



“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people..” It sounds like the ideal world. We’re together. We care for each other. All of our needs are met by each other. Weren’t lonely because we have a group around us that helps us through each day.

Nicholas Christakis is a doctor who has studied, among other things, social networks.¹ Not Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter but rather the ways in which we connect with each other and then how our connections impact other connections and influence spreads- good or bad. In fact, recent research has shown that people who are often on Facebook are more lonely than those who are not on Facebook at all or only very episodically. Human contact matters. It matters in terms of social development and it matters in terms of emotional and mental health.

In the best of families, we gather for education and for meals. Sometimes that education is Bible-based and sometimes it is googling the Wikipedia article and looking up the answer to our questions followed by discussion around the dinner table. Time spent together learning and listening and growing. The best relationships are those where we can ask questions- where we can be vulnerable- and we can learn the answers through conversation and through learning where to go to look up the answers. Mentoring of our youth, through the Youth Service Bureau program or otherwise, can be one way we care for children not related to us by blood but precious just the same. Remember that we get the world we create – or the world we ignore. It is up to us to find time and ways to devote ourselves and our children to “the apostles’ teaching and fellowship.” One of the best lessons we can give to our children or our mentees is the gift of curiosity and then the means to answer the questions. To support inquiry and development of analytical skills rather than asking our children or mentees to just meekly swallow our answer. To be fruitful, the question and the answer need our support and not just our mandate.

“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” One wonders about Karl Marx

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/nicholas_christakis_the_hidden_influence_of_social_networks/transcript?language=en (May 6, 2017)

Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

when he said that religion was the opiate of the masses. If Marx was familiar with this verse from the Acts of the Apostles, one would think he might have used it to support his vision of communal society.

It's unlikely most of us desire to live in a truly communal setting although we do have religious persons who live, even today, in intentional community when much is shared. Places where you and I might go on retreat include communities where persons have given up individual ownership of much for the good of the whole. In many families, the parents give up their wants in order to provide what is needed for their children.

For those who mentor, you give up time that you could be doing something else so that your mentee has some quality time in a safe and wholesome setting.

There are too many who suffer today for any number of reasons. It might be physical, emotional or financial. It might even be spiritual. Something in their life is not optimum. There is a gap between what ought to be in the realm of God and what is. We are called, through our faith, to reach out to those who suffer that gap. We cannot fix everything but we can offer a helping hand, a smile, some time. The ministry of presence is one of the most precious and most needed. We ought not to be afraid or dismayed or resentful that we can't fix everything. We are called to do what we can do, how we can do it, and to trust God to be present in the situation. If we will do our part, God will do the rest. And yes, that means sometimes God is present and answers the need in ways we do not see or sometimes in ways we wish were otherwise.

In this time of considering the healthy and holy relationships that we are part of or we wish to be part of, and the ways in which God is present in our world, the lessons from First Peter and John can be a disquieting, discordant and exclusivist note. Being scripture, though, we must read and discern what those lessons are saying to us today and how we are to respond in our time and place. Knowing what they likely meant to those when they were written gives us background for how we come to understand and apply them today.

Unfortunately, the First Letter of Peter has been understood by some to mean that spouses or children should stay in abusive or unhealthy or destructive relationships. Somehow that seems at odds with the life and message of Jesus as set forth in the Gospels. Jesus is the one who told us to love God and love neighbor. To turn the other cheek. To walk two miles in another's shoes. Jesus did not tell us to stay in abusive or unhealthy or destructive situations.

Some have read the Gospel lesson to mean that understanding Jesus in a particular way- and only in that particular way- is paramount for salvation. However, we have four Gospels. We have 23 additional books within the New Testament that expand upon the Gospels. Each of these 27 books – together- makes up the entire New Testament. And guess what? They don't all agree. There are parts of Matthew, Mark and Luke that are similar and there are parts of each of them that are not in the other two. The Gospel of John is in many ways quite different from Matthew, Mark and Luke. Yet each of these gospels, and each of the other 23 books, is included in our Bible. They each have something important to tell us about God, our relationship with God and with each other.

Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

Remember also that the books of the New Testament were written in Greek, which was then translated into Latin and then into the vernacular, including English. Thus, we are at least two languages removed from the original text. Similarly, we are some 2,000 years removed from the culture of the time the scriptures in the New Testament were written. Our culture with its emphasis on individual relationship with God and individual response is almost the opposite of that first century culture.

Therefore, to read the passage from the Gospel of John as stating that there is only one way to understand and believe in Jesus is not true to the original text or culture. To read singular pronouns or nouns as meaning a singular pronoun or noun today, is to miss the point of the passage all too often in a culture where individuality did not exist- it was to be avoided. Rather, the culture of Biblical times revolved around tribe and community. We are all in this together- as community- not each individually. We are, truly, our brother's keeper in the best sense of that phrase. We are called to care for each other using our gifts and talents so that all may have the chance to know God.

Christakis's research has led him to write that:

I think we form social networks because the benefits of a connected life outweigh the costs. If I was always violent towards you or gave you misinformation or made you sad or infected you with deadly germs, you would cut the ties to me, and the network would disintegrate. So the spread of good and valuable things is required to sustain and nourish social networks. Similarly, social networks are required for the spread of good and valuable things, like love and kindness and happiness and altruism and ideas. I think, in fact, that if we realized how valuable social networks are, we'd spend a lot more time nourishing them and sustaining them, because I think social networks are fundamentally related to goodness. And what I think the world needs now is more connections.

The text from Acts reminds us of what is possible when we care for one another. Our social networks, whether those here at St. John's or elsewhere can contribute substantially to a life that builds and supports our physical, emotional and mental health. What is true, then and now, is that Jesus models for us the way to relationship with God and with each other. Jesus lived that we might know how to live a healthy and productive life that is in harmony with God and with neighbor. The life that Jesus offers to us is life abundantly- flowing over with grace and gratitude for all that God has given to us and that God continues to give to us. **Amen.**