

“A Place Where We All Belong”
April 30, 2023
Scripture: Acts 2:42-47; John 10:1-10

The church’s origin story in Acts is pretty exciting. What we heard is the end of a story that begins with the Holy Spirit descending on the disciples at Pentecost which leads to their running out among the people who are in Jerusalem for the spring harvest festival, chattering away about what God has done among them. We know that story: everyone heard the disciples speaking in their native languages even though the disciples themselves couldn’t have known them. It’s a miracle of communication that seems to affirm the diversity of cultures gathered there.

After Peter has explained to the crowds what’s going on and why this is happening, they ask him what they need to do in response, and he instructs them to be baptized in the name of Christ so they, too, will experience God’s Spirit within them. The response is amazing, some 3,000 are added to their number.

Then, after all that’s happened, they settle into a new life together, spending their days in instruction and prayer and breaking bread together. Not only that, but they share all their goods in common, selling what they have to provide resources for each other. It is a picture of harmony and joy the likes of which none of them had ever imagined. It’s such an idyllic image. It’s as if everything the people there had ever wanted has finally been realized. In fact, many of them probably had no idea before these things occurred that that’s what they were looking for; no idea all they ever wanted was a place to belong.

Behind or beneath a story like this is a deep-seated desire I think we all carry within us for acceptance and wholeness. That desire is expressed in our creation stories, our myths that shape our culture. In his book *The Search for Common Ground*, the great theologian and mystic Howard Thurman describes the creation mythologies of our faith and the native Hopi Indian faith. They’re very different stories, as you can imagine. But they both speak of an intended harmony that’s been lost as a way to account for that deep longing we have for community. He writes, paraphrasing slightly to remove the masculine imagery, “When [we] ask what life was like before there was pain, hate, bitterness, and violence, the word comes back that life was beautiful and whole, tranquil and full of peace. [We have] lost this dimension in [our] journey; [we have] sinned and missed the way, so these accounts remind us; but the echo, the sound of harmony, has not died in [our] dream. It lives in [our] myths, and what [we hear] in the echo is at times more real than the distortions through which [we pass] in [our] day-by-day endeavor.”

This mythical beginning for the church reflects that same echo, the deep desire to return to wholeness and tranquility, the harmony intended at creation. This is what the church is meant to give the world. So many people wander aimlessly, caught up in the conflicts of the moment in our society. So many are convinced that the world is brutal and every relationship is a competition to squeeze as much personal benefit from every encounter that we possibly can before someone else comes along and robs us of it. We’ve created all sorts of systems to try and control that tendency: capitalism, communism, socialism; military dictatorships, authoritarian

regimes, representative democracies. Some of those systems are corrupt in themselves, with the corruption controlled at the top. Others become corrupted through opportunism and greed or just old-fashioned will to power. We miss the mark over and over. The church, at its birth, was meant to eliminate all that, to give us harmony.

The problem is, of course, the church is made up of...people. And people are easily swayed to follow thieves and robbers, as Jesus calls them. He says false shepherds come into the sheepfold the wrong way; they don't use the gate. It's a strange metaphor he uses in his attempt to explain his meaning to the disciples. "I am the gate," he tells them. We should all be rightly skeptical of anyone who makes a claim like that. Anyone who tells us they have all the answers, that they alone can fix what's wrong with us or with society, we should run away from as fast as we can. But when these words come from Jesus, then I think we at least need to hear him out.

Who is Jesus? What sort of world does he build through his teachings and ministry? Can you think of any time in the gospels when Jesus is portrayed as taking advantage of someone for personal gain? Is there a scene where he insists on someone pledging loyalty to him before he heals them? The thing about Jesus' ministry is it's offered with absolutely no strings attached. And I realize for some that doesn't ring true. Many of us have been conditioned to hear Jesus' words through the filter of the church and its doctrines. The church's tendency has been to reduce Jesus' teachings to something easier to understand, something pat and pithy. When Jesus says, "I am the gate," the church has made itself the gatekeeper. But that's not what Jesus says and it's not what he does. There is no gatekeeper. The only thing he asks his followers to do is accept what he offers...what he offers to everyone.

We've been taught to be suspicious of everyone. That's too broad, too inclusive. But much as we may want to regulate entrance, Jesus refuses to reject anyone for reason of who they are. In the first century world that meant "tax collectors and sinners," people whose role in society was seen as offensive. Today we have our own categories. I believe it was Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement who once said, "You can only love God as much as you love the person you love the least." When we think of who belongs in the Jesus's sheepfold we may need to take a hard look at the ones we love the least. Because Jesus is the gate, it's not up to us to keep anyone from passing through.

I saw a great example of that kind of inclusion on Friday night here in the sanctuary. An organization called Bridges from Borders, a support group for immigrants and refugees, held a celebration of music and education here. The One World Choir, made up of immigrants and friends from the Williamsville school district, performed several numbers. They've been rehearsing here for the last few months. But other choirs also attended, made up of immigrant and refugee communities in the area. The message they all hammered away at was "we are one people." No matter what culture we grew up in or what faith we practice, we are one people. We also heard from a couple of folks advocating on behalf of people who are on the autism spectrum. Being truly inclusive means creating ways for people who communicate differently or process information differently than most of us, to have a place at the table, too. The desire to belong, to be included, is inherent in all of us.

The story in Acts offers us a vision of the church as the fulfillment of that longing. But there is one catch. It goes both ways. It's not enough for the church to be a place where I belong. The church is meant to be the place where we all belong. It's the place where the gate is always open, where anyone can come in and go out in peace. That's what leads to abundant life. The life Jesus is talking about is a sense of fulfillment and security. We can't find that in competition with one another. We only find it in community. We only find it by walking the path of compassion and justice that Jesus walks, by passing through the gate he embodies. That's not always easy to do; it means a life of mindfulness and self-examination. It means being acutely aware of the struggles others go through and at times walking with them in those struggles. But there's nothing more fulfilling, nothing that brings more abundance.

The gate is always open; the path to wholeness is always available. Amidst all the voices around you demanding your allegiance, listen for the One who knows your name. Christ is calling you to walk through the gate and find life in abundance, a place where we all belong.

Amen