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Trinity Episcopal Church

Isaiah 58: 1 – 12  
2 Corinthians 5: 20b – 6:10

Psalm 103: 8 – 14  
Matthew 6: 1 – 6, 16 – 21

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**“Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”**

Today, we gather together as the people of God to turn back to God and to turn back to the ways of God. As Christians, we are part of a large community around the world. As of 2017, data from Pew Research indicates that Christians make up approximately 31% of the world’s 7.3 billion people, or roughly 2.25 billion, the largest of any religious group. We may sometimes feel estranged from some of our Christian brothers and sisters because of our different understandings of what our Holy Scriptures say, different ways of living them out, different ways of understanding baptism and communion, different world views, and different ways of expressing ourselves spiritually and in the marketplace. And yet, we have so much more in common than what divides us. We are the people of God, as well as the children of God through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We are the Body of Christ – different parts all knit together for one purpose. We are community, sometimes whether we like it or not.

But what does that really mean? What is community? Merriam Webster defines ‘community’ as: 1) a unified body of individuals; 2) society at large; or 3) joint ownership or participation. Under all three meanings, there are further refinements. Wikipedia adds to this definition by describing community as a small or large social unit who have something in common, such as norms, religion, values or identity, and often, a sense of place. Communities can be real or virtual, that is, online.

The word ‘community’ comes to us from 14<sup>th</sup> c. Middle English, and before that Anglo (or Old)-French, and before that, Latin. The original Latin word is thought to be ‘communitas’ meaning community as we think of it. Or it may have more of the sense of public spirit, if derived from the Latin ‘communis,’ which means ‘shared in common.’ If we break the word down further, there are some interesting connotations. ‘Com,’ of course, means ‘with.’ As in with one another. ‘Munitas’ means strong, so communitas also has the sense of ‘with strength.’ ‘Muni,’ from which we get words like municipal, comes from ‘munus,’ meaning service performed for the community, a civic duty.

But what does all that etymology have to do with today, Ash Wednesday? Our lessons all have something to tell us about what it means to be a community that belongs to God. They all speak to working together in strength, and to serving the common good. Through the prophet, Isaiah, God condemns the people of God for offering frivolous forms of sacrifice to mask their lack of righteousness, that is, right relationship, with God. So, God asks us this day, are we to make a show of our sackcloth and ashes? Aren’t we instead to loose the bonds of injustice, to work towards freeing those who are oppressed? To feed the hungry and to house the homeless? Are we not to clothe those who are naked and vulnerable, to make ourselves available for the needs of our own kin? That is what will make your light shine, God says to us. That is what comes out of being the community of God’s people. That is what, with the strength of us working together, helps make us community. But we are not to be limited to *our* idea of community – who’s in and who’s out – in order to serve others. In God’s name, we are to feed the hungry and house the homeless. Period. It is not the lines we draw, but the love and service we share that make us the people of God’s community.

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, the Psalmist writes. If we are made in the image of God, is that not how we are to be also? What does it look like for us to be a merciful and gracious community? What do we do already that helps us be that? What might

have to change or grow? What would it mean for us to be slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love? Are we anywhere close to that? If not, what gets in our way?

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes about what it means to him to be reconciled to God and to his fellow Christians. It means to work together – that ‘with strength’ part of community – because we can accomplish far more of the work God has given us to do by being the body of Christ and not the eye that says it has no need of the ear. It means understanding that it takes God’s grace, not only to accomplish what we are to do but, in fact, to *be* community. We need that grace so that we don’t put obstacles in the way of other people’s relationships with God. We need that grace to endure all the things that life might throw at us. Where do we find grace in this community? Where might we need more?

Finally, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tells us to help others without keeping score. It’s not a zero sum game, or tit for tat. We are to go about our life of service and giving quietly, not seeking personal accolades. And we are to pray.

Everyone of us is part of many communities – the church, our families, our various circles of friends, co-workers, class mates, neighbors, the organizations in which we participate, the larger community of Statesboro and Bulloch County, and even a variety of online communities. What does it mean for us to be a Christian community within a larger community around us? How can we be community outside of these walls, perhaps with people we’ve never met and who don’t seem very much like us? How are we called to serve the larger community around us? What does it take to become a community? What does it look like for us to be community with one another, within this parish and to open ourselves up to be a larger community? We come today to reconcile ourselves to God. We Episcopalians, members of the Anglican *Communion*, people of the Book of *Common* prayer, people who value Holy Eucharist or *Communion* as a regular part of our worship, how is God calling us to build community, not only among ourselves, but in our world? What might you and I do this Lent to make this be so?

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