

I don't need to tell you how profoundly everything has changed in a few short weeks – the way we work, learn, eat, shop, socialize, worship, move... Many social observers think some of these changes will become the new normal, that we won't be going back to what we were at the beginning of March. It will be a long while before it is safe to gather in groups again, and a longer while before people feel safe doing so. We can relate to those disciples, stuck inside, fearful, knowing their world has irrevocably changed, not sure how to be. There is no new life without death; there is no growth without change.

I've been saying that this disruption, as traumatic as it is globally and nationally, and personally, contains seeds of good news for the church. For our churches. It has elevated the most important aspect of our religious life: relationship. The hunger for connection is so palpable – you see it on social media, where people are posting all through the day. We see it in the new community that has arisen for us in our Zoom worship. This time of separation and social distancing is paradoxically becoming the Age of Relationship – and we ought to be really good at that. What is it that we as Christ's Body have to offer, but relationship and community?

But is that always what our churches have offered?
Have we hidden behind our lovely buildings and gracious liturgies, offering a hand of welcome but no depth of intimacy?
Have we occupied ourselves with caring for our buildings and preparing bulletins?
Have we waited for people to find their way into our building to share life with us?
Have we required them to learn our lingo, the stories in our bible, not asking for their stories, withholding from them our own stories of God's power and love?

Well, friends, we are hearing those stories from each other now, every weeknight. We are learning to be alive to where God is showing up and to share that. We are in relationship with a God who wanted to know us so fully he took on human form; who wanted to set us free from death so badly, he took on death; who wanted to be with us for all eternity so deeply, he took on resurrection life.

We are in relationship with a Jesus who let his followers see him after death, who came so close he breathed peace upon on them – no social distancing there! That’s intimacy! That’s a story, my friends! That’s a relationship.

That’s an invitation Jesus extends to us as – today, and every day of our lives.

This is the language we use about a God who wants to be so close to us,
 who draws us into relationship of such intimacy.

Can we allow ourselves to be loved in that relationship,
 to be transformed in God’s love into who we most truly are,
 and so become apostles ready to be sent, to draw others into that love?

How does a community locked in by fear become a community set free by grace?

The disciples in the upper room were the same men and women we see later in

Acts, holding everything in common, presiding over this amazing common life.

How’d that happen? How’d they go from this (*hunched*) to this (*arms wide open*)?

Well, God didn’t leave them there. God showed up in the midst of the fear.

Jesus rose from the dead, and no locked door could keep him out.

He appeared right in the middle of that room,

in the heart of their fear and doubt, and spoke peace to them.

He invited them once more into intimate relationship, with him,

so intimate that they could touch his wounds if they wanted to.

He breathed the Holy Spirit onto them. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” He said.

And a few weeks later, when the Spirit came in power upon them at Pentecost,
 they were released, empowered, gloriously freed from fear to become Christ’s
 body in the world. They preached with abandon, they healed people right and
 left, they stood up to powers and authority with boldness; and yes, they formed
 a community of grace of which we, 2000 years later, are the inheritors.

This amazing unity is what the early church called “*koinonia*.”

That’s a word I’d like us to get used to.

Koinonia is used in the New Testament to refer to the early Christian community;

it means Christian fellowship or communion with God and fellow Christians.

The root of the word is *koine*, and means “to hold things in common.

More generally, it means “communion by intimate participation.”

Koinonia means fellowship, but not just any kind of fellowship –

it’s a fellowship based on unity of heart and mind, of unity of believing.

It refers to a relationship that is dependent on more than one individual.

It's not so much the things we label fellowship – coffee hour, lunches.
It's a fellowship of doing, of actively doing God's will together.
It is used to describe an interdependent relationship.¹

Interdependence is a hallmark of Christian community.
We are stronger connected than we are trying to go it alone.
That's true for our church, and it's true for every person here today.
We are not called to take care of ourselves, to hold to ourselves
either our resources or our needs.
Either one is the way of self-sufficiency – of selfishness.

We have a choice. We can hunker down like those disciples.
Or we can deepen our connection to one another,
and look around for who we might hook into this web of *koinonia*.
The first month of closed churches was for me about keeping us connected.
This next, post-Easter period is about widening the circle.
We have a better opportunity to broaden our church community now,
because the barriers to participation are lower:
You don't have to get dressed, you don't have to go out, you don't have to speak.
You don't even have to show your face if you don't want to.
You don't even have to live in Southern Maryland.

But you do need to be invited – so who might you invite?
Who might you send post that event invitation to?
Who might you call and say, "I've been getting a lot of peace and strength
from doing church online – want to join us Sunday?"

Friends, we are disciples called to walk out the door unlocked by our risen
Lord Jesus, into the pure light of God's freedom and grace.
to trust that, in the community of the faithful, Christ's body, God has provided
abundance enough to care not only for us, but for the rest of the world.
This *koinonia* life works. There is enough as we give to one another.
We have enough to share with the many who will need our help in coming weeks.
Even from home, we can walk out the unlocked door
and carry God's contagious love into this world.

Amen.

¹ Bob Gillam, Th.D., at Bible.org

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.