

Grace to you and peace from our risen Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Any of us who has ever been part of a community, which is all of us because we're part of this one, knows that it takes work to build and nurture a community – in any context. And that includes churches.

Even the community of the early church, whose history we read about in the book of Acts, took work to develop and nurture.

In our reading today, we've skipped ahead from where we were last Sunday. By this point in history, Jesus has ascended into heaven and the Holy Spirit has come down and is now working in and through the apostles of the early Christian church.

And the church is growing by leaps and bounds. So much so, that different cultures and language groups are coming together in the name of Jesus.

In the chapters leading up to our reading this morning, the early Christian community is described as a group of people that's selfless. ¹The power of Christ's resurrection was still so strong for them that they entrusted their lives to each other.

Acts chapter four even tells us that everything that everyone owned was held in common, and there was not a needy person among them.

It sounds like a utopian community. Except, by the time we get to today's reading, that wasn't true.

There were people in the faith community who were in need, and not only were their needs not being met, they were being ignored as a people. They were being discriminated against.

So, the apostles called the whole community together to address the situation. They brought it out into the open. There were no parking lot conversations, there wasn't a "meeting after the meeting."

The community came together and worked out a solution. And the end result is that the first group of deacons in the church was commissioned. Problem solved. The word of God continued to spread, and the church continued to grow.

And then a small group of people got upset with Stephen. Only instead of taking their concerns to the whole community, they went around in secret. And they sowed suspicion, and spread rumors, and told lies. And the end result was Stephen's death.

As a whole, this story is often simply called "The Martyrdom of Stephen." And it is about that. But it also illustrates community dynamics that are healthy and life-giving, and community dynamics that are toxic and death-dealing. Literally.

These dynamics don't only happen in communities that are just starting to form. They happen in communities that are well-established. Including churches. Because church communities,

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/stephens-witness/commentary-on-acts-61-15-71-2-44-60-2>

congregations, are made up of human beings who are learning together what it means to faithfully follow Jesus. And we don't always get it right.

Because being community, being in community, takes work. Constant work. Paying attention to who's in the room, finding out from them what their needs are, working together to meet them.

And taking it a step outward, in a church community, part of the work is constantly asking questions, "Who is God calling us to become?" or "What does God want for us?" "What risks is God asking us to take?"

And then after asking the questions, it's pausing to pray and to listen for the answers.

Because being church isn't about being a perfect community, but rather being one that is faithful to Jesus. Remembering that he calls us to be faithful to him. Remembering what he taught, how he interacted with others – who he interacted with – and how he called people in.

And recognizing that being a faithful community isn't always as easy as we think it should be – or that things always go the way we think they will. But that doesn't mean the work of nurturing stops.

Many of you know that the congregation I served in Phoenix is bilingual – English/Spanish. It hasn't always been. It started out as an English-speaking congregation.

The shift began in the late 1990's/early 2000's when the church was asked to provide space for adult ESL classes (English as a Second Language). Many of the teachers came from a variety of backgrounds in Phoenix. But there were congregation members that also helped teach, and there were some who helped provide childcare. The students all lived in the neighborhood surrounding the church.

After a couple of months, the students started attending worship – and the services were in English. The people from the congregation that were helping with the ESL classes recognized their students. They welcomed them, they sat with them, helped them follow the services and explain what was going on.

Community was being formed.

Several months later, one of the congregation leaders said, "Hey – how about we get them their own worship service?" And others agreed.

So a second service was added – in Spanish, with a second pastor who is Latino. And it divided the community. The English speakers attended the English-language service, and the Spanish speakers attended the Spanish-language one.

The worship communities grew. And things shifted and reshaped because congregations are dynamic. A couple of pastors in each worship community came and went. And as things continued to develop, it was decided to call a bilingual pastor to serve both worship communities.

And in that call process, the congregation presented itself as “one congregation that speaks two languages.” When it was offered to me, I accepted the call and I served there for just over nine years.

And for many reasons, the vision of one congregation/two languages didn’t become reality in the way some assumed it would or in the way I hoped it would. We had to be open and honest with each other about what we wanted and didn’t want, and about what was working and what wasn’t. And there were some really tough conversations along the way.

But it never prevented us from building community and doing the work of ministry. We worked together to create a place of belonging for many. We celebrated baptisms, confirmations, and the lives of saints who now rest with God. We gathered together for worship and for cultural celebrations. We served the surrounding community.

We held onto the faithfulness Jesus called us to, and we held onto his faithfulness to us. And the lessons we learned helped shape who they are now as a congregation.

Being a congregation, a community that is faithful to Jesus, is hard work. The decisions we make, the ministry we do, all of it affects the people we’re in community with. Both in here and in our life outside of here. Because the way we are with each other in here shapes how we respond to situations in life outside of here.

That lesson is woven throughout the history of the church. It’s one that congregations learn over and over again.

As we do, we remember that Jesus is the one who calls us into community. Jesus shapes who we are – and who we become. Jesus reminds us to pay attention not only to who’s in the room, but also who’s on the outside. To find out from them what their needs are, and to work together to meet them.

We remember, too, that Jesus is the one who calls us outward – who pushes us to ask the questions of who God is calling us to become, and the risks God is asking us to take. Jesus is the one who waits with us as we pray and listen for his answers.

Through all of this work, we nurture one another and our community as a whole. Including the people who worship in this space, the people who haven’t yet come onto our campus, and the people who are part of our ministry partnerships.

And in our work as a community, we remind one another that it isn’t about being a perfect community, but rather about being one that is faithful to Jesus. Remembering what he taught, how he interacted with others and called people in.

And that in our work as the community Jesus calls us to be, he is faithful to us.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Amen.