

“Threats to Christian Community: Part IV”

Numbers 21:4-9 and Ephesians 2:1-10

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Today is the fourth week of our sermon series on Christian Community, life and ministry together, which is also the theme of our daily Lenten devotions written by members of the Lewinsville Community. In the first three parts of this series, Pastor Scott preached on the Center – which is Christ, the Goal, which is serving Christ, and the Ground – the sacraments of the church, gifts from the ministry and life of Christ that nourish our community. Today we are going to look at threats to Christian Community, which are most often found when a shift takes place in one of those first three parts – a decentering of Christ, a goal or purpose built on internal satisfaction over external serving in the name of Jesus and grounding the weight of the community on things that are not strong enough to hold it – like personality, what worked for us before, making one part of our community and life together something of an idol.

When something becomes weaker, at the center, the goal or the ground, the threats to healthy community that pull and push and splinter, like resentment, judgement and anxiety, gain strength. Moses knew this very well. The passage from Numbers is the last in a series of stories where the Israelites complained against Moses, and in this passage even against God, about what life is like for them after their rescue from slavery in Egypt. The complaints have included the following: bitter water, lack of food, thirst, wanting meat, and lastly in this passage, no food, no water, miserable food they detest. A common complaint unites the beginning of these stories that we find here: “why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?”

You can imagine why this is so painful to God and Moses. First, that question proclaims the foundational act of God’s saving mercy for the Israelites, - you brought us out of Egypt – then turns it on its head as an accusation - to die in the wilderness. The people know they’ve been rescued and that it was God who did it, but that is no longer the center of their community, of their narrative. Second, the people, it says in verse 4, are *on the way* that God is giving them, from Mount Hor, by the Red Sea, around Edom. God is actively with them as their guide, they have not been abandoned, yet they become impatient and begin questioning if they even want their goal to be following God on the way to what is next. Third, this time when they are complaining about the food, it is the very food that God gave them. It is after the gifts of Manna, the Quail. And those gifts have not run out. They are still there, each morning. God provides for the life of the people, but the people are no longer willing to ground their lives on what God is giving. The central story of God’s redemption and covenant is not holding, the goal no longer seems worth waiting for or moving towards, the ground – the food they collect from the literal ground – the original Bread of Heaven – is found wanting.

So now there is room for what comes next. Room for one person to voice a complaint and then another, room for resentment towards God, judgement on Moses and each other, anxiety within themselves to build. One preacher described this moment as the “Let’s Go Back to Egypt Committee” getting wound up again (*Feasting on the Word Commentary, Numbers 21:4-9*). Then goes on to say that every church he has ever served also had a “Let’s Go Back to Egypt Committee” that got wound up. Healthy Christian Community has so much room for disagreement, debate, doubt, dissent, as we discern together the work of the Spirit among us. That is different than this. The complaining stories of the people in the wilderness point to a unique challenge, when the big building blocks of community aren’t as they should be.

Which is how Ephesians 2 and its short course in reformed theology and belief come alongside this scripture. Dead to sin, made us alive together with Christ. Great love with which we are loved. By grace you have been saved through faith, as a gift of God. We are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works. All of this plural, every you in this passage is Pastor Scott’s Southern ya’ll, or my Jersey “you guys.” Our Christian Community stakes its life on fundamental beliefs about which there is no wavering. Hear me say that you can absolutely be part of the community and not be sure about one or all of these, but you also agree to be part of a community that is clear about its belief in them, will set its mission by these words and the Word, that will teach them to young and old, that will set them as center, goal and ground.

No amount of complaining will ever change Jesus in the center, serving Christ as the goal, sacraments as the ground. And I wonder how much of our challenges, whenever it happens within our Christian community, or within the whole Body of Christ, is eased by a refocus on those three things. One commentator puts it like this, people who lack trust and become unreliable with God lack trust and become unreliable with each other. (*New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*) Or now in my words, Christian Community is at its strongest when the members of it are at their closest to God. And each one matters, each one of you doing and not neglecting the good works that Christ created you to do. God has called you, singular, with your gifts, because God has some good works to do that need you. And now you, plural. And that is how we should see and value each other.

The Israelites in Numbers give us some idea for what helps when a threat has grown into a rupture from God and from each other –Name the sin, confess it, “we have sinned by.....” We are good at “I” confessions in our church. What might we as a congregation, need to confess? About our center, goal and ground? About our resentment, judgement and anxiety? Then, face the consequences that this sin has brought into the community – in the case in Numbers it is literal toxicity, snake venom, spreading, in our case it is usually metaphorical toxicity that can be no less deadly to community – and ask for God’s help.

Tell all the stories of the faith community, good and bad, like how some bronze serpent on a pole became a thing because of the inability of the people to center God’s rescue from slavery, God’s covenant with the people, to center that God, who is rich in mercy, out of the

great love with which we are loved - even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved.

And no boasting, as Ephesians says, because it is ridiculous to boast of a freely given gift, to let any of our community life be centered, focused or grounded on resentment for what we don't have or what we once had, judgment for what others aren't doing, for what I'm not getting, or anxiety that God with us and what God gives us will run out, or not be enough.

The theology professor Stephen Fowl wrote a book on idolatry, where he identifies a list quite similar to resentment, judgment and anxiety as the habits that descend a community into idolatry and away from their true center, goal and ground. But he also writes that although Idolatry happens in community, it is also curbed and rejected in community. because Loving the Lord is something we learn to do together, for the Spirit is at work in the body of Christ to enable habits of fidelity in a world angling for the orchestration of our attention. (*Christian Century Review* of Stephen Fowl's book by Brad East, 2/24/20)

In a bit we will sing together They'll Know We are Christians by Our Love. A hymn written by a Catholic Priest on Chicago's South Side serving a multi-racial congregation in the middle of the Civil Rights struggle who made the simple point that not just Christians, but certainly Christians and Christian community should be marked by oneness, Love, the spirit's guidance, Working for justice for all humankind, And the hymns ends where we begin our community:

“All praise to the Father, from whom all things come;
and all praise to Christ Jesus, God's only Son.
And all praise to the Spirit who makes us one.”