

**6th Sunday of after the Epiphany (Year A) – 1 Corinthians 3:1-9**  
**St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ**

***Embodying Community***

*“The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose...  
For we are God’s servants, working together.”*

These words from Paul’s first letter to the early believers of Corinth remind us that guiding and shaping a new community involves the efforts of not just a few individuals, but is the holy work of all. Paul offers his teaching using agricultural imagery, language that people close to the land might appreciate and understand:

*“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”*

In describing the collaborative efforts of a farming community, Paul is encouraging these new followers of Christ to celebrate the gifts that each person brings for the benefit of all. He is helping them reimagine their relationships with each other in ways that offer glimpses the kingdom of heaven in their lives right then and there. And he is supporting them in reshaping their lives toward a common purpose with God. God is always inviting God’s people to work together to help build up the Kingdom of Heaven.

In both of today’s New Testament readings, we hear how Jesus and Paul are inspiring faithful people to envision and embody what it means to be disciples in community for the sake of community; not just any community;

but God's new community - the kingdom of heaven. In reflecting on the actions and activities of the growing community of disciples, Paul points out that certain individual efforts are not better than others; but that God values all of our efforts to shape the new community because our God is a God of relationships. Our God is a God of hospitality. Our God is a God of community.

How do you imagine shaping God's New Community here at St. Andrew's? Earlier this year, many of you reflected on this question and shared your "Three Wishes for the future" with the vestry and search committee. Your prayers and encouragement supported the parish community in moving into a challenging period of discernment and transition. Today I celebrate my first month with you as your new rector. And in case you haven't noticed, we are still in a time of transition! We are still getting to know each other. We are still learning how to communicate with each other. We are still imagining fresh ways to collaborate on new initiatives that prioritize our wishes for the future. We are actively reshaping God's new community here at St. Andrew's and in the Verde Valley and transforming our hopes into reality. While that all sounds very positive and exciting, our life experiences and wisdom tell us that no matter how positive a change in life may be, it's healthy to acknowledge that we may be grieving the loss of times gone by at the same time we are looking forward to new possibilities for the future. No, everything is not

“coming up roses” as that famous overly optimistic show tune might imply. But maybe roses are showing up in our lives in a different way.

During my first few weeks here I’ve become acquainted with some of you in small group meetings by introducing a brief check-in process that involves sharing our “highs and lows” for the week. This practice is also referred to as sharing our “roses and thorns.” I can relate to the roses and thorns analogy because I imagine being part of a rose bush growing with the support of a strong network of roots; nurtured by healthy soil, fresh water, sunshine and shade; and the stems sprouting both thorns and blossoms. By acknowledging the roses and thorns in our daily lives we can move beyond a simplistic binary view of the world - in which things are either good or bad - into a fuller, more complex sense of life; one that is always in the process of rebirth and renewal. As Christians we are always living into the hope of resurrection joy. And we know that resurrection doesn’t happen without something first dying. Without letting go of how things used to be, and cultivating new ways of being; especially being in relationship as a faith community.

Paul’s first letter to the first generation of believers in Corinth indicates that the people were adjusting to new ways of being in community and different leadership styles. From Paul’s description, it sounds like many people were having difficulty letting go of past ways of being, while others

were quarreling about the importance of their individual roles in manifesting the new community. People were arguing over who had the greatest gifts, relentlessly judged one another, and were heavily influenced by cultural norms that valued people based on how rich and powerful they were. Paul is reminding this new faith community that Jesus did not die on the cross just for those with material wealth, or political power, or special gifts. None of those things were as important to Jesus as showing love for each other in community.

While I haven't heard that there is a great deal of quarreling and jockeying for position within our parish community, there certainly is more than enough judgmental rhetoric and divisiveness in our nation to call into question our Christian identity and values. The world is watching. And more importantly, God is watching. God is watching not so much as a wrathful old man up in the sky waiting to throw thunderbolts down on the sinful. But God is watching like a loving parent. God is watching like a caring teacher. God is watching like a kind neighbor. And God is not only watching, but God is working through the goodness in our hearts and hands towards God's purpose. God has hope and faith in us, that we will set aside our egos and arrogance, and live into the loving new community that God intends for all.

In this liturgical season after the Epiphany, our lectionary reminds us that the identity of Jesus was revealed, not just in ancient times. The light of

Jesus the Christ is being revealed in and through our lives every day. Sometimes in our personal devotions, our prayers may reflect a personal relationship with God. But God is guiding each of us and all of us to participate in the shaping of God's New Community for all people, at all times and in all places. God is empowering us to envision and embody discipleship in community for the sake of community with faith, hope and love. Not the greeting card kind of love that may show up in your mailbox this Tuesday. But the kind of love Paul wrote about to the people of Corinth a few chapters later. The kind of love that is embodied in God's New Community.

“Love is patient; Love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful, it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

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