



We prayed earlier "Increase in us the gifts of faith, hope and charity ... and make us love what you command" (*Collect, Proper 25*). I'm not quite sure about the "make us love what you command" partly because anyone telling me what I must do can set my back up and I run the other way, sometimes just for spite! Perhaps this is simply another case of the translation suffers a bit in our contemporary American society where individual rights and determination rule the day, often to the exclusion of building and sustaining community.

If you ask almost anyone why they go to church, the answer will include something about community. Although we cherish our independence, we all need community. Repeated research has affirmed the impact of holding and cuddling newborns whether human or animals. If newborns are not held and cuddled they too often fail to thrive. Connection is a fundamental human need. Connections affirm that we have value, that we belong, and that we are important to another.

Jesus doesn't name connection, per se, as the binding agent in the first or the second great commandment but it's there. "Love your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind." What's that but connection? A connection between you and God. "Blest be the tie that binds" the old hymn starts. Blest be the relationship that is centered on the one in whom we live and move and have our being. Blest be the tie that gives us the spiritual, moral and ethical compass for a live well lived.

Just as our love for God gives us a framework for life and relationship, from that flows the second great commandment: love your neighbor as yourself. Two-pronged and both are important. Both are necessary.

If I don't love myself, how can I love my neighbor? If I hold myself in contempt or of little regard, then I can only hold my neighbor in contempt or of little regard. The lack of self-esteem: the lack of understanding and accepting that I am awesomely and wonderfully made, and that I am worthy of God's love- results in my carrying that opinion over onto others. A healthy regard for myself - not too hot or not too cold to take a phrase from the children's story of the three bears and Goldilocks. A healthy regard for myself is key to living a life that loves God, loves myself and thus is able to love others.

This weekend at Diocesan Convention we had several mission projects available to choose from. One was to visit sailors who ply the Ohio River. We have an Episcopal Priest and an Episcopal Deacon whose ministry is to be with these men and women. Their jobs take them away from home and sometimes into danger from the weather. The Seaman's Church Institute has offered a ministry of presence and community for years. We also provide hats and gloves and some other basic needs.

Another ministry was to the homeless and nearly homeless. We gathered small toiletries which

were put into zip lock bags and then taken to an area shelter. We talked about the opioid crisis, which has hit the very southern part of Indiana quite hard. The fundamental causes of addiction are, in my opinion, too often related to lack of self-worth which ties to lack of a good, strong and moral community. Treatment programs can help if someone is willing and able to do the work necessary but they may not be permanently effective unless there is some way for the addict to find life without their drug of choice worthwhile. We can help by providing a model of a healthy community. We can help by looking out for each other, in ways large and small. We can help by loving our neighbor as ourselves - and by loving ourselves as children of God.

At Convention we continued the Listening Process that Bp. Jennifer started during these first six months of her time with us. We were given a synopsis or the high points of the ten sessions held around the Diocese with different constituencies.

Over and over, framed in different words, was the underlying theme of connection. At our table, we sat with delegates from another congregation- they average about 20 on a Sunday- and they, like us, are the only Episcopal Church in their county. They connected with another small parish in an adjacent county and set up a "Picnic at Pentecost" where the two parishes would join together for Sunday worship on Pentecost. That's something we might float with St. Andrew's or St John's in Lafayette. Yes, it takes effort to get together. But perhaps by doing so the Spirit might move us to be more than ourselves.

The idea of joining together in Christ's name, as one church with different denominations, is part of what's behind our Lenten soup supper and discussion series and the Tuesday night program we just finished. It is part of what was behind our "Beer and Brats Reformation Celebration" we held last night. Together we can have a great time, learn some things about our faith and each other, and be a model to the world of what it's like to step out in faith.

To grow into what God is calling us to be requires us also to listen to each other. We all know that we are increasingly a divided country. Part of what drives the divide is that we have lost – or perhaps we never learned – how to listen to someone who holds divergent views without becoming defensive. To go into a conversation with the hope that we might learn something not that we change the mind of the other.

We saw last week and we see again this week that Jesus interacts with those who disagree with him, the Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees and others. He accepts their questions even as he doesn't accept the premise or assumptions in their questions. Even as Jesus knows that the questions are asked with malice and the hope of tripping Jesus up so that the authorities will arrest Jesus and put him to death – Jesus accepts their questions and responds. He responds not to the emotion in the question but rather to the underlying theological questions.

The questions have to do with to whom do I belong: to God or to the Romans. Or how do I live my life in a way that honors my relationship with God, who made me and loves me. Or how do I live when someone wrongs me.

When we talk with someone about a topic that matters deeply to us, the words we use are important. Do we frame our conversation with words that evoke equality, fairness, protecting vulnerable people from harm, social justice. Or do we tend to use words that evoke group

loyalty, patriotism, and respect for authority, moral purity, or religious sanctity. If you read again the interactions between Jesus and the Pharisees that are our Gospel for today, you can see Jesus is using words that appeal to them because they were a group that focused on moral purity, respect for authority and religious sanctity. If you think of Jesus's interaction with the rich young man, the appeal for social justice through selling all that he owned and giving the proceeds to the poor were more than the young man could swallow and so he went away sad.

In our Baptismal Covenant we have both. We say:

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

I will with God's help.

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

I will, with God's help.

These affirmations and responses appeal to the side of us that wants religious sanctity, respects authority and seeks, to a greater or lesser sense, moral purity.

On the other hand, the question and response:

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?

I will with God's help.

This question and response appeals to our desire for fairness, social justice and equality. When we can keep these two approaches to conversation and interactions with each other in balance, we can discuss those issues that divide us without necessarily escalating into situations where nobody is listening, nobody is learning. The rift between us widens and our community fractures. God is saddened when this happens and so our relationship with God also starts to show cracks. The world remains a broken place.

The hymn, *Blest be the tie that binds*, gives us words to ponder:

Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.

Before our Father's throne,
We pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one,
Our comforts, and our cares.

We share our mutual woes,
Our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.¹

The hymn is based, in part on 1 Corinthians 12:25: "... that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another" (NRSV). Whether I seek religious sanctity and moral purity as a core value or whether I express my core values as centering social justice, both – all- can only occur in community. The second great commandment is as necessary to us as is the first. We are all connected, in ways great and small. We need each other and we need God. St. John's is a community that was once deeply fractured and is now a strong and stable place. We give evidence that we acknowledge God as the source of all light and life. Come to the table. Rejoice in the day the Lord has made. Rejoice, I say, rejoice. **Amen.**

¹ John Fawcett, 1782.