

How Does A Community Become Fully Alive?

Friends, the Love of God continues to weave us together as a community through our longer and newer connections. On this fifteenth of twenty-five Sundays in the long green growing season of Ordinary Time, we will have the opportunity to gather for a special congregational meeting to discuss matters of significant meaning and potential impact for our merging congregation and our wider local community.

Let's wonder together today: how does a community become fully alive? This question was inspired by a line from Psalm 119 on which we drew during our Prayer of Confession and Longing. The paraphrased verses we prayed were these: *"Turn my eyes from the world's temptations, and birth me into new Life. Let me enter into the realm where the aspirations of my soul may become manifest"* (*Psalms for Praying*). Both the Apostle Paul and Jesus offer illustrations of how we might hold ourselves open to being led into new and fuller life in which the best in our souls becomes manifest.

Let us pray together: O God grant to each of us and to our congregation: serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

On recent Sundays, Scriptures have invited us to focus on self – honesty, loving, care of ourselves as we approach living and relating with others. I've asked: "What encourages your living?" and "What does 'doing all you can' look like?" Today's readings invite us to build a healthy fully alive community as individual who commit to the messy, gritty work of loving one another.

I draw the phrase "fully alive" from a song by that name, written and sung by my friend Bryan Sirchio.

We shared in the chorus a few minutes ago, during A Time with Children and Youth. While the focus is partly on an individual's sense of aliveness, the lyrics make clear that the fire of our aliveness can only be kindled in relationship with others – that is, in community. I'd like to share the words of the chorus with you again, preceded by the first verse which tells the origin for the song title.

*“There is a phrase...that comes to us
From the Church father... Irenaeus
The Glory of God...is a human
Fully alive...fully alive!*

*I want to open my heart a little wider
Let Spirit in a little deeper
Love with a Love that's on fire
And be fully alive”*

I invite us to wonder today about the ways we can be fully alive as a church – a community of faith; opening our collective heart a little wider, letting Spirit in a little deeper, loving with a love that's on fire.

When I call loving one another messy and gritty, I mean that it might metaphorically look like one of my children when they arrive home after a long day's work of being a student – clothing dotted with marker, paint, and bits of food; hair ruffled; face adorned with grimy smudges, and shoes filled with the sand and grass of the playground. They look very alive! I hope that we depart from a Sunday morning together or a meeting of a working group having been marked in ways we can identify.

Perhaps you enter the church building or a Zoom meeting with your sleeves down and relaxed. Hopefully you depart with your sleeves rolled up, energized by meaningful collaboration with a team or committee.

Perhaps you enter a church project or event wearing fresh clothes, curious to observe what's going on and thinking you might hang out around the periphery. Hopefully you depart with your clothing a bit ruffled from having been brought shoulder to shoulder with others and holding bits of the artful messy details of church work across your chest and sleeves.

Perhaps you enter a church engagement with your hair combed and sitting in a way that feels comfortable for you. Hopefully you depart with your hair blown a bit askew by a tense, generative conversation; eyes brightened by a new idea someone shared or a kind word of affirmation or care that you receive.

Perhaps you enter church with your face clean, feeling fresh and ready. Hopefully you depart with a brave smudge or two where, drawing perspiration across your temple or jaw, you gathered courage to say what was true for you, staying fully in the tension of divergent perspectives. These are all signs that you might be fully alive within our community.

I wonder: does your experience in our congregation contribute to your individually becoming more fully alive?

I also wonder: how might we make moves to become more fully alive as a community?

The artwork on the front of today's worship bulletin offers depictions of two people sitting with their backs against one another, leaning on each other to stay upright – first an image of two children and then an image of two people in young or middle adulthood. To me, the images convey experiences of intimacy and trust. And I believe that intimacy and trust can develop through the intentional work of developing mutual appreciation among community members.

Let's turn to our Scripture readings for today, inviting them to illumine our own wonderings about aliveness – about the development of intimacy and trust through the work of mutual appreciation.

We heard in the reading from Romans: *“Owe no debt to anyone – except the debt that binds us to love one another. If you love your neighbor, you have fulfilled the Law.”*

I am intrigued by how the Apostle Paul speaks of us owing one another love. Two weeks ago, we celebrated the rite of membership with our four newest members. Each year, we baptize one or more persons into the belonging within our community. In both the rite of membership and the sacrament of Baptism, we make explicit promises to love one another. Indeed, we do owe each other love. Let's always be on the lookout for how we and others are making good on our promises! **I wonder: who in our congregation has served as an example to you of fulfilling the Law of Love, modeling a way of a low debt burden of love? And who might be watching you as the model for freedom from love debt?**

We also heard this reflection from the Apostle Paul. He may have initially been speaking to a fledgling church in Rome, brave in the midst of persecution. Yet we can hear how he also speaks to us today. Paul wrote, *“Besides, you know the time in which we are living. It is now the hour for you to wake up from sleep, for our salvation is closer than when we first accepted the faith.”*

Friends, we know the time in which we are living. We witness evil in the form of dominant human groups oppressing marginalized human groups. We witness humans building solidarity and justice with one another. We participate in both (hopefully solidarity and justice more often than oppression, but certainly both). As a progressive Christian community, we embrace Jesus' way of civic engagement.

We know that our faith is political, calling us to embody God's table turning love by doing the sacred work of messing with the dynamics of oppressive systems. **I wonder: who in our congregation has served as a model for embodying Love in the public sphere? In what area of human injustice would you like to see us engage more fully in efforts to co-create justice?**

Jesus speaks directly to the sleeves-rolled-up, rumped-hair, smudged-face, bright-eyed work of being a local church. We heard, *"If your sister or brother should commit some wrong against you, go and point out the error, but keep it between the two of you."* Engaging in direct confrontation can be so challenging. It requires bravery, humility, and clarity. It requires staying true to one's actual experiences and feelings. It takes openness to the radical act of forgiveness – of ACTUALLY not holding a wrong against someone after there has been an opportunity for healthy confrontation and expression of sorrow.

Jesus continued, *"If she or he listens to you, you have won a loved one back; if not, try again, but take one or two others with you, so that every case may stand on the word of two or three witnesses."* Herein lies the gifts of developing intimacy and trust within community. With length and depth of investment of ourselves in the life of this faith community, we come to know and be known by others. We learn with whom we have an easy simpatico and the potential for building deep trust. Those several people are great candidates to be your witnesses when you experience hurt.

Finally, Jesus said, *"If your sister or brother refuses to listen to them, refer the matter to the church. If she or he ignores even the church, then treat that sister or brother as you would a Gentile or a tax collector."*

I wonder: have you ever found yourself saying, ‘thank goodness for our Leadership Team!’ Indeed, that group cares deeply and dedicates their time to our congregation’s wellbeing.

I was intrigued this week by Jesus’ distinction between treating one’s siblings in faith differently than one would treat “a Gentile or a tax collector.” We know that Jesus – a Jewish carpenter and itinerant preacher – treated Gentiles, tax collectors, and others who were not of the same groups as he with great respect and openness of heart. Perhaps the distinction in behavior toward a sibling versus a further afield neighbor lies in intimacy and trust, which can only develop through shared experience in community over time.

May we invest ourselves in becoming more fully alive through our shared experience here. And may our mutual appreciation in this intimate community ripple out to positively affect our relationships with our further afield neighbors. Love is counting on us. Amen.

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People’s Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
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Romans 13: 8-14, Matthew 18: 15-20