

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Year A

Our Particular Community

[RCL] Acts 7:55-60; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

The Scriptures this morning draw us to reflect on what it means to be community. We each have our own communities that we come here from on Sunday, but we are part of the larger community of the Christian faith—a community in which we can gather and from which we can gain wisdom, rejuvenation, and identity. Within each of our larger units of community, there are smaller ones, such as our families, our friendship circles, our schools, our churches, and our workplace communities. We define these in very particular ways.

But this way of defining a community is not a new thing that we in contemporary society invented. It has been going on from the time people could group together to share the responsibilities and burdens of survival. Identity in tribal cultures came from community, not from individual accomplishments. One thing that tribes knew is that they were stronger together and that to go off alone, you would eventually lose your mind or die.

In Jesus' time, people identified themselves with being Jewish or Roman or Samaritan or one of the many other cultures and nations that were intermingling under Roman conquest. Jesus himself was Jewish and worked within the framework of being Jewish to call people back to God.

When we celebrate Easter, we celebrate a very particular definition of what it means to be community: We are the people who believe in the God who has been revealed to us decisively in Jesus Christ. As we say in Eucharistic Prayer A, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." This separates us as a community, just as it separated the community for whom the Gospel of John was written.

Our Gospel of John wasn't written in one sitting. Instead, it was written over time to address the developing religious and pastoral needs of a particular community. We don't know exact times, but given the evidence of what was happening in the social and historical context, we can understand this Gospel as originating in an early Christian community struggling to separate itself from first century Judaism—that is, sometime between 75-100 CE. The religious turmoil within emergent Judaism after 70 CE, when the Jewish temple was destroyed, is critical; the Gospel of John's focused talk about "the Jews" and its prediction of expulsion, persecution, and martyrdom for believers readily displays the intra-Jewish conflict of the time. John's community saw themselves to be a persecuted religious minority, expelled from the synagogue, their religious home, because of their faith in Jesus.

Of course, there were other religious beliefs swirling around during that time. The early Christians were also living within a Hellenistic society—meaning that much of the worldview held at that time was that of the Greeks—the principles, ideas, and pursuits associated with the contemporary Greek culture permeated the Mediterranean world. The way the Gospel of John was written is also influenced by this fact. This Gospel was written to a particular community in a particular time and place so that they could define themselves apart from the other religions that were around them. This Gospel helped define them as a community.

Things haven't changed much since then. We have different religions and philosophies swirling around us in this modern age, too. So how do we define ourselves as Christians now? How do we live as Easter people? Defining ourselves doesn't mean that we throw stones at others. Defining ourselves means that we live out our lives in a particular way as community so that people can clearly see what being a Christian means. In our lesson from the Book of Acts today, this meant that even unto death, Stephen echoed Jesus, asking God to receive his spirit and to forgive those who were murdering him. Stephen's faithfulness compelled him to behave differently than someone who did not follow Jesus.

In our American culture, we are not persecuted in the same way that Stephen was or how Christians are treated in other parts of the world. This is nice and comfortable for us, but it often makes it more difficult to show the world how a community that follows Jesus defines itself. The media makes this even more difficult when it highlights Christians that manifest bigotry, hate, and judgment on their neighbors, lumping us all into that category together. How do we continue to define ourselves in the midst of this? How do we show that we are God's people? What makes us different from Habitat for Humanity or the food bank? They do good works, too, right?

In our Gospel lesson, we have part of the answer. We know the way to the place that Jesus is going because we, by definition, claim to know Jesus as God incarnate—God with us—God's own son. Jesus was always going to return to God the Father because they were inseparable. Jesus himself was and is simultaneously the access to and the embodiment of life with God. This is our particular belief that helps define us as a Christian community and because of this belief, we are to love Jesus by doing his works and by keeping his commandments: love God and love one another.

How have we defined ourselves in our own community as Episcopalians? What does it mean to be Episcopalian? When we begin to lose our own identity and lose our saltiness, we need to be recalled to the larger community of The Episcopal Church and to the extended Christian community.

As Christians, we are not called to be like everyone else and as Episcopalians, we have our own distinct flavor. Bishop Brian Prior of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota asks this question in his blog from May 2014: "If someone were to stop at a gas station and ask where your church was, how would the gas station attendant answer?" Great question. Would the attendant look at you blankly? Give a vague answer? Or would he or she say, "Oh, that church! That's the church where this, this, and this happens!" What is our identity in the wider community? What do we want to be known for?

Here are some further questions to ponder this week: What do we value about being Christians in our community? What is God calling us to as the Episcopal presence in our community? How do we define ourselves, as the community for whom the Gospel of John was written defined itself?

May God give us wisdom and courage to live into the answers. Amen.

The Rev. Danáe M. Ashley, MDiv, MA, LMFTA is an Episcopal priest and marriage and family therapist who has ministered with parishes in North Carolina, New York, Minnesota, and is serving part-time as the Priest-in-Charge at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Seattle and a therapist at Soul Spa Seattle, LLC. She is also the Director of The Episcopal Center for Embodied Faith, a website repository for resources for the intersection between our bodies and faith, and a proud member of Thank God for Sex, a psycho-educational group that puts on community education events to promote healing for those who have shame around their bodies, sexuality, and faith.

Mother Danáe uses art, music, drama, poetry, and movement in counseling, spiritual direction, and creation of ritual, especially for pregnancy and infant loss. She is an alumna of The Young Clergy Women Project and has written for their online magazine Fidelia's Sisters and their Advent devotional published by Chalice Press, as well as being a contributing writer to the Episcopal Church's online ministry "Sermons that Work." Mother Danáe is also one of the contributors of the book Still a Mother: Journeys through Perinatal Bereavement that was released in February 2016 by Judson Press. Additionally, she developed and produced the verbatim play "Naming the Un-Named: Stories of Fertility Struggle" with playwright Amanda Aikman.

Her favorite past times include hiking with her husband and beloved dog, reading, traveling, visiting with family and friends, dancing with wild abandon to Celtic music, and serious karaoke.

Published by the Office of Formation of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. © 2017 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.