

Dwelling in Community

(Revelation 21:1-6)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 19, 2019

In the name of the one God: creator; redeemer; and sustainer. Amen.

*See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them.*¹

At various times during the past few weeks, I have preached about the recognition of Jesus in the faces of others. I have issued the challenge of looking for Christ in those near us, and I have asked us to consider how we respond and react when we experience that joyful moment of discovering him in someone else. I have considered what it meant in the 21st chapter of John for the disciples ... and for us in our lives today ... to go from not recognizing Jesus to suddenly seeing him. And I have talked about the assurance we sometimes need ... our need, like that of the community surrounding Jesus in the 10th chapter of John, to have Jesus **confirm** that he **is in fact** the Messiah.

The reading this morning from Revelation, particularly the verse I just shared a few moments ago, is one I feel is important to continuing this conversation. In some respects it broadens my theme – taking it from seeing the holy in the face of a single person to discovering the presence of God in a community. For that is what I pull from this particular verse: God is **among** ... God is **dwelling with** ... mortals. **Plural**. God is among **the community**.

Community is a **powerful** thing. It is a **wonderful** thing. It is a **necessary** thing. Yes, I know that there are people who prefer independence and solitude to community. Speaking as an introvert, there is for me a certain point at which solitude and independence are necessary in order for me to recharge my batteries. Even Jesus as we know needed to slip away from time to time to go to the shore of a lake or high into the mountains to be alone in prayer with his Father.

But his ministry was not carried out in solitude; he preached, healed, taught and loved **within a community**. The size of the community changed; sometimes he was off with two or three of his disciples, such as at the moment of his transfiguration. At other times, he worked among sizeable crowds; consider the thousands that he fed and the tremendous number who entered the city of Jerusalem with him on that first Palm Sunday. No matter the size, however, he was **among** ... **God** was **among** ... mortals. And community is vital for **all of us**.

¹ Revelation 21:3 (NRSV).

Yesterday, I attended a forum sponsored by the Winchester Region of our diocese on congregational care for addiction. It was developed as a way of giving faith communities – Episcopal and otherwise – a starting point for finding resources and organizations they can utilize to offer support for those suffering from addiction as well as their families and friends. As part of the meeting, three individuals took time to share their own stories of recovery. What they told us was ***emotional***; it was ***honest***; it was ***powerful***; in some instances, it was ***very raw***. But no matter who was speaking, one common theme was woven into the fabric of their stories: ***the support of community***. To a person, they each spoke of how it was various communities – their families, their friends, 12-step groups, and others – who were instrumental in walking with them on their road to recovery.

It is no secret that we can accomplish together far more than we can accomplish alone. However, it is often difficult to take that first step of inviting the community into our lives and struggles. Yesterday I heard a gentleman speak of how it was almost impossible for him to say three simple words: “***I ... need ... help.***” But once the words were spoken, a community of support rallied around him. That community became a source of strength for him.

Communities are ***gifts of God***. If they were not, would the writer of Revelation have said that the home of God is among mortals? Would he have in essence said that God dwells among the community of mortals? I do not think so. And so it is important that we ***always*** remember that we have the opportunity to call on our various communities to walk with us through ***our*** earthly journeys – not just in the good times, but in the bad, and not just the community of believers here at Christ Church, but all those of which we are a part in our daily lives.

More importantly, living in community and calling on those around us opens space for the work of the Holy Spirit to continue. We focus often on how the Spirit is at work in and through us, but I think sometimes we lose sight of the fact that we receive ***tremendous blessing*** – and we bless ***others*** – by recognizing and making space for the work of the Spirit in those around us. When we do not reach out to others in the spirit of community, we run the risk of depriving ourselves of wonderful gifts. And when we do not reach out to others ... or in fact, ignore the call of others reaching out to us ... we prevent God from doing the work he has given us and others to do.

Henri Nouwen once wrote, “[C]ommunity is first of all a quality of the heart. It grows from the spiritual knowledge that we are alive not for ourselves but for one another. Community is the fruit of our capacity to make the interests of others more important than our own. The question, therefore, is not 'How can we make community?' but, 'How can we develop and nurture giving hearts?’”²

In the days ahead, I invite you to consider ***community*** ... and ***heart*** ... and the interests of those around us. Accepting that God is at work as a rule is important, yes; but opening the space for

² <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/858488>

God to work through us for the benefit of others ... calling on God, deeply and prayerfully, to work in and through our communities ... is one of the most precious gifts we can offer and receive.

God dwells with us; God makes a home among us. God has created community. At the very least we should reach out to our communities out of our own yearning for compassion ... out of our own need ... out of the calls welling up deep in our souls and released through our prayers. And the most we can do is respond as a community to the needs of others ... to those reaching out to us ... offering ourselves as vessels through which God answers, in his own way and in his own time, the calls of others.

Amen.