

Belonging
Acts 2:37–47
Sunday, June 12, 2022 (Trinity Sunday)

Let us pray: Show us who you are, Lord, and who you are calling *us* to be, in Christ. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago, I was sitting in the Kean Room with Sue Chudy and Lisa Scolari as we undertook the infamous task of cleaning the rolls. Some of you know what this means, but for those of you who do *not*, every member of this church has their name written in a book. This book is the roll of active members of St. John's Presbyterian Church. Every Presbyterian Church has one of these, and we are required, every other year, to go through them and make sure they are up to date. What this means is, we look at a list of names and ask, "Is this person actively engaged in the life and ministry of the church?" If it is determined that they *are*, their names are left there, and we move on to the next one. If we determine that they are *not* active members of the church, then we go through a process at the end of which their names may be removed from the rolls of the church.

It is an unenviable, thankless task that inevitably gets people upset at you. But the *reason* we do it is, first, because it tells us if there are people we haven't seen in a while that we need to reach out to; we want to *encourage* active participation in the life of the church. And second, we need to keep an accurate record of the membership of the church because we *pay* the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) \$35.38 for every active member on our rolls. It is called *per capita giving*, and there is an insert in your bulletin so that you can learn more about it. It's not a tax or a membership fee. We are a *connected church*, and this is how we help make the ministry of the greater church possible. It's how we do more *together* than we can do on *our own*. And while we *love* you, we do not want to pay \$35.38 for you if you are not actually an active member in

the life of the church. That starts to add up pretty quickly. So we go through this process every other year of cleaning the rolls.

Now, every time we do this, the question always arises, “What does it *mean* to be an active member?” Does it mean coming to worship? Technically, if you come to worship *one time* in that two-year span, you’re an active member. But is that active participation in the life and ministry of the church? And what about our homebound members who can no longer come to worship? Maybe they still *give* to support the life and ministry of the church. So does being an active member of the church mean *giving*? Well, maybe you can’t give *financially*, but you give in *other* ways. You make meals for people. You help with Horse Show parking. So you can see how one question leads to another, and it can be very difficult to determine what active membership in the life and ministry of the church actually *means*.

I remember years back, when we did this at the first church I served, we would send a letter to someone saying, “We noticed you haven’t been actively participating for some time. We would love to have you back. If you intend on coming back, let us know, and we will leave your name on the rolls. Otherwise, we will need to remove you from active membership.” This gets especially tricky with people who grew up in the church but have gone off to college and aren’t coming back. We send the letter to their parents, and I remember once receiving a very irate phone call from a parent who said, “I want them to stay on the rolls so that they can get married here!” I said, “Oh, I didn’t know they were getting married!” They said, “They’re *not*...yet. But when they *do*, I want them to be a member so they can get married here.” I said, “You know, I would still marry them. We don’t just marry *members*.”

Another person wanted us to keep their name on the rolls so that they could receive pastoral care. We said, “Oh, are you in *need* of pastoral care?” “Well, no, but if I *am*, I want to be a member!” Again, we don’t base pastoral care on membership. Another person wanted their name kept on the rolls so they could “be buried here” when they die. First of all, we don’t bury anyone *in* the church, not even members. Second, of course I would still do your funeral. But also, you moved out of the area *20 years ago*, shouldn’t you have joined another church by now? Is that all membership in a church is to you? Having your name written in a book so you can have your funeral there when you die?

So *as* I was sitting there with Sue and Lisa going through the rolls of the church, I thought, “We should talk about this!” *What does it mean to be a member of a church?* And *today* is the perfect Sunday to talk about it. Because last week was Pentecost, on which we celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church, so now that the church *exists*, what does it mean to *belong* to it? But also because today is Trinity Sunday. We’ll come back to that in a bit.

But the first thing that I want you all to hear – I joked about it a minute ago, but I want to say it in all seriousness now – your membership status here does not determine our ability to love and care for you. We do pastoral care, weddings, and funerals for members *and* non-members. And I know that there are people who have been here for a long time, and they are actively engaged in the life and ministry of this church, but they aren’t technically members. That’s fine. We don’t treat them any differently than we treat members. We don’t love them any less than we love members. And even though their names aren’t written in a book, they *belong* here.

The ministry of the church is modeled on the ministry of Jesus Christ, who loved and healed and taught and ate with both the people of Israel and those who were *outside* of Israel. Jesus did not

define people in terms of *member* and *non-member*, and neither should we. If you are here, you belong, and you are loved.

So, that being said, what does it *mean* to be a member of a church? Or maybe we should say, “What does it mean to be a part of a church family?” What does active participation in the life and ministry of the church look like? Well, our reading from Acts shows us what it looked like for the first church. It’s still the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit has come upon Jesus’ disciples. Peter stands up and preaches Jesus; he gives his testimony of Jesus as the crucified and resurrected Messiah. When the people around them hear this, they are *cut to the heart*, and they say, “What should we do?!” Peter says, “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

That word *repent* is the Greek word *metanoia*, which means, “to change your mind.” The Hebrew word that Peter likely would have used was *shuv*, which means, “to turn” (it’s this idea of turning *away* from sin and turning *to* God). So what Peter is saying here is, “*Rethink everything* in light of Jesus Christ. Rethink your *life*, turn away from sin, orient your life to God, and be baptized to reflect this new life.” That is where membership in the church starts: baptism. Baptism is our birth into a life of faith. It reflects the washing away and cleansing of our sin in Christ’s death and our sharing in his resurrection as we are born into a new life. Baptism involves a profession of faith that Jesus Christ is Lord. And at its very core, that is what it means to be a Christian – to profess Jesus Christ as Lord and to orient our lives to him; to live in ways that follow him.

So it says that day 3,000 people were baptized. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. The first thing they did

after being baptized was devote themselves to the apostles' teaching. They had to *learn* about Jesus. We devote ourselves to learning about Jesus and what it means to follow him. We do this through reading scripture, through reading other books, through sermons and studies.

But it's more than just knowing *facts* and *information* about Jesus. It's about knowing *him*. I can give you facts and information about Leonardo DiCaprio – when he was born, where he was born, what movies he has been in, even what his hobbies and interests are – I can tell you all about him, but I don't *know* him. In the same way, we can read all about Jesus, know when he was born, where he was born, the stories he told, the miracles that he performed, and still not *know* him. Being part of the church of Jesus Christ is about devoting ourselves to *knowing Christ* – not just knowing *about* Christ, but *knowing Christ* as one knows a friend.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings, to knowing Christ, and they also devoted themselves to *fellowship*, to knowing *each other*. Being a Christian, being part of a church, is not just a private thing between you and Jesus. It's about knowing all these other people, being in relationship with all these other people who are also seeking to know Jesus. It's about spending time together. Talking to one another. That word *fellowship* is the Greek word *koinonia*. It also gets translated as *community* – they devoted themselves to *community* – but it has its roots in a word that means *partners*. Fellowship is about us being *partners* in this pursuit of knowing Christ.

Then it says they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread and the prayers. This means a couple of things. The breaking of bread takes place in worship, at the table, in communion. Same with “the prayers.” Notice it doesn't just say, “They devoted themselves to *prayer*.” It says, “They devoted themselves to *the prayers*.” That's specific. There was some kind of

liturgy or ordered prayer that they devoted themselves to. They did all of that *collectively*, in worship together, and they also did it *outside* of worship. It says later that they also broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.” Being part of a church involves breaking bread together at Christ’s table in worship, and it also means eating together outside of here, at *our own* tables. It means devoting ourselves to the prayers that we all pray here together, and devoting ourselves to the prayers that we pray on our own, or even devoting ourselves to praying for *one another*.

Finally, it says that all who believed were together and had all things in common, not that they all shared the same interests or liked the same things, but that they would sell their possessions and good and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. A little bit later in Acts, it says that the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. Being part of a church involves *giving* to help those in need. Giving of *ourselves* for the life of the *community*.

We don’t just ask you to give financially so that we can keep the lights on. That’s not what this is about. We ask you to give in order to make possible the ministry of this church in which we all share. To help people get food and clothing. To help people keep *their* lights on. As we heard last week, to help teenage mothers get the love and care and support that they need. To help people in Philadelphia have food and shelter and an education. To help people in Haiti and Mexico and Peru have medical care. To help people with developmental disabilities have jobs that provide them with skills and a sense of pride.

So the church does not just exist for *us* to build ourselves up and be in relationship with one another. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the church is *only* the church when it exists for

others...not dominating, but helping and serving. Being part of a church carries an expectation that you will not just *consume* and leave that responsibility to others, but that you will give to support the ministry to which we are all committed.

So what does it mean to be part of a church? It means we profess Jesus Christ as Lord. We seek to know him and to know each other. We worship together, pray together, eat together. We share our resources to help those in need. In all of this, it is about *living life together*, sharing our lives with God and with each other. And *that* is a very reflection of the nature of God.

Today is Trinity Sunday, the day on the church calendar when we reflect on God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and what that means for us. The Trinity is not just a *theological idea*. It's a *way of life*. It's not just something to be *studied* or *understood*. It is something to be *embodied* and *lived*. The Trinity is the relationship between *three distinct persons* (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and yet at the same time those three distinct persons are *one*, living together in mutual love. The *very nature of God* is one of *community* – three living together as one. And this is what the Trinity shows us about *ourselves* – that being created in the very image of the triune God, *our* nature is found in community. We were *created* for *community*, to live life *together*, as *one*, in mutual love.

The first Christians shared their *food*. They shared their *money*. They shared their *time*. They lived life *together*. This wasn't just a Sunday thing for them. They *depended* on each other. They *opened their lives up* to one another. They were *inherently connected* to each other. Their lives were *bound* together. What affected *one* of them affected *all* of them. They were *many*, living together as *one*. *That* is a reflection of the very nature of God – three living together as

one in mutual love, distinct and yet inseparable from one another, their lives intertwined with each other.

This is what the church is meant to be. A community of people whose *lives* are *bound together*. Inherently connected. Living life together. Sharing our gifts, sharing our *lives* with each other. Laughing together, crying together, praying together. Many distinct people, living together as *one*. The Greek word for *church* is *ekklesia*, which means, “Those who have been called out.” We have been called out of our individual lives, to live a *new life, together*, in Christ.

We are called not just to *go* to church, but to *be* the church. To open ourselves up and let each other in and *share life together*. Share our hopes and our joys. Share our fears and our failures. When one of us does well, Paul says, we *all* do well. When one of us hurts, we *all* hurt. We are called to be as connected to each other as the Father is to the Son and the Spirit is to the Father and the Son is to the Spirit.

And *that* can be a very hard thing to do. Because when you open yourself up to someone else and live life together like that, things can get *messy*. It’s a *risk* anytime we let other people into our lives; let them see our wounds and imperfections and mistakes. We risk being hurt or rejected. It can be *terrifying* to be this *bound* to other people. It can feel very *vulnerable* and out of our control. And maybe that’s the point. That it *is* out of our control. That in our life together, we are being called to trust not just *each other*, but we are being called to trust *God* together.

That is a reflection of the Trinity. And that is what we are *all* called to do together as Christ’s church – to live life together in love, even in the midst of our differences. It is not *easy*. It is

hard, and it can be *messy*, and there is *risk* involved with *trusting* each other and being *vulnerable* with each other like that. But that is what it looks like to *be* the Church and *live* the Trinity. Distinct persons living together as one, our individual lives so bound together that they cannot be separated. It's not always neat or easy, and like the Trinity, it doesn't always make sense. But it's who *God is*, and we were created in the very *image* of this Triune God, so it's who *we are*, too.

Belonging to a church is not just about *going* to church. It is about *being* the church and living life together in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.