

Three years ago, our world changed profoundly – in a few short weeks,
we changed the way we work, learn, eat, shop, socialize, worship, move...
Even as we move solidly into a post-pandemic life, we can remember those days.
They came back clearly to me when I realized I am getting to the end of
my Covid toilet paper hoard!

It's not hard to imagine how Jesus' disciples may have felt, stuck inside, fearful,
knowing their world has irrevocably changed, not sure how to be.

Yet the Covid disruption, as traumatic as it has been, was good for our churches.
It elevated the most important aspect of our religious life: relationship.

The online study and worship opportunities we began during that time of
lock-down continue to thrive – even across state and international borders.
Our need for connection persists despite a return to "normal."

That time of separation and social distancing paradoxically intensified
the need for relationship – and we ought to be really good at that.

What is it that we as Christ's Body have to offer, but relationship and community?

We are in relationship with a God who wanted to know us so fully
he took on human form;

who wanted to set us free from death so badly, he took on death;

who wanted to be with us for all eternity so deeply, he took on resurrection life.

We are in relationship with a Jesus who let his followers see him after death,
who came so close he breathed peace upon on them – no social distancing there!

That's intimacy! That's a story! That's a relationship.

That's an invitation Jesus extends to us as – today, and every day of our lives.

Our God who wants to be so close to us, to draws us into relationship

of such intimacy. Can we allow ourselves to be loved in that relationship,

to be transformed in God's love into who we most truly are,

and so become apostles ready to be sent, to draw others into that love?

How does a community locked in by fear become a community set free by grace?

The disciples in the upper room were the same men and women we see later in

Acts, holding everything in common, presiding over this amazing common life.

How'd that happen? How'd they go from this (*hunched*) to this (*arms wide open*)?

Well, God didn't leave them there. Jesus showed up in the midst of the fear. No grave could hold him in, and no locked door could keep him out. He appeared right in the middle of that room,
in the heart of their fear and doubt, and spoke peace to them. He invited them once more into intimate relationship, with him,
so intimate that they could touch his wounds if they wanted to. He breathed the Holy Spirit onto them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," He said.

That is the source of all our super-powers, right there – the Holy Spirit in us. And what is that power for? To forgive, to set free. *"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."* We can spread the peace of Christ – we practice in church every week. We can share the forgiveness of God. We can retain sin or release it. That's a lot of power!

Those disciples didn't seem to know what to do with it – they stayed frozen in that place for a while. As our reading tells us, the following Sunday Jesus showed up again and there they still were, despite his having said, *"As the Father has sent me, so I send you."* But a few weeks later, when the Spirit came in power upon them at Pentecost, they were released, empowered, gloriously freed from fear to become Christ's body in the world. They preached with abandon, they healed people right and left, they stood up to powers and authority with boldness; and yes, they formed a community of grace of which we, 2000 years later, are the inheritors.

And we are here because they continued to work through relationship. The intimate relationship Jesus invited them into he told them to share with each other. This amazing unity is what the early church called *"koinonia."* *Koinonia* is used in the New Testament to refer to the early Christian community; it means Christian fellowship or communion with God and fellow Christians. The root of the word is *koine*, and means "to hold things in common. More generally, it means "communion by intimate participation." *Koinonia* means fellowship, but not just any kind of fellowship – it's a fellowship based on unity of heart and mind, of unity of believing. It refers to a relationship that is dependent on more than one individual. It's not so much the things we label fellowship – coffee hour, lunches. It's a fellowship of doing, of actively doing God's will together.

It is used to describe an interdependent relationship.¹ Interdependence is a hallmark of Christian community. It is another of our super powers. Anything we hope to do connecting people with the fiercely accepting love of Jesus we have to do together.

That's true for our church, and it's true for every person here today. We are not called to take care of ourselves, to hold to ourselves either our resources or our needs.

Either one is the way of self-sufficiency – of selfishness.

Today in La Plata we're going to gather after church to reimagine our food pantry. That's a longtime ministry, yet most parishioners have no contact with it.

There are as many Waysiders who actively volunteer as La Plata folks. We need to come together to discern the particular mission God has for that ministry, how we are to connect people with the fiercely accepting love of Jesus through that food pantry. How might God be calling us to release people from food insecurity and the anxiety that comes with it, from malnutrition, and the disease that comes with it?

How might we be sent to spread peace through that ministry?

How might we more effectively invite the wider community to participate?

[We here at Wayside need to think the same way about our assets – how is our beautiful new parish hall to help connect people with the fiercely accepting love of Jesus? How are our ministries with children?]

Friends, Jesus is here today – every time we gather, in fact, breathing peace on us. Take a deep breath in.... hold it, let it expand in you.... Feel the life of God fill you. And then exhale, breathing God's forgiving love out upon someone (maybe yourself..). Then do it again.

Jesus invites us to rejoice too, even in the pain and disruption of all that troubles us and this world. Jesus is still risen! He still speaks peace to us, and as we let his presence live in us, we can feel that peace spread through our minds and bodies and spirits. We can share it with others, just as we practice this morning. That's our greatest super-power.

Amen.

¹ Bob Gillam, Th.D., at Bible.org

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.