

PROPER 13B-RCL
Exodus 16:2-4; 9-15
Ephesians 4:1-6
John 6:24-35

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

There are several words in English that describe a group of people who share things, food and dreams together. Many of them start with the letters "c-o-m" or "c-o-n" – prefixes that come from the Latin word *cum*, meaning "with." If we do some quick translations, we can think of *companions* (those with whom we eat bread); *congregation* (with the flock); or *common* and *community* from the same Latin roots (with meaning.) All four words describe a human group bound together in some basic way.

Each of our lessons today tells us something important about a particular group. In Exodus, we hear about the Israelites wandering in the desert, a loose collection of former slaves. They are learning to depend upon the abundance of God rather than the dole of the Egyptians. Their eating manna in the morning and wild quail in the evening would come in time to symbolize their becoming a unified people once again, the chosen ones of a God who loved them so much that he fed them. They became companions.

The writer of Ephesians outlines the requirements for living together as followers of Jesus. He urges them to consider themselves bound by their diversity into something like a single body – not all the same, but each

vitality different and distinct. “*Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift,*” he writes. Some will have gifts of prophecy and teaching; some will be pastors and apostles; and all will be part of the “Body of Christ.” Every part of the body must respect and learn to depend on every other part. To be a follower of Jesus’ Way of Love, each person must adopt a shared sense of meaning, as well as a humble, but honorable identity as a child of God. Shared meaning is what makes community.

In John’s gospel, our reading today focuses on Jesus’ teaching about what the difference is between companions, who eat physical bread together, and the spiritual community that becomes a congregation. Those who wish to follow Jesus must eat spiritual food, share a sense of being in Christ, and eat the “true bread from heaven.”

Companion, community, congregation.

What do we humans do that reinforces and rebinds us into one Body? The old fashioned answer is that we perform spiritual and corporal works of mercy. If you haven’t read or remembered them recently, they bear repeating, for they are the powerful means by which we build the connections that hold us together.

We are to care for the physical well-being of our human brothers and sisters by feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing those who

need clothes, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Equally, we are to care for people's spiritual needs as we are able: teaching the ignorant, counseling those in doubt or anxiety, telling people when they doing wrong, bearing our own wrongs patiently, forgiving others willingly, comforting those who are afflicted in any way, and praying for the living and the dead.

The aim of these works of mercy is that we will become part of Jesus' desire for the reconciliation of Creation. These are healing practices – they heal us when we perform them, and they bring healing to those who receive them. They build strength and flexibility into the Body that Paul writes about. He says “*...Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.*”

Yes, each one of us is involved in this great work, and that's where our sense of community comes from. When we practice these works of mercy together, we shine the light of Jesus' love into our world. We become the light that drives away darkness.

There are a staggering number of challenges to community today, and an even more staggering number of people who are working hard to bring

the light of love into places of darkness. But our media too often tell us to focus on the darkness – and they are not alone!

Anglican priest and consultant, Rob Voyle, says in his recent newsletter, that when he asks people whether they would agree that “There is so much darkness in the world,” most people nod their heads. Then he points out that we spend enormous amounts of time and energy studying the darkness. Scholars write histories of darkness, and scientists label and categorize it. Talking heads and politicians decide who is to blame for it. Meanwhile poets and artists romanticize it, and theologians create theologies on darkness. Finally he says, we teach people how to embrace and live with the darkness. Not interested, he says!

What Rob Voyle wants to know is:

Where is the light switch? When confronted with darkness we need to discover and turn on the light. Trying to have less darkness or making friends with the darkness won't work – we need to turn on the light. From a theological perspective, what did Jesus come for? Was it to give us less death or was it to give us life?

We are part of a creation formed by light and by love. If we focus on darkness too intently, we may forget to turn on our own powerful light switches. Since we are part of Christ's body, and as the apostle John tells

us, “in him there is no darkness at all,” we neglect our light switches at our peril.

Let us practice both the works of mercy and turning on our lights. Rob Voyle says it is a matter of finding out what simple things give us joy, and

“...a deep sense of satisfaction that may often be out of proportion to the nature of the activity. These simple things we love to do are either literally or metaphorically true of why we are on the face of the earth. They are a basic resource pattern for how we can bring the best of ourselves to the challenges of our daily lives.”

So, my friends, here is good advice from Paul, John and Rob. We are meant to be people of light, and as Christians we practice bringing light to the world. We build community and congregation by bringing our own special gifts, our unique call to joy, to each other by grace.

And because we have a God who loves us and feeds us, so that we may have bread for our journey, we remember Jesus' words: “***I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and who believes in me will never be thirsty.***”

May you eat and drink of light and love, until you are deeply and happily full. And may you share that light and love with all God's creation.

Amen.