

“How to Live in Community”
Sermon by the Very Rev. Timothy Jones
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
January 20, 2019
1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

When I began working on this sermon,
I assumed that I would have to focus on either
Paul’s letter to the Corinthians
or John’s story of Jesus changing water into wine.
Each seems so different, and unrelated.

But if I ask the question,
what do these passages from holy Scripture say
about our life together as a Cathedral parish,
then I see how they complement one another.

And if I ask what it means to live and work in a
world that desperately needs what we enjoy here,
then suddenly both passages have a message for
us and the challenges we face.

For we live in polarizing times.
Think of how our communities are fragmenting.

How friendships suffer and social ties weaken.
Our loneliness and divisions have us longing for
something more when we come here.

Just when I think political stalemates and stand-
offs can't get any worse, they do.

The Pew Research Center [revealed](#) through a
survey last week that Democrats and Republicans
don't have many or even any friends of the
opposite party,
across the political aisle.

The number of Democrats and Republicans who
see the opposing party as 'very unfavorable' has
more than doubled in the last 24 years.

All this at the very time we are more
disconnected,
more isolated by our technology,
our smart phones and blue screens
and chat rooms and online enclaves.

New York *Times* columnist David Brooks went around interviewing students at some of the most prestigious campuses in America.

He found a longing among our young people.
“‘We're more connected but we're more apart,’
one student lamented.”

“‘How do you create relationship?’ [plaintively
asked another.]

*David Brooks, "A Generation Emerging from the
Wreckage," The New York Times (2-26-18)*

Hunger for deeper ties and true community
undergirded everything he heard.

Where do we turn for guidance and help?
Today we see again how an ancient book
is strikingly relevant.

First, we see how Paul, that early missionary and
apostle, agonizes over
a congregation that has run off the rails when it
comes to getting along.

Well, they were a spiritually intense bunch,

which was one of their glories,
and one of their pitfalls.

They were white-hot with devotion for God,
zealous for Christ,
galvanized by the Holy Spirit.

And that compelling faith brought them together.

Speaking in tongues and prophetic words and
healings were happening when they gathered.

Who wouldn't be impressed by miracles?

But such intensity also created animosity.
Or at least the way the Corinthians handled it did.

There are in groups and out groups.
There's dissention, all couched in very holy terms,
all put under the banner of being faithful,
standing for what's right.

But no less corrosive.

Even the Corinthians' experiences of the
sweetness of Christ
and the power of the Holy Spirit led them to take
potshots when talking to one another.

Paul is quick to say how multiplied spiritual gifts
are a gift and blessing.

Deep experiences of God's love are wonderful.

But we don't have to look alike or act alike.

Different responses to God's grace in Christ, seen
the right way, actually
help the church to be healthy and fruitful.

But there's more. Their breakdown in community
life threatened something else: the true expression
of their gifts for ministry.

The church was situated in a cosmopolitan area,
and drew attracted Gentiles and Jews,
the rich and the poor, slaves and free people,
all united by their discoveries about Christ.

They didn't have to strive for diversity.

They just showed up and lived it.

And Paul shakes their shoulders verbally to say,

God blesses every Christian congregation with people with different make-ups, with different spiritual gifts, with varied abilities and aptitudes and experiences.

Celebrate them!

Some will teach up front.

Some will serve in the back.

Some will be hands and feet—doers, in the kitchen, say. Others will be a beating heart of devotion—pray-ers, showing up in the chapel to remember all of the sick on Trinity prayer list every morning.

All such gifts are rooted in the same Spirit.

All Christians, not just an elite few, not just the ushers and greeters, were to contribute to the warm welcome and vitality.

The gifts are to build up the entire community, and help them reach out to others.

For not only did Paul grieve for the church members there, their divisiveness.

He also was haunted by something else, another consequence of their in-fighting:

The grumbling and back-biting was harming the advance of their message in the world.

Like us, Corinth was a strategically located capitol city. It was the crossroads for several sea routes.

Intellectuals and cultured elites flocked to the city!

Paul must have thought to himself, *Just think of all the potential new members!*

Paul, ever the evangelist, thought those seekers might be drawn to the faith if they could see the difference it made in the lives of the Corinthian Christians,

if they could see a life-giving community.

With the way big cities can eat away at
relationships and community,
those outside the fold, those not in on the lively,
vibrant gatherings,
hungered for community.

They needed what the Corinthians enjoyed.

But not if that someone looking in saw petty
quarrelling.

Once I heard a church consultant commenting on
a tendency in the church to fight over our
disagreements.

Well, she said, nobody much wants to be part of a
church where people are arguing.

Which is where the Gospel reading comes in.
Remember I said both passages fit together?

The story of Jesus' sign at the wedding in Cana of
Galilee says something to the church's attention to
getting along in Christ, too.

Weddings in those days were big celebrations—
seven-day affairs. Pity the bride's family footing
the bill for that reception. Still the wine runs out.

John goes out of his way to tell us how big and
how many were the water jars.
And a lot of wine was needed!

But Jesus is there.
What a difference that makes.
An already joyful party gets even bubblier.

Sometimes we orderly church people forget that
our Lord attended a wedding feast and didn't hang
back in a corner.

He was at the center of
laughing and hugging and dancing.
There's pure delight in what it means to be a
human family celebrating a milestone.
There was a wedding here last night.
And the joy filled the room.
That's the way weddings are!

And, as John said, this was the first of Jesus' signs. A sign points to something. Jesus wanted to point that crowd to his heavenly Father, and he wanted to point them to a God who loves to hear the laughter of people celebrating people, people delighting in being together.

My vision is that we, too, go out of our way to bring a joyful heart, and reach out with smiles, across our divides and favorite groups. Why not attend a study led by someone you disagree with. Sit with someone at a meal you don't know well, and maybe do know but don't like! And keep your eyes peeled for someone sitting at a table alone, or a new family in a pew by themselves. Go out of your way to sit with them. Come ready to share the joy here, with others. And think of your neighbors! Others want to be invited to share what we have.

My wife and children and I were living in a
second-story
apartment in a Chicago suburb.

I was a magazine editor at the time.
It would have been a typical bedtime, except my
sons couldn't seem to get settled.

As they jumped out of their bunk bed to use the
bathroom one more time,
the thudding sound of their feet on the floor
infuriated our downstairs neighbor,
whose bedroom was directly below theirs.
He flew into a rage, ran up the stairs in our
building, and began pounding on our door.
“Open this door or I'll hurt you,” he shouted.

The police came, settled down our neighbor.
We were fine but shaken.

Not yet settled in a church home,
that Sunday my family and I went to church we'd
been attending only a few weeks.
It was the first Episcopal Church we'd attended!

The rector stood up at the beginning of the service and said, apologetically, “I don’t normally do this, but I feel moved to say that this place is a *safe* place. Some of you come from dangerous situations. But here you are safe.”

Father Lobs had no idea what had happened to us two nights before.

What a gift to be assured we’d come a place that felt safe.

That’s what we are, here.

And what we can become even more.

I don’t want to trivialize our convictions, wherever we stand on the hard, hot-button issues.

I will never say your convictions don’t matter. But let’s not forget a larger calling to be a people who show love.

These passages call us to be a place that is different from the partisan wrangling outside these walls.

We're better than that.

And if we're not better than that, Christ will make
us better--not rolling our eyes at what our fellow

Cathedral members think or believe,

but opening our hearts.

Paul stresses how much we mean to each other.

Then Jesus reminds us to keep the party going.

And those on the outside, tentatively looking in,

when they see us sharing that life,

showing that love,

they just might want to be here too.