

I come in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Community! By definition, “a community is a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals.” The commonalities, attitudes, interests, and goals form an identity – what defines who they are. Communities can be as small as a few people, and as large as one can imagine.

A community’s culture, which is made up of stories, traditions, standards, rules, attitudes, and expectations, provide structure, and consistency, and is often passed from generation to generation. Stories and traditions are faithfully carried forward without question – and sometimes without understanding.

To maintain integrity, these stories, traditions, and culture form the criteria used to classify people, cast judgment, and determine worthiness. To be accepted into a community means that criteria and expectations must be met, to measure up, to conform. Yet, it is possible that what binds some together, can also divide, exclude, and alienate others.

It might surprise you that I’m a bit of a non-conformist. In some communities, I’d be the reason for the creation of more rules. I believe that I would violate some rules on the books by some churches.

In Alabama, it is illegal to wear a fake mustache that causes laughter in church. In Delaware, it is illegal to whisper in church. In Nebraska, it is illegal to

burp in church. In Ohio, it is illegal to kill a housefly within 160 feet of a church without a license (gotta wonder what brought that on).

Obviously, some individuals or groups did not properly represent the culture and identity of the particular community. These rules, and so many of our standards and expectations, are designed to find ways to force conformity, or exclude others, to say “no,” or to label them as ‘unworthy.’ I suggest that rather than dismissing the stories of others, one should seek to gain understanding from them. Traditions of others should not be discarded as ‘quaint,’ but taken seriously as new perspectives into our truth. Listen, watch, and discern how the culture of the past can be relevant in modern times. Welcome people, to find ways to say “yes”. Sometimes communities become so focused on maintaining the culture of the past, that there is an inability to see what it may be called to be, to unlock imaginations, to dream wildly.

Consider the false mustache in church. It is unacceptable to laugh in church! After all, we should be solemn and miserable. Have you ever had something trigger an uncontrollable urge to laugh in church (usually involves at least 2 people)? It takes enormous energy to suppress it. The harder you try, the more difficult it gets. Then, of course, those in the surrounding pews turn towards the offenders to deliver that look of disapproval. The traditions, standards and expectations of the community prohibited laughter in church because it seems

irreverent. Rather than being offended, perhaps consider that God made us in love for joy. What better place to express joy than in church? Or how about that child that runs up and down the aisle, singing a song? Wouldn't Jesus have been delighted in that? He may have even sung along.

These are trivial examples, but do offer us a reflection point. Today, in Scripture, we hear about the renewal of communities - to see 'yes' in God's vision of community.

In our reading from Acts, Peter believed that redemption was reserved for those who followed the Jewish tradition. Certain foods were considered profane and consuming them made you ritually impure. To dine with, or associate with sinners or outsiders, such as tax collectors, prostitutes, and Gentiles, also made the person impure. Unworthy. When impure, he/she is removed from the community until a purification ritual is performed.

Peter is challenged to see community from the perspective of Jesus. The culture of the Christian Jews was exclusive, and only welcomed members who met the criteria, rules, and standards. Those who did not meet the qualifications were considered unworthy of God's grace. Peter was challenged to consider that because God is pure goodness, He creates all things in goodness. Therefore, there is no food that is profane, or people who are unworthy.

Peter realized that his perspectives of the community needed to be broadened and renewed. He came to understand that Jesus wanted his community to have grace and redemption available to all peoples, an inclusive community - the community of humankind. To have anything less says “no”, and stands in the way of God’s grace.

In Revelation, we hear about all things be made new again. In the community of humankind, God “will dwell with them as their God; they will be his people. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.”

Where in this reading is the list of God’s ‘people?’ He will not wipe the tears from some eyes, relieve the pain of some, eliminate the mourning of some. God is eager to welcome those who thirst for Him. They will be given the ‘gift’ of the water of life. Gift – no standards, no rules, no traditions, no culture. The grace of God will have no bounds, will not be inhibited.

In our Gospel, Jesus commands the disciples to love to one another as he loved them. As a matter of fact, love so abundantly, so profoundly, so freely, that others will have no choice but to notice. This renewed community of love would stand apart, not through exclusion, but by profound inclusion. To love so greatly that others get drawn in. Tear down walls, building bridges. So what?

As Episcopalians, we hear about the three-legged stool as the source of truth: Scripture (stories), tradition, and reason. Our identity is built on strength in Scripture, and rich tradition. Our culture has been formed by this over the centuries. Our challenge is to honor the identity and culture of the past, but be open for new perspectives and renewal. We are not meant to take our faith tradition at face value. We are meant to reflect, wrestle, discern, and reevaluate our faith throughout our entire lives. Truth does not change, but the world in which we live does. It takes dedication and effort to continually seek how unchanging truth can influence a dynamic world.

It is time to break the rules that inhibit God's grace in our world. It is time to imagine inclusion and acceptance. It is time to dream of crazy ways to share the richness of our tradition with those who feel excluded, disconnected, or lost. It is time to celebrate the community of God in which everyone has access to His grace and redemption. It is time to love freely, generously, and carelessly. It is time to live in a community that finds every way possible to say 'yes.' AND wear a fake mustache to church and sing in the aisle. Amen.