

A People of Faith in Community

I was at the hospital, Friday morning, visiting a parishioner. As I was leaving I started up a casual conversation with a man on the elevator down to the lobby. It was a conversation that was pleasant and generic, and which would have ended as soon as we made it to the parking lot. But when we discovered that our cars were parked next to each other – that is, we were both parked in the spots designated for clergy – our conversation continued. It turns out that the man was a retired pastor, who had served churches in the Wesleyan and Nazarine traditions. I told him where I worked, and we began “talking shop.”

At some point in our conversation I remember thinking how nice it was that two people, who were otherwise complete strangers to each other, could get along so nicely. And probably because I had been thinking about our Bible readings for this morning, I thought that this was what it must have been like for those first Christians, we heard about this morning, in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles – they were a diverse people bound together by a common faith.

And in fact, as we learned from that reading from Acts, the first Christians in Jerusalem lived together in a community. And it was a living arrangement that was not all that strange for them, because it was a lifestyle modeled after the average first century Palestinian household. Because a single-family household – at least as we understand it today – was not the norm. Rather, the usual arrangement was for an extended family to live under the same roof. Certainly, you had parents and their children; but you also might find uncles and aunts, cousins, grandparents, and so forth, all living together. They were a group of people – different though they may be, and sometimes significantly different from their relatives – but they were bound together by the bonds of a blood relationship.

Well, what bound the first Christians together, in their community in Jerusalem, was their common faith – a faith which was supported by their regular practices. They gathered together regularly to hear scripture being read, to hear the commentaries and teachings on scripture, to participate in the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, to pray together, to share meals together, and to have fun together. (Does that sound familiar?) It was, as it turned out, a community that was attractive to outsiders, and so it grew.

The early Christian community did well together, for a time. I think what helped them stay together for so long – besides the fact that they shared a common faith and practices – was the fact that they also shared the burden of persecution. The persecution of Christians by the Roman government provided them with a common enemy. It was a situation that made their individual differences seem minor and inconsequential by comparison. (In fact, the practice of identifying a common enemy is still favored by many people who either seek power, or who seek to retain power.) But when the official persecutions ended in the early part of the fourth century – that is, when the burden of a common enemy was removed – then the Christians had more time and opportunity and inclination to focus on their individual differences. And those differences, which

before seemed small, suddenly began to grow in significance. (Here's an interesting, and somehow sad, historical note: Although the official persecution of Christians ended sometime around 312, at the first general council of the church, which took place in Nicaea in 325, at which gathered all of the bishops of the church, there was already a significant disagreement between the "orthodox" bishops and a priest named Arius. By the end of the council, Arius had been denounced, and the Nicene Creed had been adopted.) And the rest, as they say, is history.

As my conversation with that pastor at the hospital parking lot continued, he told me that he had a close friend who was an Episcopal priest "up north," and who was discouraged by all of the "liberality" that was going on in the Episcopal Church. And with what seemed like genuine concern, that pastor asked me how I was managing throughout all our current unpleasantness. At that point, I thought to myself, this conversation is not going to end well. So, in an attempt to keep things going along a fairly neutral course, I said things like how I thought that change was inevitable, and that change was often uncomfortable and even scary. But I could see that he didn't like where we were heading, so I changed tactics. So I talked about how the Episcopalians in Kansas were doing mission work in places like Kenya and Haiti, and that seemed to get him to relax. But when I said things like, when you get to know people and work with them, the differences between them – differences of culture, language, and even beliefs – seem to become less important. And, in fact, it seemed to me that it's when you began to put labels on people that their differences became more pronounced, and problematic. Well, at this point, I could see his eyes glaze over and, from his body language, I could tell that he was getting ready to end our conversation. So I made a point of shaking his hand, and "blessed" him, and got into my car. And as I drove away from the hospital, I felt just a bit saddened by how the conversation, which had really started off so well, seemed to end so poorly. But it made me appreciate all the more what we have here at St. Luke's.

When I was in college, I had a good friend who attended the same church as I, and we went to the same weekly Bible studies and fellowship events. He was of the opinion that the church was never stronger than when it was experiencing persecution of one sort or another. And he thought that the modern Christian Church needed another "really good persecution" to help it reevaluate its priorities and bring all of the many denominations back together once more. At the time, I thought my friend was a nut. Sure, he was my friend, but he was also, clearly, a nut. But now I'm not so sure. Sometimes, I wonder. And as things turned out, he left the Episcopal Church when we started ordaining women.

I think that the challenge for the Christian community today is to find a way to be more like that first Christian community in Jerusalem – that is, without having to wait for a general persecution, and without having to find a common enemy to push us closer together. The challenge is to find a way to focus more on those things that we still hold in common, and give less weight to those we don't. May we, one day, find that unity for which Christ prayed. May we, one day, be able to finally look beyond our differences and seek those areas of similarity. May all Christian denominations – and even all people of faith around the world – find a way to be One, even as Jesus and his Father are One. So then, hopefully, the next time I meet that pastor at the hospital, our conversation might end as well as it began.