

Kerry Mansir
August 22, 2021

This morning, we'll welcome new members to the community of Christ Church and pledge together to share in the pilgrimage of faith. Forming faith communities, choosing not to go at it alone, but instead, joining with others to seek God and to transform ourselves, our communities, and our world is an ancient tradition that we can see in our readings today.

The first worshiping community we heard about today was Israel during the reign of Solomon who had the Temple built in Jerusalem, wanting the people of Israel to have a central place to worship and to practice their rituals. Today, we heard the story of bringing the ark of the covenant into that newly constructed Temple. Remember that the ark was like the placeholder for God and up until the time that it was placed at the center of the Temple, the ark was mobile—it could be taken where the people needed it.

The ark was a symbol that God didn't just condescend to dwell among the people but actually desired to dwell among the people. Even so, Solomon recognized that his Temple with the ark at its center could not confine God, admitting, "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built."

Even while God could not be contained, the Temple would be the place where the people would seek God—seek forgiveness and community healing. Too often, perhaps, the people of Israel believed that it was only at the Temple where they could encounter God. But I recently heard a great Hasidic parable that refutes that idea. "How big is your God?" the parable asks. "God is so big the universe cannot contain him and so small she can live in your heart." is the answer

But even while we carry God in our hearts wherever we go, we are also strengthened by a place of worship and a community that worships with us. The Temple, like the Ark before it, made it possible for the people to feel as if God was available and present to them. Today, we come to our churches for that sense of the presence of God among the worshiping community. When we gather to hear the Word, to share in the sacraments, to pass the peace with those in our community, we are making meaning of the mystery and centering ourselves in God.

The community of John, those for whom he wrote the Gospel, were themselves figuring out how to be a worshiping community. Many of them would have belonged to synagogues like the one at Capernaum where Jesus was preaching in our reading today. The synagogues came along when the Jewish leadership realized that the journey to the Temple in Jerusalem was not always possible and that people needed a nearer presence of God. And they knew that God not only dwelled in the ark of the covenant but in the Torah—in their scriptures. So the synagogues became houses of worship where people would gather to hear the Law and the Prophets read.

But we hear in John's Gospel that sometimes followers of Jesus were thrown out of their synagogues. And being excluded from those communities would have been painful and isolating. One answer to that exclusion is Jesus' bread of life discourse, those words which we have heard repeated several times in the past few weeks and which can be summed up like this, "Those of you who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." (John 6:35). Those words were assurance from Jesus that even if they were excluded from their synagogues, that God was still very present with

them—so present, in fact, that he was their bread—the very things which sustained their lives.

And like the community of John's Gospel and the community of King Solomon, we still gather in our places of worship seeking the nearer presence of God. Our faith communities are essential because it's difficult to grow our spiritual lives without relationship. God created us to be relational beings. But faith communities are not always easy or comfortable and we have to be honest about that, even as we welcome new members this morning. This faith community, just like any other, comes with all the messiness of our humanity.

I love to hear people say about Christ Church, "You have such a welcoming and warm community." And I believe that we do. But, of course, that can never be the entire story, right? People are bound to be disappointed if they think every interaction within our community will be warm and welcoming. We're human, after all.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a Lutheran pastor who understands how important it is to be honest about the shortcomings of our faith communities. She has done remarkable work in making her church feel welcoming to those on the margins—those who didn't think they could ever feel comfortable in a church. But despite this, I love her honesty when she says this about those wishing to join the church, "This community will disappoint them. It's a matter of when, not if. We will let them down or I'll say something stupid and hurt their feelings. So I invite them on this side of their inevitable disappointment to decide if they'll stick around after it happens. If they choose to leave when we don't meet their expectations, they won't get to see how the grace of God can come in and fill the holes left by our community's failure, and that's just too beautiful and too real to miss."

Now when Nadia Bolz-Weber talks about being disappointed in the community, she is not talking about abuse or toxic leadership or relationships. We all know that too often church communities are breeding grounds for those things, and nobody needs to stick it out or wait around for the grace of God to show up in those situations.

But we do need to have patience with each other because every community can get messy at times, and faith communities are no exception. Since the beginning of the Christian community our liturgy has included space for confession, forgiveness, and sharing the peace—recognizing that we come as people in need of healing and reconciliation, sometimes within the very relationships that we form here.

One of the very reasons that people can get so disenchanted with their church communities, I think, is because our aspirations are so high. Christian brotherly and sisterly love is not easy. Think about the words of our opening hymn. As Christians, we make a commitment to walk with each other hand in hand, to work side by side, to guard each other's dignity and pride and to be known by our love. No doubt, we are going to fall short of those aspirations often.

So I say this morning, not just to those becoming new members but to all of you...make space for grace. As Nadia Bolz-Weber says, when you feel as if our community has failed you—look for the grace of God to come in and fill the holes. Help us to become better by lovingly reminding us when we fall short of our Christian ideals and stick around to help us be better. And be open to the need for your own honesty about the ways you can grow in Christian love. Make space for grace and let God fill in the holes. Amen.

