

A Beloved Community

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, May 20, 2012,
The Seventh Sunday of Easter.
Based on John 17:6-19.*

One of the words I've heard most often around St. Bart's, particularly in the past six or eight months, is "community." Every time I've heard it, the word "community" has been expressed in the context of a deep desire, a yearning, even longing. This deep desire for community, for connection, came up in every Transition Forum held last fall. It's been expressed in various groups that meet here at the church. I find it often in personal emails, particularly from those new to St. Bart's who are seeking connection, or greater connection, here.

What kind of "community" is it that St. Bartians so deeply desire? As I hear it, the desire is for something beyond Facebook or other social media connections. I recognize that these various social media engines can provide a valuable way to stay in touch, especially for those isolated by circumstances or geography. They also can be a powerful force for good—remember Arab Spring. (I wonder: some day, could social media and personal relationships provide an alternative to war?)

While acknowledging their positive aspects, I am wary about the effects using social media has on us. How are they affecting our brains and our hearts? How might they be shaping the kind of people we are becoming? Are they encouraging superficial connections and narcissistic self-promotion (do I really need to broadcast what I ate for dinner last night, or what theatre I attended)? The pressure to keep posting and responding is relentless. Are these "community engines" helping or hindering our forming real friendships? Are they moving us toward authentic connection or toward isolation?

I believe the kind of community being sought here at St. Bart's is that of authentic, meaningful person-to-person relationship. Some people see church as a way to make new friends, and it is. You can meet some of the finest people in the world here at St. Bart's. I can attest to that.

But St. Bart's—and the Church's—reason for being is not to be a social club. If we were, we could screen people for "suitability" and we could charge dues. That might be easier all around. Then no one would have to make, or listen to, announcements about giving money. You'd just get a statement in the email, and if you didn't pay, you'd be deleted from the rolls. That might be easier, but that wouldn't be Church.

Church—and St. Bart's—exists for a reason that goes beyond a social club. Quite simply, we exist to follow, as best we can, the life and teachings of Jesus. Following Jesus' life and teachings is not about checking the boxes of a certain set of beliefs or doctrines, but about living the way Jesus lived—not just in this place on Sundays, but living that way every day out into the world.

What do we know about how Jesus lived? What did he teach and then show by example?

He respected women and treated them as equal human beings. He taught—and lived—love. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul; love your neighbor as yourself. Love one another as I have loved you. Jesus taught—and lived—that hardest of teachings: Love your enemies. He put compassion for other human beings ahead of "the law": he healed on the Sabbath and healed everyone, including the wrong kind of people. He touched and ate with the untouchables, with people on the margins: lepers, people we would call "mentally ill," people who were "unclean" or despised, with women, Samaritans, Gentiles, tax collectors. He also ate with the elite of his day: the Pharisees and Sadducees, wealthy and powerful people, probably a Roman oppressor or two. Jesus stood for justice of all kinds; he was a non-violent resister of all systems of oppression. Jesus associated with and healed and loved all kinds of people, period.

At St. Bart's we try very hard and very intentionally to welcome people here as Jesus would welcome them. We say, and we mean it: no matter who you are, where you have come from, what you wear, what you have done or not done, you are welcome here. In my work as the clergy person on our team responsible for Welcome and Inclusion ministries, I have the privilege of saying that to people rather often. Anyone who wants to be a member of the St. Bart's community can be a member. You can join this community any time, just by talking with any of the clergy or David Bryan, our Director of Welcome and Inclusion. You can join just as you are; you don't have to change anything about yourself to become an active, committed, involved member of this community.

Inevitably, the person looks astounded; some look wary (in a very polite way, of course). That sounds way too easy. They wait for the punch line. What's the catch? Truth be told, every time I say that, I'm astounded, too, and sometimes I look up, waiting for lightning to strike. But what I've said really is true here.

Every so often church leaders from various parts of the country call or come by to learn more about St. Bart's "radical welcome," seeking ideas to help their church improve their own welcome. Last week the rector of an Episcopal church in another part of the country called me to ask about this "anyone can join just as they are" business. He'd read our website and was genuinely curious, but also wanted to know how we count these people on the annual church reports required by the diocese. He didn't quite say this, but I think he wondered if we were playing with the numbers, or double-counting somehow. (Answer: No, we're not!)

If you want to join this community, you are welcome. Even if you don't want to join this community, you are welcome! If you join and also want to take the further step(s) of being baptized or confirmed or received, we are glad to help you follow those paths as well.

If you have been here before, you know everyone is welcome at this table, God's table, which we understand to be our privilege to share, not our duty to guard. If this is your first time at St. Bart's, listen for that invitation following the announcements. That's an astounding invitation—and it really is true. Sometimes when I make that invitation at weekday services, I also look up, waiting for lightning to strike.

St. Bart's generous understanding of membership and the open table offered here are only two of the ways we are trying to follow Jesus. I'd like to reclaim that phrase that's become used so often and is used too often as a way of dividing people, WWJD: What would Jesus do? No one can answer that definitively. But, based on everything I've learned so far, Jesus included and welcomed—and challenged—all. Whom did Jesus turn away from the table? No one, as far as I can tell.

In John's Gospel particularly, Jesus creates a community of beloved friends—a beloved community of leaders who have reclined at table with him, who have talked and argued with him, who have tried to follow him in a particular way of living and relating to others. Jesus prays for his beloved community and entrusts them to God. So, too, we will pray in a few minutes for members of this beloved community and people beyond this beloved community, lifting them to God's love and mercy and protection.

Another kind of prayer, a prayer in action, is taking place right now. A group of people from this community set off from here at 8:30 this morning on the AIDS Walk. Prayer in action took place even earlier this morning, as it does several times every week, as hundreds of hungry people were fed breakfast. Prayer in action takes place here every night of the year as 8-10 women are given safe, clean, loving shelter in this place. Prayer in action takes many other forms here. We understand ourselves to be "a house of prayer for all people."

For all the Church's faults, and they are legion, at our best we are—we try to be—a beloved community. Not a perfect community, but a community of beloved disciples, trying to follow Jesus. The mission of the Church, as stated in our Catechism (yes, we do have one—you'll find it in the tiny print in the back of *The Book of Common Prayer*, page 855) is "to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." That doesn't mean making everybody Episcopalian or even Christian. It means being a beloved community who relate to each other and to others in such ways that the love of God is shown and shared.

Being a beloved community of Jesus' disciples means being willing to risk authentic, meaningful personal relationship. Anyone who has tried that kind of relationship knows it is not easy. It is often challenging and messy. Sometimes it means disagreeing with each other in as honest and respectful a way as we can manage. It always requires forgiveness.

As Church, as our unique expression of church here at Park and 51st, we are about something bigger than any of us. This morning, in just a few minutes, we will welcome with a little formality and with great joy a group of people who have decided to join this beloved community. Their presence is a great gift to us. I hope this community will be a great gift in their lives. We are all the richer for their joining their lives with ours.

We will promise to support each other by our prayers, presence and gifts. We promise to companion each other as we work and live to share God's love not only within this community but outside these doors as well. May we grow in our understanding that we are all, both inside and outside these doors, God's beloved community.

Welcome to this particular beloved community.

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