

2 Easter, Acts 4:32-35

I read an on-line health survey recently that reported that a person's response to three statements has a significant influence on the individual's over-all state of health and well-being.

Each statement would get a response of, "Frequently," "Sometimes," or "Almost Never."

O.K., so here are the three statements:

#1. I feel hopeful about my future.

#2 I have close friends, relatives or others with whom I can talk about personal matters and call on for help when needed.

#3. I participate in group activities such as religious and community groups.

Did you hear a common theme there, especially in the second and third statements?

"I have close friends, relatives or others to whom I can talk, and call on for help when needed."

"I participate in group activities such as religious or community groups."

They're playing our song, at least it should be our song!
For a long, long time, one of the most important themes of my priesthood has been community.

I don't always use that word.

Sometimes I talk about the family of faith, or our intentional family, but I know the word family is not a universally positive word, so I use the word community a lot.

That's who we are, and that's what I want to talk about this morning (and it's especially appropriate as we welcome Cora today though the Sacrament of Baptism).

You and I are communal or tribal animals.

We need to be in relationship with other human beings, so we collect ourselves in all kinds of associations, clubs and organizations.

We're aware of the biological, genetic kinship we share as families, but we want more than that.

So if we're joiners maybe we're members of the PTA, or the AAUW, or the NRA, or the GOP or the DAR.

And if we're not joiners, maybe we are aware that we belong to a loyal band of fans who support the same sports team, or

members of a group who collect a certain kind of art or who enjoy a particular kind of music.

With the La Jolla Concours d'Elegance going on at The Cove today, maybe we know we share a special connection with others who drool over those incredibly beautiful cars that have come to town.

Think about all the different ways we align ourselves with other human beings.

Think about the time and energy and money we spend to maintain those alliances.

Think about the bonds of solidarity that develop in those groups.

Think about the positive feelings and other benefits we enjoy when we believe we truly belong.

Think about all those things and realize that they cast a faint shadow when we hold them up next to what happens when a life is deeply rooted in the Christian community, the Body of Christ.

That's the message in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning. This reading is a short, moving description of life in the Church at its very beginning.

“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...There was not a needy person among them...”

That’s a description of a radical kind of community.

Biblical scholarship calls it a “community of goods.”

Thanks to Karl Marx and others like him, it sounds to us like Socialism or Communism, and a lot of people would dismiss the notion of such a community as impossible, or unrealistic or just plain unAmerican.

But let’s remember that we’re talking about the Church, and not about some political or economic experiment.

The way those early Christians ordered their common life was not legislated or dictated.

It was a spontaneous outgrowth of shared purpose and commitment and values.

It was the result of being transformed by experiencing the love of God in Jesus Christ.

The spontaneous emergence of that way of living is a sign of a community that is truly Christian.

I don't mean that others can't live that way, but if a community is truly Christian, this is what it becomes, a place where no one has to tell us to share and to take care of each other, but a place where our heart tells us that, of course, that's what we do.

That's a tall order and becoming that kind of community doesn't happen overnight, but it's a challenge we accept when we are baptized into this family of faith.

In baptism we have been anointed and commissioned and empowered to do God's work in the world, to communicate God's love, to help bring about reconciliation, and to let this world know that we cannot tolerate injustice or hunger or bigotry or oppression of any kind.

This is our vocation, to help take care of people who are too sick or frail or poor to take care of themselves, to advocate for finding honest labor for every person who wants to work, but who can't find a job, to work and pray for peace and for a continuing reversal of the armament of the world that threatens every human life and diverts precious resources from being used for life-enhancing ends.

6.

This is our calling as members of this community, the Body of Christ, to demonstrate that the person of Jesus has made a difference, and that we can look to the future with hope and joy instead of with fear and despair.

That's not always an easy thing to do, because we don't always, or often, have all the answers, and things aren't always A-O.K.

So it's important to remind ourselves that the Body onto which we have been grafted is not a collection of perfect people who have arrived.

It's a place where we choose to abide to let the conversion and the healing begin — and continue, and it's a life-long process.

The church is meant to provide an environment that encourages growth and renewal, to be a place where we can unlearn our old ways of pettiness and selfishness, and to learn new ways of living expanded, abundant lives.

And if this community at St. James has been given into our care to be those things, then it has also been given into our care to be a place where it is safe to acknowledge conflict and struggle and pain.

Some of us have come here today bearing wounds of loneliness or grief or a broken relationship or some other kind of anguish.

A responsibility of this community is to name those struggles and to deal with them honestly and in the open.

And it is only if we can do that with one another that we can be a place that nurtures healing and conversion and growth.

If we want to be this kind of community we will need to de-emphasize our own sense of self-sufficiency and to work at being a place where our shared life is characterized by forgiveness and forbearance and humility.

If these are the foundations stones of our community, with Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone, amazing things can happen.

Overbearing, bossy people can become attentive and respectful listeners.

Fearful people can learn how to trust and to take initiative.

People bound to material things can experience the liberating feeling of living more simply, and the joy of giving things away.

Men who have operated from positions of power can learn how to acknowledge their needs.

Women who have been taught to follow can learn how to lead.

Strong people can confront their weaknesses, and weak people can find strengths they never knew they had.

We can all learn how to feel so close to each other that we really feel as if we are one body.

When one of us suffers, we all suffer.

When one of us rejoices, we all dance and sing.

This is the community we are being called to become.

We're not there yet, but in baptism the process of conversion has begun.

With God as our companion and guide, we can grow into all that we are being called to become.