

“In the Company of Others”
Sermon by the Very Rev. Timothy Jones
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral / August 19, 2018

Ephesians 5:15-20
John 5:51-58

I made my way into church one afternoon.
It was during the week. No one else was here.
It was quiet, still. And I walked along the aisles
and lingered at certain pews.

There stole over me a sense of the heritage and
history that's here. I don't just mean the
prominent rectors or distinguished citizens we
think of when we recite the milestones of
Trinity's 200-plus years.

No, I was moved by the power of the quieter,
maybe even hidden moments.
I could imagine, for instance, someone sitting in a
pew on a Sunday morning
still reeling after losing a job,
pouring out his or her disappointment to God.

In my mind's eye I got a picture of another someone kneeling, confessing to God regret and guilt over an extramarital affair.

I thought of someone whose child might have struggled with peer pressures leading to some worrisome choices, that dad or mom praying for that child by name during Prayers of the People, agonizing with God through their anxieties and longings for that child, saying, please, please, please God don't let us lose him, lose her.

Some over the decades have come here to find the courage to accept hard news from a medical test or a diagnosis learned the day or two before.

There certainly were tears in this sacred space more than once this past week as those who lost a loved one to death gathered for consolation. Someone came up to me after this morning's early service still stunned by a parishioner's death, and it helped to talk.

That afternoon as I walked around in the stillness
of the Cathedral, I could picture in my
imagination the countless joyful moments as
people over the generations
have sat or knelt or stood,
hearing a verse of Scripture read or explained in a
way that makes sudden sense of a struggle they
were having, or that helped them see a
disappointment in a new, more hopeful light.

I thought of the countless times people have
witnessed a baptism or wedding or confirmation
or chorister recognition. Maybe getting chills up
and down a spine during an Easter anthem or a
favorite hymn. Or people coming up to request
healing prayer from one of our healing prayer lay
ministers. Or I think of those commissioned for
mission trips or lay ministries,
or ordained to priestly ministry.

All moments not only spent before God, but in the
presence of *others*, in the company of other
believers and seekers and fellow strugglers.

These were little miracles. Quiet transformations.

I caught a glimpse of generations joining for prayer and liturgy and getting sent back out in to the world to attempt great kingdom things.

Of course, there's more questioning in our culture about why church going should matter.

The institutional church seems out of style in some circles. Surveys tells us that the number of religiously "unaffiliated" Americans continues to rise. That has affected church attendance across the country.

But no way am I giving up on the church.

In fact, what we have, who we are, is needed now more than ever.

Because for one thing, I want to say, really, where else will you find what your soul needs?

We think we like the ideal of rugged individualism. But we are wired for connection at every level, including our soul, our faith.

Why try to gut it out and make faith a do-it-yourself-project, especially if we want truly to grow and go deeper in our faith?

Now, I have heard people say,
I feel closer to God out in nature, when I hike on a mountain or make the rounds on a golf course or watch a sun set over the ocean.

Well, it's sophisticated sounding hogwash.

I mean, I love the outdoors. Time spent the woods refreshes me. And yes, moments out there can make us catch our breath with the beauty of creation's glories.

But while we admire the heavens, the seas, and the mountains, nature cannot meet our need for intimacy, our longing for relationship, for a connection that helps us through our harder times.

Where do you turn when you need deeper help at the broken places? You need someone who will support you and listen to your fears.

The beauties and even the glories of nature cannot
put an arm around you.

They cannot assure you that you are loved and
cherished no matter how crummy you've come to
feel about yourself.

No, for those moments, you need flesh and blood,
You need to join your heartache with the longings
and prayers of others.

You grow your soul with soul friends and
companions who help and challenge you.
Someone who will call you out, kick you in the
can, call you to be better.

Studies show that one risk for heart attacks and
heart disease is loneliness and isolation.

There can be a kind of *emotional* heart disease.
And I think there can be a kind of anemia of the
soul too that comes from neglecting time with
fellow Christians. When you try to live a spiritual
life on your own, you end up with a weakened
spiritual pulse.

We need the miracle of being together.
The miracle that happens when God's people
come together. And then are sent out.

Paul the apostle gets at this, in a way.

In our reading he urged the churches in and
around Ephesus "to make the most of the time."

To be alert, to discover and understand what
God's will is. That applies to us as individuals.

But it is largely a corporate assignment.

It's a word for God's people. It's a word for the
church, in this letter of his full of insights about
God's gathered people.

Don't get "drunk with wine," he says,
because that diminishment of a person's spiritual
alertness weakens also the gathered church.
It makes us less sensitive to the ways we can help
another, pray for another.

And don't go looking for euphoric experiences
from alcohol or any other diversion, not when you

can, as Paul goes on, “be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves.”

He’s saying, look for, expect exhilaration, even ecstasy, when you join voices in prayer and song and confession with others.

When you hear the Word preached.

When you hear the words of absolution.

I think there is great comfort sometimes in “being led” our praying. I love spontaneity in prayer. I love to pray spontaneously. But when I feel spiritually dry, when I don’t feel particularly fluent, I can be carried along by the momentum of a worship service and its language and melody.

That can be a huge relief, for our prayers not always to depend on our moods.

Someone stands in front of us and not only invites us to pray; he or she helps us actually find the words, words that we might never find within our narrow little soul. Suddenly it is not up to us. Or our supposed eloquence.

And we find help in the prayers of others in yet another way. Perhaps it is no accident that many of the corporate prayers of the church throughout the centuries have been sung. Some of the great passages in Paul's letters, scholars believe, used the words of first-century hymns.

Hymns are a way to pray and worship and praise.

Sometimes *singing* our prayers reminds us how much we need the voices and presence of one another to make a go of prayer.

What might sound like a squeaky, off-key solo becomes a mighty chorus when we all join in.

And one more thing: Jesus reminds us in the Gospel reading from John of his presence whenever we come together. He has said that where two or three are gathered, there he is in the midst of them. That is *especially* true when we gather for the eucharist.

At the Last Supper, as Tish Harrison Warren writes, Jesus tells his disciples to eat in

remembrance of him. “Of all the things he could’ve have chosen to be done ‘in remembrance’ of him, Jesus chose a meal.

He could have asked his followers to do something impressive or mystical—climb a mountain, fast for forty days, or have a trippy sweat lodge ceremony—but instead he picks the most ordinary of acts, eating [--eating together--] through which to be present to his people.”

Bread and wine, nothing particularly remarkable there, but shared together, with his presence, his very self there: Wow.

That becomes a shared meal of joy and transformation, the meal of God’s people.

Christ is our bread, placed into our hands, shared with one another, and Christ nourishes us, strengthens us.

With him here in our midst, who knows what further miracles we will witness in this place together?