faith with one another. We do that by showing with our lives, our words, and our deeds the reality of Jesus Christ. We do that by living a life that is authentic, a life that acknowledges the existence of sin and confesses our participation in sin. Part of that happens by accepting forgiveness and Jesus’ atoning sacrifice for our sins.

The world will try to tell us that Jesus is dead – the pull of the darkness of sin can be quite compelling, especially to those who are not fully walking in the light. It isn’t easy sometimes given all the opposing voices and glittery appeal of worldly things. We must, however, realize that no matter what conflicts within and oppositions from without the church faces today, as Christians we have assurance that God is at work and God will prevail. That is the message of the Good News that comes through in our scripture readings. That is the message we give to the world as we strive for the unity of fellowship and faith.

It has been a week since we celebrated Jesus’ resurrection and our transformation from people who mourn to people who rejoice. We are fully in the Easter season; we can turn and laugh at the forces of evil who tried but failed to defeat the goodness of God. Satan tried to defeat Jesus through death, but Jesus’ death is our victory and makes walking in the light and living a life of faith possible.