

4th Sunday of Easter – Acts 2:42-47
St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ

Discerning Ministry with Community

“All who believed were together and had all things in common.”

A few days ago, I wanted to go hiking but the heatwave deterred me from exploring local parks, so I drove up to Flagstaff to hike the trails in Walnut Canyon. As I descended the many steps to the Island Loop Trail, I paused to take in the beautiful view and listen to the birds singing. Looking across the canyon I saw a series of cliff dwellings where ancient communities made their homes. As I followed the curve around the mountainside, a wave of excitement and gratitude pass over me. It felt like I was home again.

It's been several years since I have visited cliff dwellings and ceremonial caves in the Southwest. They were my favorite places to seek out when I lived in New Mexico. It fascinated me that these homes were intimately connected with nature, and were part of a collaborative network that shared resources and skills for the benefit of the wider community. One of the interpretive panels at Walnut Canyon reminded me that “this was a community of relatives and neighbors. Its members worked together to haul water, hunt animals, and gather plants. They likely assisted each other with large fields on the rims. They shared walls and resources, joy and sorrow, success and failure.”

While this description of community life might sound as idealized as the one offered by Luke in today's reading from Acts, there was undoubtedly a desire and a need for people to engage in a way of life that nourished all of them - physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The early Jesus movement began with similar intentions of unity, shared hospitality and camaraderie. But as followers of The Way spread throughout all nations, this initial view of communal life challenged the apostles to discern how the Holy Spirit was calling them to live faithfully while respecting the distinctiveness of the local communities to which they were sent.

Spiritual discernment is not a predefined procedure with checklists and surveys to be completed within a predetermined amount of time. Discernment is a process that, like our individual spiritual journeys, is shaped by God's time and in God's ways. As a spiritual practice, the discernment process is both individual and communal. We bring together our individual experiences and perspectives to share with the larger group for the benefit of the community. As the native peoples of the Southwest grew in number, so did their dwelling places. In Walnut Canyon, cliff dwellings were built on several different levels as the geology provided natural alcoves on all sides of the canyon. The people lived close together in clans to remind them that they are supposed to love each other. They shared in the abundance of natural resources, especially the river water that nourished all of life in the valley. When a family discerned

that it was time to build another house, they gathered the materials provided by nature and drew from the reserve of good will among their clan, acquired from their own participation in previous cooperative projects. Even though cliff dwellers were separated by the canyon landscape, they made intentional efforts to nurture relationships with friends and neighbors by constructing trail ways between dwelling places. They developed ways to communicate, collaborate, and cooperate for the good will of all the people. When it was time for them to migrate to new lands, they did not just suddenly decide to pack up and leave. They discerned over a period of time that weather patterns were shifting, crop yields were diminishing, and wildlife populations decreasing. That discerned over time, that their current way of life in that particular location was no longer sustainable. As a community, they gathered to discuss their needs and concerns and plan for their future. I imagine that not everyone agreed on how they moved forward. But they valued collaboration, and they discerned how to move forward together as a community.

The first generation of believers in the Jesus movement also gathered to share their needs and concerns as a developing faith community. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. As a Spirit-led community, the apostles determined how to move forward through spiritual discernment – a process that probably involved prayer, non-judgmental listening, authentic sharing, and personal

and group reflection. Together they discerned how to faithfully live into the Way of Jesus amidst the unjust social, economic, and political pressures of their time.

As a Spirit-led community, our congregation is seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we embody Christ's church for our own time and context. Our Baptismal Covenant reminds us that we, too, are called to devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. In teaching, we are called to guide current and future generations in faithful living, and to collaborate across generations and abilities toward manifesting God's mission for all people and all creation. In fellowship, we are called to gather not only among our own clans of friends and relatives, but to come together among the diverse groups of people that make up the richness of our wider community.

Today in the Verde Valley, our communities are experiencing our own challenges related to climate change, housing, and population growth. Our communities are feeling the economic strain between the haves and the have nots; between the people who migrate for pleasure and comfort and those who do so out of necessity for personal safety and economic stability. There are parts of our community that are struggling to survive. There are people in our community who are worried and scared. Many of them are so integrated into the fabric our local economy that we often take them for granted. They

are the people who put food on our tables as agricultural workers, as grocers, as chefs, as table servers. They are the people who make our lives comfortable by cleaning our homes and workplaces; our hotel rooms and pools;

they are the people who meticulously manicure the artistic contours of our xeriscaped yards. These people are an integral part of community life. And yet, for many of us they are invisible.

Over the past few weeks, I have been attending gatherings with other faith-based groups to discuss the needs and concerns of the people of our wider community. Some of them are wealthy privileged educated white people, like us. Others are lower-income people of color who have worked hard to build a lifestyle that supports their families despite various forms of discrimination. Some of them are young people who have succeeded in graduating from high school with honors only to be restrained in their desire for a college education and improved economic status by their parents' lack of documentation. In these community gatherings, I have heard stories about personal struggles and perseverance. I have heard faithful people express strong desires that we collaborate for our mutual benefit. I have heard hopefulness in the voices of the wider community when we commit to standing as allies with those who have felt marginalized by unjust and broken social systems. I have felt the movement of the Holy Spirit in our community

reigniting the fire in our souls and guiding us to respond to humanitarian needs with glad and generous hearts for the good will of all the people.

This is the Easter message that the early apostles are modeling for us through the Holy Scriptures today. It is a message of resurrection and new life. It is a message of thanksgiving for God's provision and protection for all of creation. It is a message of hope as we collaborate in creating sustainable communities for all its members. It is a message of celebration that God's abundant love is freely shared for the benefit of all. As apostles of Christ may we not only gather here to devote ourselves to the breaking of bread and prayers. But let us rejoice in the power of the Holy Spirit as we go out into our communities with glad and generous hearts and create good will for the benefit all people.

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