Christ Church UCC, Annville PA

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Pastor Tony Fields

**Listen and hear**

Today these scriptures reflect on what it means to lead a faithful life. Exodus describes the Passover meal where Hebrews celebrate the Passover meal. Well, Hebrews were living on a harsh Egyptian rule compared to the bondage on a journey to freedom. First, they must prepare and they must remember. Psalm 149 begins with a celebration of God and then moves to a call to overthrow the tyrants that enslave God's people. Romans reminds us to obey the commandments, notably the commandments to love.

Matthew calls followers to the holy life of the community, promising the presence of Jesus in their midst.

The biggest question that faces us is how do we live in a community? And I think today’s scripture addresses how we are to “be” in a society when situations arise. Let's be real because this is a problem of today, and how do we remain faithful and engage each other?

I want to talk about Community. As members, each person should know that I think that the church and community are significant in the life of humanity. The church is vital to ensure that people live in harmony with each other. It is my prayer that we exist well, and we co-exist. I think we are purposefully residing in the community we live. I know most say I was born here and raised here, and that’s why I am here. However, I believe our existence is far deeper than that. People migrate all over the world to live in a community that intrigues them. Although different communities provide different opportunities, something attracts us to the place we reside in or causes us to remain within our community.

Let me push the conversation further. I don’t think it’s by chance that we are in our communities, but I genuinely believe that God has placed each person in the community. I think he put something there to intrigue us, to get us to look at certain things and then we think that this is where we should live. I think God has rested in our heart that we need to live in our community. And yes, our communities are changing, and this can be unsettling, which increases our anxiety levels. Previously you used to know your neighbors. We used to know who lived next door. But our communities are changing. So I ask the question, why don’t we don’t know our neighbors? Why don’t we engage with others who are not like us?

However, we have people who are gathering in our community of different knowledge, cultures, understandings, viewpoints, philosophies, racial and ethnic differences, which I think is a beautiful thing. I think it’s beautiful when all of us can come together, and then we can tap into the vast well of resources that each offer and will be beneficial for our community.

Let’s talk about scripture. If you consider all this, it can be tough to get along. It is not only the 2020 pandemic of the coronavirus, with its threat to physical bodies and emotional well-being, but we are trying to figure out how to co-exist with all this going on. Our schools are trying to teach and learn in a new way. Our families are going through difficulties. Then we have the other deadly viruses of systemic racism, sexism, ageism, or any other -isms that solidify hierarchies of human value, while tarnishing the communal bodies of the church and the world. But here we are, God’s people, trying to live in community. Let’s be honest. We want to go back safely to our buildings. I know we want to go back in and worship once again. But we have to realize that we all are our sisters’ and brothers’ keepers.

Let’s take a look at Jesus’ outlook on the community. Jesus challenges us and does not let his disciples off the accountability hook. He pushed his disciples to understand that he has a purpose for each of us. But his pledge to be present with them through whatever comes is a promise that empowers them to live into their calling. He empowers us to live within the community, realizing that He’s going to protect the vulnerable.

*Protecting the vulnerable*
Jesus encourages the church to be a community that nurtures honest dialogue and refuses to keep silent in the face of behavior that harms others.

I agree with professor Audrey West who states, “By hearing this passage in its narrative context, we might note that its primary function is less to define a universal, three-step process of conflict resolution (as if following the steps will produce guaranteed results). It’s more to model how to walk alongside and protect those who are being disempowered or made vulnerable, enabling them to speak so that others might hear.”

We are collaborators. Where two or three are gathered in my name, how do we work together to be the church and a living witness to the grace of God and mercy within the world?

Imagine this is the devotion we had towards each other, as our brothers’ and sisters’ keeper. Listen and hear.

I came upon this prayer, which I thought was very apt as we come to unfold the scripture, so listen to this prayer.

Jesus said where two or three are gathered
in my name there I am among them,
then this must be a holy people a holy place,
and to this sacred place we invite the communion of saints, they are already here they have never left, among that community are all our
loved ones who have gone before, and on this holy assembly, I ask a blessing on our food,
and on ourselves, asking, pleading,
that god be in our head, and our understanding;
God be in our eyes, and our looking;
God be in our mouth, and our speaking;
God be in our heart, and our thinking;
God be at our end and our departing
God be with us morning, noon, evening,
and through the night.
God be with us, and God be always with us,
and with our absent brothers and sisters.
And we all say, Amen.

It is a strong indictment against attitudes and practices that obstruct human flourishing. We should listen to each other. I’ll say that again: we should listen to each other. We have lost this art of listening to understand and often share our displeasure with each other especially on social media. Unfortunately, when we do this kind of thing it doesn’t just affect the individual, it also affects the church. We have to be mindful of our we interact with one another, even when we disagree with each other. This dampens nonmembers’ trust in the church; if the church can't hear and listen with discernment of people’s underlying issues, then who will listen and how does our community remain vital? Look at them and hear not just the words, but understand what they are really saying, the underlying issues. Not look at them as an attack, but we need to remember that they are people too.

When listening to understand, not listening to obey. It doesn’t mean you have to downplay someone. It means you are willing to hear the conversation, that you are willing to hear what they have to say. But let them know that they do not stand alone in all they are facing. All of us want to be heard. All of us want to have someone to listen to us. Too often, we confuse listening as doing what one says, and if you don’t do what I say, you are not on my side.

Listening is hard. It’s hard to hear, especially when they don’t have my same viewpoint.

Perhaps that is why the process outlined in our pericope involves hearing or listening at every step. Four times in the first three verses, Jesus refers to listening or refusing to listen. The repetition suggests that the call to hear one another, to listen closely to the truth of the other, is a vital component of a community grounded in the ways of Jesus.

For many people, it is easier to identify the ways they are harmed than it is to recognize the ways their actions can harm others, even if unintentionally. Perhaps one of the most challenging truths of this passage is a reminder of the human capacity to cause harm to others—both in the systems in which we participate as well as in our actions (or failures to act).

In the text, Jesus says he’ll be there with us. So what does that tell us? It says that maybe, with all this chaos and all that we are facing, maybe God is trying to remind us that He is right there with us, in the harsh of reality.

Furthermore, in our Gospel reading, we hear of Christ's promise to us that when we agree with others in prayer that he is the unseen party to our requests. The Greek word "agree" is "sumphoneo," from which is derived the English name, "symphony." Likewise, Christ is teaching us how to work together and harmonize with others.

He wants us, His people, to be unified in our prayers while living as ambassadors because this is one of the core places where the bonds that we share can grow and strengthen. More importantly, this empowers our communities. Matthew calls followers to the holy life of society, promising the presence of Jesus in their midst.

Isn’t that what we are supposed to be doing, sisters and brothers, as collaborators and ambassadors? Reminding people that Jesus is in our midst. Even when we are sitting out in the park and as we sit, and even when we disagree. I wonder if it would change our conversation, if we really believe that God is in our midst, when two or three are gathered.

Amen.