

“A People of Faith, in Community.”

Several years ago, I was at a hospital visiting a parishioner. And as I was leaving, I struck up a casual conversation with a man on the elevator. Although I thought the conversation would end as soon as the elevator doors opened, it turned out that we were parked next right to each other, in spaces reserved for clergy.

And so naturally, our conversation continued, but now we were “talking shop.” He told me that he was a retired pastor, who had served churches in the Wesleyan and Nazarine traditions. I told him where I worked. And as we continued to chat, I began to marvel at how two otherwise complete strangers could get along so nicely, and I remember thinking that this was what it must have been like for those first Christian communities that we heard about in our reading this morning from Acts — they were a diverse group of people, bound together by a common faith.



Well, as we learned from our reading from Acts, those first Christians in Jerusalem did actually live together in a community; although I imagine that it was a living arrangement that was fairly familiar to them. For the average first-century Palestinian household usually was an extended-family gathering. So, you would have parents and children, but also uncles and aunts, and sometimes even cousins and grandparents all living under the same roof, or in the same compound. Yes, they were sometimes very different people, but they were bound together by the bonds of a blood relationship.

Well, what bound the first Christians together, in their community in Jerusalem, was their common faith — a faith which was supported by their regular practices. Which is to say that they gathered together regularly: To hear readings from scripture, and sermons; To participate in the sacraments; To share meals together; To have fun together. (Does this sound at all familiar?) And it turned out to be a community that was fairly attractive to outsiders, and so it grew.

The early Christian community did well for a time. And I think what helped them stay together for so long — besides their common faith and practices — was the fact that they also shared the burden of persecution. In other words, the persecution of Christians by the Roman government provided them with a common enemy. And it was a situation that made their individual differences seem minor, and even inconsequential, by comparison.

But when the official persecutions ended in the early part of the fourth century, that unifying factor of a common enemy was removed. And that meant that they had more time to think about their differences. And those differences, which before seemed small, suddenly began to grow in significance.

Now, here's an interesting historical note: The official end to the persecution of Christians took place in the year 312. By 325 (a mere 13 years later), at the first general council of the Christian church — at the Council of Nicaea, from which we got our Nicene Creed — there was already a significant disagreement between the bishops who had gathered there, and a priest named Arius. And by the end of that council, Arius had been denounced as a heretic and removed from his post.



Returning to my conversation with that retired pastor in the hospital parking lot: At some point, he told me that he had a close friend who was an Episcopal priest “up north” (he wasn't any more specific than that) who was discouraged by all of the “liberality” that was going on in the Episcopal Church. And with *genuine* concern, that retired pastor asked me how I was holding up throughout all the unpleasantness.

At that point, I knew our conversation would not end well. So, in an effort to keep things going along a fairly neutral course, I said things like how I thought that change was inevitable. That change was often uncomfortable and even scary. But I could see that he didn't like where we were heading, so I changed tactics.

I described the mission-work that Kansas Episcopalians were doing in Kenya and Haiti, and he seemed to relax. But then — you know, “In for a penny, in for a pound” — I started to talk about how, when you get to know people and work with them, that the differences between you and them — you know, differences of culture, language, or even beliefs — somehow become less important. And then, I said that I thought that, when you begin to put labels on people, that their differences became even more pronounced, and problematic.

Well, by this time his eyes were glazed over, and, from his body language, I could tell that he was getting ready to end our conversation. So I made a point of shaking his hand, and “blessed” him, and got into my car. But as I drove away, I felt sad that a conversation, which had begun so well, seemed to end so poorly.



When I was in college, I had a good friend who attended my church and Bible study. And we often hung out together. My friend was of the opinion that the Christian church was never stronger than when it was being persecuted. I thought he may have had a point. But what’s more, he thought that the Christian Church needed another “really good persecution,” to help it get its act together, and reunite the many Christian denominations.

At the time, I thought my friend was a nut. Sure, he was my friend, but he was also, clearly, a nut — “You want another general persecution of the Christian Church?” But now I’m not so sure. And sometimes, I wonder if he was right. And as things turned out, he left the Episcopal Church when we started ordaining women, so we never really got to finish that conversation.

I think that the challenge for the Christian community today is to find a way to be more like that first Christian community in Jerusalem — that is, without needing a common enemy to push us closer together.

And I think our challenge is to try to find a way to focus *more* on those things that we still hold in common, and give *less* weight to those we don’t; to finally be able to look beyond our differences, and seek those areas of similarity. In other words, if the greater church could be more like St. Andrew’s Church, things would be cool.

And then, hopefully, the next time I’m chatting with a pastor from another denomination in a hospital parking lot, our conversation just might end as well as it began.