

The Third Sunday after Pentecost, 3 July 2011
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

Today's propers are a very interesting assortment, which really set me thinking.

First, in the collect we are reminded of Jesus' Summary of the Law: Love God and love our neighbor – and ask the help of the Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to God with our whole hearts, and united to one another with pure affection. United with pure affection – that requires some contemplation. Just what is pure affection?

Then we heard that lovely reading from Zechariah, which has so much in so few words: the image of the king who is at once 'triumphant and victorious' and 'humble and riding on a donkey'. Triumphant and humble simultaneously. And the people addressed are called 'prisoners of hope'.

The Psalm is less complex, a lovely paean of praise to the God who is all love and mercy for everyone.

Then the stress-filled outpouring of Saint Paul, who agonizes over his inability to live up to his calling to be all that he was created to be. Some people look at that passage and say he was suffering from mental illness. But anyone who has failed to follow a healthy diet or exercise regimen knows exactly what he is talking about. We know what we should do, but there is something willful within us which prevents us from doing what we know is best. And that is frustrating – and aggravating – and embarrassing.

Finally we heard Jesus in the Gospel speaking about how impossible it is to please the crowd, and how hard it is for human reasoning to find its way to God – only to conclude with those beautiful lines of comfort: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

That is a wonderful ending to this assortment of images, pulling us in so many directions. Resting in that promise of peace, we can wrestle with the other ideas.

Lately I have been thinking a lot about something that has long bothered me about church life. I grew up in the church, but in a very protected way. I attended worship every week from when I was very young. I joined in the singing and praying, listened to the readings and the sermons, participated in Communion once I was confirmed. It filled me with joy and peace. I liked nothing better than being at church – and what I experienced and learned there I strove to carry forth into my life at home and at school.

But I had no sense of the community life of the parish. The only people I knew by name were the priests and the people I knew from television and the movies. I could point out the pew where Roy Rogers and his large family sat. John Carradine sat behind me singing in his remarkably monotone bass voice. My only relationship with any of them was as fellow worshipers. It seemed perfectly fine to me – I did not feel deprived of anything, because I had no notion of there being anything else.

I knew that I was safe from that horrible Sunday School where I was called an idolater for wearing a Madonna necklace, free to be and to worship and to sing, fully welcome.

What I missed out on and never encountered personally until I was a candidate for Holy Orders was all the struggle and strife that so many people consider normal in the life of a church community.

To me church was always that place of rest, refreshment, and joy Jesus is inviting us to, the place to be fed and gather strength to go out and serve the world.

The thing that has long bothered me, that I discovered to my dismay during my early years as an ordination candidate, is that people expect strife and discord in a church community. People speak of how communities eat their clergy alive. I just attended a workshop that spoke of the 80% of clergy who report themselves to be burned out. People joke about hostile relationships with Altar Guilds, between organists and choir members, among the Vestry, between competing groups in the parish, and so on. What bothers me is not so much that such things can exist – we are human after all. What bothers me is that we expect and accept it.

“Oh, you know what church is like.” Every time I hear someone tell a horror story and then laugh it off, because that is just what we should expect as par for the course in the church, my distress is renewed.

I do not know where we got the idea that behaving in ways that would never be accepted in our families or in the workplace is fine at church.

One of the things I love best about Saint James is that we have a culture of courtesy and appreciation that does not encourage gossip or conflict. This strikes many people as remarkable – but it should not be. It should be normal.

People point to Saint Paul to show that rivalry and conflict has always existed in the Church. They are right; Paul talks a lot about it – always in distress. Again and again he reminds the people that as the Body of Christ we are called to live in harmony, to be striving for reconciliation among all people. He makes lists of all the things we should avoid (such as party-spirit) and these sometimes seem to be the very things that are popularly described as the norm for church life.

We are called to live our lives after the pattern of Christ, the Truly Human One, serving the world and showing what God created us to be – not making excuses for bad behavior, but truly embracing one another in love.

We live in a time in our cultural history in which division and hostility are the norm everywhere, which gives us an even greater opportunity to model something different, something beautiful, something holy, a community unified by love, reconciled to one another despite all our differences.

So what does that array of lessons tell us about this challenge?

Our collect reminds us that we are meant to be bound together, all of us, by ‘pure affection’ – that would seem to mean an affection that is not self-serving, that accepts everyone, and that comes only by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Zechariah shows us our king who is at once triumphant and humble – and so should we be, not striving to be powerful, or right, but humbly accepting our privileged place in God’s own family. And he gives us that phrase ‘prisoners of hope’. We can feel like prisoners in a world filled with argument and dissension, but always we live in hope because of our relationship with God in Christ.

The Psalm is a wonderful text of reassurance, reminding us of God’s wide embrace, which both assures us of our inclusion and gives us the model whereby we strive to be loving and merciful to everyone else.

I found the Paul passage particularly helpful as I thought about the bizarre dysfunction of so much Christian community. Paul describes his own inner torment, but it could also be seen as describing communities as well. There exists no Christian community which has not heard Jesus’ call to love God and one another – to be reconciled to everyone. We all know that is what we are meant to be and do. But do often we fail. And if we fight with one another, or form cliques, or exclude people, that does not mean that we are not true churches, any more than it means that such behavior is just a natural part of being church. It means that we have the same struggles as Saint Paul – and that we need to always seek the grace of the Holy Spirit to be what God calls us to be.

Finally, Christ reminds us that, however frustrated we may be at our own shortcomings, or those of our community, always he is there for us with rest, comfort, love, and hope.

I do get frustrated when people expect Christian communities to be filled with dissension – and I am infinitely grateful that Saint James is so reliably a place of inclusion and embrace. It is my hope that we will continue to live out our ministry of reconciliation, at once humble and triumphant, like our Lord, a beacon and a model of a community living into the love of God, bound together with pure affection.