

Verse of the day

Acts 2: 45-46

Day after day they met together in the temple. They broke bread⁴⁴ together in different homes and shared their food happily and freely, ⁴⁷ while praising God.

Gospel reading....

Mark 12:28-34

One of the teachers of the Law of Moses came up while Jesus and the Sadducees were arguing. When he heard Jesus give a good answer, he asked him, "What is the most important commandment?"

²⁹ Jesus answered, "The most important one says: 'People of Israel, you have only one Lord and God. ³⁰ You must love him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.' ³¹ The second most important commandment says: 'Love others as much as you love yourself.' No other commandment is more important than these."

³² The man replied, "Teacher, you are certainly right to say there is only one God. ³³ It is also true that we must love God with all our heart, mind, and strength, and that we must love others as much as we love ourselves. These commandments are more important than all the sacrifices and offerings that we could possibly make."

Acts 2:42-47 CEV

They spent their time learning from the apostles, and they were like family to each other. They also broke bread⁴⁴ and prayed together.

⁴³ Everyone was amazed by the many miracles and wonders that the apostles worked. ⁴⁴ All the Lord's followers often met together, and they shared everything they had. ⁴⁵ They would sell their property and possessions and give the money to whoever needed it. ⁴⁶ Day after day they met together in the temple. They broke bread⁴⁴ together in different homes and shared their food happily and freely, ⁴⁷ while praising God. Everyone liked them, and each day the Lord added to their group others who were being saved.

Psalm 145: 1-9 The Msg

I lift you high in praise my God, O my King!

And I'll bless your name into eternity.

I'll bless you every day and keep it up from now to eternity.

God is magnificent; he can never be praised enough.

There are no boundaries to his greatness.

Generation after generation stands in awe of your work;

Each one tells stories of your mighty acts.

Your beauty and splendour have everyone talking;

I compose songs on your wonders.

Your marvellous doings are headline news; I could write a book full of the details of your greatness.

The fame of your goodness spreads across the country;

Your righteousness is on everyone's lips.

God is all mercy and grace

Not quick to anger, is rich in love.

God is good to one and all; everything he does is suffused with grace.

Prayer – Holy One, be with us this morning as we listen, reflect and journey together, be in my words and in our thoughts we pray. Amen

Good morning, isn't it good to be together this morning? Turn around and take a look, we are together we can hear our faith children rustling and young people jiggling their feet! We can see our faith parents and grandparents, listening, sometimes nodding off and worshipping. We are whanau together....

Well, we are sitting together in the same place aren't we ☺. Who remembers, or experiences times in family when we are geographically together, maybe sharing a meal or a space but actually we couldn't be further away? Maybe angry words have been exchanged, or simply the busyness of life has made connection become hard?

Our journey through Acts has invited us to wrestle with this idea of community! Three times in the first 5 chapters of Acts there is a paragraph about the Jerusalem community living together, worshipping together, sharing meals together, doing life together. Luke doesn't define the community, so children, youth, adults, older adults all would have been a part of this community. Each bringing their natural gifts to be used for the well-being of the faith community. Teachers teaching, pastors listening, artists creating art, musicians creating music, cooks feeding everyone... while I'm sure children would have become bored with the adults talking and run off to play, and the older adults may well have nodded off a time or two, and those tasked with working in their various skills for the well-being of all, may have felt pretty stressed at times... the story of Acts remains that the community chose to live closely together caring for one another and gathering not just to worship but to wrestle with what Jesus life, death and resurrection meant, how it all connected to the Torah, and how it would change their lives now. They chose to eat together, to hang out, to learn from one another.

So here is a challenge and an invitation, the Bible is full of the perception of all ages and stages learning and growing together, in the Old Testament and New. David speaks of generations passing worship one to the other, Jesus reminds the disciples of the value of children's faith, Paul writes to Timothy encouraging his leadership despite his youth.

Over time, we have lost that sense of doing life together all ages together, over the past 18 or so years of ministry I have lost count of the times I have been told people have 'done their time with children/youth' or 'my kids have grown up so I don't have to be involved now'. Which speaks maybe to a sense of exhaustion from the demands of raising children in the 20th Century when the burden is all on the parents and not shared by the wider local community, but also subscribes to a lie that we may have nothing more to offer or wish to give to other generations. Over time that sense gives way to almost a fear of children and young people that we may no longer understand them. That goes both ways though, often children and young people don't understand adults either.

So how do we bridge this? How do we move from the slightly awkward distanced family who's lost touch with each other, to the relaxed, chill, grace-giving, loving whanau that all thrive within?

One way is to begin to understand that there are different perceptions of community, where it is found, what it looks like, how it can be built and sustained. I'm going to talk generational perceptions, but there are also different cultural understandings too.

In generational theory there are three different perceptions of community

Door to door

Place to place

Person to person

Door to door means an understanding of community that is local, within the local community in which one lives, there is deep loyalty, an understanding of duty and trust in institution. Doing the right thing is important, therefore leadership and volunteering are a natural extension of duty. People within this category have generally been shaped by fighting evil, making sacrifice for the good of the vulnerable - children and women, as time has gone on though some have been scarred by the great depression and pointless wars. Church is trustworthy and part of the sense of duty and loyalty to the community they have given their lives in service of.

Place to place means an understanding of community that is more general, it is the place where our needs are met, it is about the *experience* of community. Trust in institutions have been eroded by international and national policies becoming less black and white, higher educational and travel opportunities creating bigger vistas and ideas. Shifts in gender roles, and cultural perspectives have served to start to challenge the status quo and trust in the church is waning. These people look for the faith community that works for them and their families. Increasingly, as the need for two incomes has increased so the need for a faith community that offers what's needed without eroding family time too much. Leadership and volunteering as also weighed against sacrifice of family time and energy, paid staff for a variety of roles has become the norm to sustain ministry and lifetime commitment is not the norm.

Finally, *Person to Person is*, naturally, about people and specifically about relationship. Community is formed around relationship. Trust is in person rather than institution or group, community can happen anywhere, online, in a café, at a camp, at church. Community can also happen across generations, hierarchy doesn't exist, we are all equal, and all have something to offer at any time. The church is constantly competing with other options, programming is less important than the quality of relationships found and the contributions that can be made. These groups of people have been shaped by the advent of inequality, climate change, corporate greed, higher education, & in NZ, bi-cultural partnership and of course the explosion of the internet and the connectedness and brutality across the world that that brings. These people know that time is limited and want to use it wisely, they want to contribute and know they have something to contribute. Collaboration, team work and authentic community are deeply significant and desired across divides of age, culture, gender etc. There is a battle of gospel understanding that we are not appointed as judges, (as found in James) but are to leave the judging to God. Person to person community can be built anywhere, therefore the church does not automatically have trust and is only as trustworthy as the relationships found in it, and in the role a that can be played within it that is valuable and constructive.

Now these are broad generalisations, and many people sit across generations or resonate with different aspects of the theories, however there are people throughout our congregations for whom deep loyalty and commitment will come up against the hunger and expectation of positive and life-giving relationships. The confusion of having a world of information at fingertips, that is unfiltered and arbitrary, dictated by algorithms can go a long way to being wrestled with by person to person relationships where grace, respect and equity are paramount.

In youth work we often speak of the 'wisdom in the room', the very newest youth workers have plenty to offer as well as the long-serving youth workers like myself.

So again, how does this help us? Well, when we see the bridge needs to be crossed, and when we choose to cross it, we are able to approach one another with that love that Jesus spoke of, about loving our neighbour. Trick is, the longer we've been at this walking with Jesus thing, the more we understand of God reaching out to us, to help us navigate the world we find ourselves in, the higher the expectation on us to reach across the divides with grace and humility, that is whanau together I suggest!

So, there's nothing better than taking some learning and processing it, so I'm going to help us do that with my favourite avenue, a story. Here is the invitation, you know when I invited you to look around at each other? Well after the story, I'm going to invite you to look around again and form small groups of 5 or so of people of different ages and stages. Kids, youth if you'd like to keep a friend with you, that's cool, but for this to work we all need to be reaching across the generations. I'll give you a couple of questions to talk about in your groups. If you don't know each other, take the time to swap names first.

Here are the ground rules... listen to each other, this isn't about right or wrong, but about what has captured people's attention about the story. Each person, what you note is yours. While some may note similar things, across a group I would expect different people to resonate with different aspects of the story.

So let's give this a go shall we?

Story

On screen **What captured your attention in this story? Why (share only as much as you feel safe to)**

Did it remind you of something familiar?

Invite some people to share the perspectives of their groups (I'll need a roaming mike)

This story is a re-written one from 19th Century Danish Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, he wanted to challenge his church to seek other pastures, to take the faith out of the comfort of their community to the wider world. As you have just seen, different people have drawn different learnings from this story, others the same as the original author intended.

For me, what a great example of the diversity of perspective we often have.

So back to my question, So how do we bridge this? How do we move from the slightly awkward distanced family who's lost touch with each other, to the relaxed, chill, grace-giving, loving whanau that all thrive within?

Well, our Gospel reading speaks of love, our psalm of worship and our Acts reading of being together, intentionally being together, so, as we move forward, wrestling in our own ways with the conundrum of being people of faith in this connected, face-paced world we live in, maybe our invitation is to consider how we interact with each other, and how we choose to be church together. What does it look like to be a church of many generations choosing to be as whanau together, rather than as tribes?

Prayer: Creator God, come, speak to us we pray, each one of us, from the very youngest to the eldest, help us to continue to adapt our faith community to be one of nurture, welcome and belonging. Help us to reach across divides as you do, help us to love as you do, help us to walk forward confident in Your God-ship in this community, we pray, Amen.