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St. Paul's Episcopal Church
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Text: 1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50; Luke 6:27-38

“We Believe:” What Makes Christian Community Unique

As many of you know, this past fall we unveiled our new identity statement here at St. Paul's: “Seeking, Serving, Loving, *Together*.”

This statement, which you can see in our publications and on signs behind you in the narthex, Attempts to capture our essence as a community.

It attempts to answer the question “Who are we?”

We are people who are seeking, serving, loving, together.

This is who we are,

and by knowing who we are,

We can more easily share our church with other people – with our friends and with strangers.

Think of it as an elevator pitch of sorts:

Join me at my church, where we are “Seeking, serving, loving together.”

Over the past six months we've been exploring our new identity statement in our Adult Forums, Asking ourselves what our Anglican sources of authority have to teach us...

What does “Scripture, Tradition, and Reason” have to say about “Seeking, Serving, Loving, Together”?

Last week in our forum we began an exploration of the final word in the statement: “Together.”

I led the forum, and we took our questions to Scripture,

Asking what our sacred texts can teach us about a sense of togetherness.

The enduring question that lingered for me was,

“What makes Christian community unique?”

Yes, we seek, serve, and love together here at St. Paul's.

But then I think of some of the “tag lines” for other organizations...

Royal Caribbean's just came out with a new tag line recently: “Come. Seek.”

The city of Solon's brand is “working, learning, thriving together.”

Cleveland Heights has a marketing campaign that says something to the effect of “All are welcome here.”

There are so many ways to be together in this world.

Social media, book groups, social clubs, school organizations...

So what's different about what we're doing here?

What makes our “Seeking, serving, loving, together” different?

Part of the answer to this question comes into clarity as we hear the continuation of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain in our Gospel today.

As you know if you were last week, this section is Luke's version of the more famous “Sermon on the Mount” that we hear from Matthew.

Last week we heard the iconic Beatitudes – “Blessed are you, and woe to you.”
 Today Jesus turns to the topic of how exactly we are to live in the world.
 And as you heard, his instructions for Christ-like living are in stunning contrast to the norms of our culture.

Love your enemies.

Do good to those who hate you.

Give to everyone who begs from you.

We’ve encapsulated this passage into the slogan the “Golden Rule.”

We teach it to our children,

Finding the words of Jesus rolling off our lips: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

This passage is almost trite in its familiarity.

But it’s shocking how often we fail to live up to its ideals.

It’s the essence of this teaching that is partly what makes Christian community unique.

If we’re truly following Jesus, we’d teach our children to not expect anything in return.

Give and love with no thought of what you’ll get for it.

Do you have money? Give it away.

Have you been wronged? Forgive.

Again, these instructions feel almost unattainable,

And yet they are the teachings that make what we’re doing here *different*.

But one could argue that a myriad of non-Christian teachers and philosophers teach this same morality.

The Golden Rule is ubiquitous in how our society teaches morality.

In fact, many might even say that non-Christians have sometimes been better examples of this ethos than Christians.

So I return to the question – how is what we’re doing here unique?

How are we not just the city of Solon or Shaker Heights School District or Royal Caribbean cruise line?

How is Christianity and Christian community unique?

To answer this, I turn to our patron Saint Paul and the nearly incomprehensible passage we hear from his letters today.

His topic of the day is Jesus’ bodily resurrection.

We catch Paul mid-argument, as he anticipates the skepticism he’ll receive from the church in Corinth.

Amid his metaphors of seeds and invocations of the Genesis story with Adam,

We see Paul’s point re-emerging as we heard it described last week from Corinthians:

“If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”

Today Paul argues (seemingly with himself) about the centrality of Christ’s bodily resurrection to the whole Christian movement.

And here, amidst the diatribe of Paul, we see the answer coming into focus:

What makes this --- us --- unique?

Our belief in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That is what makes us different ---

That we say we believe that

Jesus was born in a physical place in a historical moment to an actual woman.

That Jesus died on the cross.

That Jesus' body was resurrected.

This belief is ultimately what makes us different from Royal Caribbean cruise line,
Or a country club, or a community group.

Now I know what I just said probably makes some of you uncomfortable.

I know many of us haven't been formed to make such bold proclamations, such Christ-centered statements.

Many of you have found the Episcopal Church precisely because of this discomfort – Because it's a big tent that allows doubters and skeptics a place to rest amidst sacred music, profound liturgy, and beautiful spaces.

Many of us come here for the comfort of community...For the assurance that we're not alone in this life.

So for those among us who feel this discomfort, I leave you with one of my favorite anecdotes from the Episcopal preacher Barbara Brown Taylor.

Taylor writes about the somewhat common discomfort some Episcopalians have with saying the Nicene Creed.

“All the hard mysteries of faith are embedded there,”

She says.

“The triune God, the virgin birth, the last judgment, the resurrection of the dead.”

Once someone asked Barbara Brown Taylor for help trying to make sense of these core beliefs of our faith.

How could they profess these facts with integrity even amid their doubt?

To this Taylor answered,

“All I could give her was what I give myself – the reassurance that the creed is said in the plural, not the singular. When I say ‘We believe...’ I count on that to cover what I cannot believe on my own right now.

When my faith limps, I lean on the faith of the church, letting ‘our’ faith suffice until ‘mine’ returns.

Later, when I'm able to say ‘We believe...’ with renewed confidence,

I know that I'm filling in for others who are indisposed for the time being, as they filled in for me.

My decision to say the creed at all” she concluded, “is a decision to trust those who have gone before me,

Embracing the faith they have commended to me.” (Preaching Life, 75.)

So for those of us who struggle, I remind you that the words we're about to say begin with the plural – *We*.

That this is what makes us unique,
And it's laid out for us in our new identity statement:
That we're seeking...
Seeking Jesus and trying to follow his hard teachings,
That we're serving...
Serving those the world has forgotten.
That we're loving...
Loving each other through our doubts and through all the "changes and chances" of this life.
And that we are doing it all *together*. Amen.