

**“All for One and One for All”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade**  
**Second Sunday of Easter**  
**April 19, 2009**  
**Scripture: Acts 4:32-35**  
**John 20:19-31**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION:** *Make us to linger in the glory of Easter, O Holy God. Keep us from returning to life as usual. Open our eyes and our hearts to how raising Jesus to new life makes all things new – all things possible. Embolden us to embrace new possibilities for our life together. Amen.*

Wasn't last week wonderful?! Even though I know you will agree with me that this Easter was magnificent (Actually, all of Holy week was) Easter Sunday is always great! I always need Easter. That holy day is so inspiring and really makes the presence of God tangible. I love the hope which is found on that day. I love the grace which is present when we talk about the resurrection. I love the fact that those of us who are here every week come in our best Sunday clothes, but even more I love the fact that there are people worshiping with us for whom it is their one trip to church for the year. I wish it could be Easter every week!!!

The truth, though, is that it is! You see, we just completed the first seven days of the “Great Fifty Days”. Easter lasts for fifty days. Fifty days marks the time between Easter and the birth of the Church at Pentecost. For fifty days, more than the forty we experience during Lent, we celebrate the fact that our Lord has risen. But this is what we do every Sunday. We don't count Sundays in the forty days of Lent because Sundays are reserved for celebrating the resurrection. Every Sunday is a little Easter and so Easter continues today. The church is not a place where we memorialize the death of Christ each week. We are not simply a tombstone marking a place of rest of our Savior. We gather because we represent that our Savior is still working. We are the physical reminder that our Lord has risen and that is what we celebrate each week.

Will Willimon tells a story about when he was visiting with a man a couple of days before his death.

He asked the man how he was feeling now that he knew he was at the end of his life and whether he was fearful. The man replied, “Fear? No. I'm not fearful because of my faith in Jesus.” “We all have hope that our future is in God's hands,” Willimon said, somewhat piously. “Well I'm not hopeful because of what I believe about the future,” he corrected, “I'm hopeful because of what I've experienced in the past.” The Bishop asked him to say more. The man continued, “I look back over my life, all the mistakes I've made, all the times I've turned away from Jesus, gone my own way, strayed and gotten lost. And time and time again, he came back for me. He found a way to get to me, showed up and got me, looked for me when I wasn't looking for him. I don't think he will let something like my dying get in the way of his love for me.”

There is really nothing at all which can stop our resurrected Savior from reaching us. Today we find the disciples locked in a house out of fear. They were afraid because they had just witnessed their Rabbi, the one they thought was the Messiah, die a horrific death. Now his body was missing and they knew it would upset some people. They cowered in fear in this locked house wondering what to do. The scripture tells us that it was the fear of the Jews that called all ten of these disciples together. They feared the fact that they may suffer the same fate as Jesus – that the Jewish leaders may try to squelch the rebellion even more by taking out Jesus' followers. They thought they may be blamed for his missing body and suffer because of that.

And, my friends, it is into the midst of this fear and anxiety that Jesus shows up. The resurrected Jesus returns to his broken followers and gives them peace. His first words to the ten are, “Peace be with you.” They all rejoice that they see the one who had just died in front of them. He came through the locked doors and now is in their presence. Jesus had returned to his fearful disciples, to those who had betrayed and forsaken him just days before. He came to bring peace and to give them a mission.

A few months ago – actually I remember that it was in January – the Sunday after Christmas – I told you that I planned to base a sermon every quarter on our mission statement. Well...today's the day, my

friends. Do you remember it - our mission statement, I mean?

“The mission of the First Presbyterian Church of Dunedin is to invite, share, celebrate, and send the Christian Faith by word and deed to the community and the world”, It says. The last time we focused on the mission statement during worship, we addressed it in its entirety. This morning, I want for us to look at just the first goal – “invite”.

As we have been reading and discussing church growth, I have learned that when it comes to welcoming guests or even new members, many churches just want clones of themselves. “We want to grow,” they declare. “We love new members,” they say, “just as long as they are like us – just as long as they think like us, dress like us and act like us.”

Even here, at First Church, where each and every one of us is proud to see ourselves as warm, and friendly, and welcoming, it has distressed me to hear people say, “those people”, “that other service”, or “I don't know why we can't have the worship services at the time I like.” Fear of change paralyzes congregations and pushes them into locked rooms. The church they love turns into, “My Church.” They claim possession over it and, like a two year old they hold onto it and repeat over and over again, “Mine! Mine! Mine!”

I love you – I love all of you – I love worshiping with the folks in Worship Café and I love worshiping with the folks in the Traditional Service. And...please hear me on this...I am not pointing fingers at either service, nor am pointing fingers at only members or only staff. I have heard the same comments from people in all groups in First Church. And as much as it pains me when I hear these things, I know it pains Jesus as much if not more!

Jesus comes to us today in the midst of our locked doors, in the midst of our fears and reminds us of our calling. He tells us, “As the Father sent me, so I send you.” When he says that to the disciples, he transforms them from disciples into apostles. Disciples are people who follow a teacher, who learn all they can from the teacher and who then, as apostles, live the rest of their lives living and serving in the teacher's shadow.

In one of my favorite scripture passages – one

which also comes from John's gospel – is another time when Jesus says to his disciples, "Peace I leave with you," Jesus also says, "I have said these things to you while I am still with you, but the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you."

And just think, that little band of frightened, anxious people we read about in John's gospel, became a church – a community of believers - whom Luke, in our Epistle reading this morning describes as being "of one heart and soul". Then Luke reveals the source of this amazing community's unity. While only the apostles were endowed with "great power", the entire church received "great grace" – the gift which enables the apostles' message to be received and the community to act faithfully upon it. That "great grace". Luke says, so changes human nature that Luke goes on to say that "no one said that any of the things he or she possessed was their own" Instead, lands and possessions were sold and proceeds from the sales were brought to the apostles for equitable distribution. Grace enabled those early Christians to transcend the fixation on self and replace it with concern for the whole community as the highest priority – no longer was it every man for himself. Rather it became a community which lived by the adage, "All for one and o n e f o r a l l . "

The learning I think we should glean from our two scripture passages this morning is the power of unity. Unity of heart and soul manifests itself in a community where all feel valued, where all feel welcome, where all can trust. This thinking is a great challenge to us; we cherish individualism and being right. The price paid for insisting on our own way, though is loneliness and a lack of community, the very opposite of what is before us in this story.

Our calling is to pursue unity – not conformity, but unity. The "one heart and soul" Luke tells us about the church having was boon of a determination not to let petty opinion or selfishness divide them. Being a community trumped being individuals. We know there were disagreements among the apostles. Peter and Paul certainly were not always of one mind. But beneath this was a determination to seek and follow the will of God,

rather than to have an individual's will triumph at the cost of unity. I like the way Luke says this later in Acts: "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us". To me that suggests an approach to community life grounded in discussion and prayer, where the good of the group within the leading of the Spirit, prevails over individual agendas.

You know this may well end up being one of those sermons about which our good friend Sarah Heyward would have said "It was fine until she went from preaching to meddling." And, as I mentioned to a friend yesterday that it probably takes me longer to write these "Mission Statement" focus sermons more than any other sermon are a stretch – not so much because I don't believe what I'm saying, but because I believe it strongly and am afraid of offending someone. I'll bet Jesus didn't worry about that, though, huh?!

We can read these scripture passages and think, "yeah right – it might have worked back then. Or we can invite this story to rise from the past and shape the present in which we live, to the glory of God. We can read these scripture passages and fairly snort in disbelief at their naiveté and idealism. Or we can seek to do and be as they were: a people grounded in the astonishing truth of Easter, living by grace, seeking the well-being of all – All for one and one for all. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

*Thanks to Lawrence W. Farris for his sermon, "Because of the Resurrection", Will Willimon for his sermon, Jim (I searched in vain for his last name) for his sermon, "Open Doors", Will Willimon for his sermon, "People of the Presence", and to Leonard Sweet for his collected works through Christian Globe Networks, 1991.*

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