

Genesis 18: 1-15

Psalm 133

John 15: 1-11

ON BEING COMMUNITY

The wild goose has been a symbol for the Holy Spirit for centuries. It is a perfect symbol. It turns out that wild geese can also teach us a little about community.

Every spring when the geese were migrating north, they would take up temporary residence in many of the farmers' fields around one of my first churches. They could rest in the expansive fields, and be near the Rideau River all at the same time. But I'm afraid they weren't very popular with the farmers. The geese kept them up at night with all their honking. And it was truly an infernal racket. And all their droppings unfortunately were toxic to the fields, so the farmers would be out in the fields trying to scare the birds off.

Every year around Pentecost, when we would be listening to how God's Spirit descended upon the church – that first community of believers – the geese would faithfully arrive.

The wind blows where it chooses, Jesus told Nicodemus earlier on in John's gospel. You do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

Geese have been a symbol for the holy Spirit for centuries. Perhaps it is because they demand attention, or can keep you up at night but perhaps it has something to do with living in community. Did you know that geese have a 75 % greater range when they travel together as a flock? They also travel about 75% faster than a single goose can when it just flies alone. Flocks travel faster and more efficiently together. And so if we have as much sense as a goose, we will live and work together in community, as followers of Jesus.

You've seen what I mean. When the lead goose gets tired, he rotates to the back and another goose takes a turn and flies up front. The geese honk at the one up front to encourage it to keep the speed up. And when one goose gets sick, or wounded, two others fall out of the formation to stay with it to help and protect him.

Neither are there any solo Christians. While the personal aspect of our faith is important and needs to be nurtured, we never really go it alone. "Without the discipline of community, solitude [can] degenerate into self absorption. It's in the community of faith that we really learn the language of love... A life-giving church is one where human brokenness is lifted up like bread and wine to be held and touched and blessed – to heal the world." (paraphrase- Kent Ira Groff)

Not only are we a part of the community of this congregation, the surrounding churches and the whole community that is the body of Christ through out the world, Hebrews 12: reminds us of the great a cloud of witnesses that surrounds us. Imagine.

Even God lives in Community. I'm referring to the Trinity. In the year 213, Tertullian, an early Church Father and theologian insisted that it was important to preserve the idea of One God, in a world of pagan beliefs. He claimed that the relationship or the Community of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit was within God. This concept has challenged theologians ever since.

There is a temptation to consider the trinity as a puzzle to be solved: The Three in One the One in Three. But another way to think of the mystery of the Trinity is as a Divine relationship that we are all invited to enter into, to experience, to allow this community to shape, nurture heal and astonish us, with power and awe.

If you take a look at the picture that I have brought with me, you will see the work of the artist Andrei Rublev. In about 1410 he created this Icon, called *The Trinity*. While we are not particularly accustomed to the use of icons in the Presbyterian or in any Reformed church, there is still some deep wisdom for us to glean from this amazing piece of art.

Icons are intended not as idols to be worshipped, but as prayer tools.

The figures represent both the trinity as well as the three visitors who came to see Abraham and Sarah. In the passage that we read in Genesis, there are difficulties with the language and the translation. Sometimes those mysterious guests are referred to as three and sometimes it is just one- 'the Lord'. Historically the three figures have often been thought of as the Trinity coming to visit Abraham and Sarah.

And so we see both visions: the Trinity of God at table, with communion perhaps, and the Trinity of the holy visitors sharing the food prepared for them. One is not set higher than the other. They are all engaged and connected to each other. The figure on the right is probably God the Father, in the centre is Jesus, the son of God, Saviour, and on the left is the Holy Spirit.

But one of the things that I have always found most interesting and wonderful is that if you look closely the perspective seems off, not because the artist couldn't draw, but it is actually reversed most notably in this icon and often in others. The idea is to actually draw the viewer into the picture. Like Abraham's hospitality we are welcomed to come closer and be at table with the three figures seated there. This Icon is a Prayer tool inviting us into community of the Trinity. The community of believers that the writer of John was writing to was a persecuted one. They were shut out of the synagogues. It was an anxious time. In that gospel Jesus tells us that he is the vine and we are connected to him. He is the one that gives the community life. And we are nurtured by him, in order that we may love one another as Jesus commanded.

Love one another he tells us, as I have loved you.

Living together is never easy. There is nothing romantic about living in community. It requires patience and gentleness and humility as Paul says. There are of course large communities such as Iona, near Scotland but with members all over the world as well as living there. Or there is the prayer community of Taize, or the world wide communities of L'Arche, begun by Jean Vanier, for those with mental disabilities.

And yet there are millions of smaller communities like this living and working together to praise and worship and serve Jesus Christ and the world that God so loves. All over the world there are Christian communities that surround us and each other- little groups of friends who fly with us together in a V, honking to encourage and stopping to protect and wait for healing.

There is a wonderful book by Sue Monk-Kidd called the 'Secret life of Bees.' It is a lovely tale about a 14 year old girl in South Carolina in the mid 60's. It speaks to issues of racism and the effects of the civil rights movement. Her nanny, who is her surrogate mother, is black. She isn't. For a number of reasons, the two of them end up living with 3 black women who are bee keepers. It is a unique and caring household, and above all- it is a community of faith. And as Lily's life becomes woven together with all these other women, the threads and details of the beekeeping life are set out for the reader to see.

In early Christian art, bees and hives were used as symbols of Christian community. What a lovely description it is. There are many roles for each bee. There is the Queen of course – the mother bee. There are the drones who fertilize the queen and help to continue the hive. Ninety eight percent of the bees are workers (in a hive they are female). Mortuary bees carry out the dead ones; fanning bees keep the hive cool; guard bees protect the entrance and the water carriers help with the production of the honey. Each community or hive produces its own sort of honey, depending on the kind of source they have for pollen.

Each community of the body of Christ produces its own unique sort of honey as well.

May we all be blessed with the sweetness and nurturing love of God.

May God use us to feed and nurture not only one another but those who hunger and thirst for the sweetness of God.