

# This is what community looks like

Acts 4: 32-35;

John 20:19-31

April 15, 2012,

Rev. Phil Haslanger

Memorial United Church of Christ, Fitchburg

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, who sent your word to live among us. Amen.*

After Wisconsin's April election about two weeks ago, the *Washington Post* looked at the exit poll data and came to a striking conclusion. Here's what Chris Cillizza wrote last week: "The Badger State has the most polarized electorate in the country."

This probably does not come as a surprise to anyone around here who has been following the news in Wisconsin over the last year or so. But it provides quite a contrast to the words we heard from this morning's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, those stories of life among the earliest Christians.

Remember that first line? "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul ..."

It's an idyllic picture of the early Christian community, a picture of caring for one another, of sharing possessions, of living just the way you think Jesus might have intended.

But don't think the early Christians did not have their share of times when they were not all of one heart and soul.

Just check out the reading from the Gospel according to John today.

Or check out the sections just before and after the little snippet from Acts that we heard today and you will find a much more contentious environment.

The key to living as Christians is not that any community has achieved perfection. It is how we as a community try to live out the ideals set out by Jesus. That is one of the things we are called to do here at Memorial UCC.

The story from John's Gospel is most well known for the reaction of Thomas, the Apostle who missed the first appearance of the resurrected Jesus to his followers and who doubted that it actually happened. He wanted proof. And then when he sees Jesus and acknowledges his presence, Jesus tells Thomas those who have not seen yet who have believed are blessed.

Think for a minute what life must have been like among that tight community of Jesus' followers in the week between Jesus' first and second appearances.

First of all, they were scared. They were hiding out behind locked doors. There was a hostile world around them – the world of Jews in Jerusalem was a sharply polarized one at this point.

Then they have this extraordinary experience of Jesus appearing in their midst, only to have Thomas arrive late and tell his fellow disciples, "I don't believe what you are saying." That is not the kind of statement that is likely to endear Thomas and the rest to one another. You can imagine what the tension must have been like over the next few days.

Perhaps the rest of the disciples finally remembered something Jesus had told them on that first visit. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven."

They knew that they all had their own shortcomings. In

those last days, most of them had taken shelter while Jesus was being tried and executed. None of them raised their voices in the midst of the crowd calling for Jesus to be crucified.

Only a handful showed up at the site of the crucifixion. Only a few women were brave enough to venture out to his tomb.

They knew about the need for forgiveness. They knew that forgiving oneself is often harder than forgiving another. Yet they knew that if they were acting in the way Jesus had taught them, as a community they had to extend that sense of forgiveness to Thomas, the one who would not believe them.

This was a community that was not yet all of one heart and soul ... but they were working on it. They were wrestling with their fears, learning the meaning of forgiveness, trusting in their experience with Jesus to overcome their instincts for self-preservation and retribution.

So when we hear the little snippet from the Acts of the Apostles, we get the impression that the early Christian community must have really gotten it together. But it does have a bit of the “good old days” quality to it.

The Acts of the Apostles probably were written down somewhere in the 60s- that’s not the 1960s, but the 60s of the first century - about 30 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, about 30 years after the formation of these first Christian communities. The author is looking back at the ideal form, reminding his readers of what could be.

In the Greek world of that era, the description of a community of friends could be found in the writings of Aristotle. One of his proverbs was, “Friends hold all things in common.” There was the concept in Aristotle that communities of friends were grounded in the idea that what was best for all is the virtue, not what is merely satisfying to

an individual. The result was a community that looked out for one another.

As the story in Acts says, “There was not a needy person among them.” The leaders of the community made sure that everyone was taken care of.

Yet the polarization of their time still challenged their ideal.

Just before this passage in Acts, the religious leaders in Jerusalem arrested these dissident Jews – Peter and John, the leaders of the early Christians. They tried to get the Christians to stop talking about the resurrection – a story that meant Jesus had overcome the plots against him.

Instead, Peter and John healed a man standing in their midst, showing the religious leaders and the crowds that compassion could trump rigid dogma.

Then right after the story of how the early Christians all lived with one heart and soul, there are two contrasting stories.

One is of Joseph Barnabas, a member of the Jewish priestly class who came from a foreign land. The story says, “He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”

Here’s one more example of someone contributing to what we today might call the pastor’s discretionary fund.

But then there is another story right after that, this one about a couple named Ananias and Sapphira. They, too, sell a piece of property and give the proceeds to the Apostles – only they do not give all the proceeds, even though they said they did. For their deception, they both died on the spot.

The last line of this part of the story? “And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard these things.”

I don't think this is a model for a future stewardship campaign. But it does tell us that that life in the early Christian community was just as complicated as life in our world today. There were divisions, there were noble acts, there was generosity, there was greed, there was deceit.

This, as they say, is what community looks like.

And what does our community look like?

Let me tell you three brief stories from Easter Sunday, about what our community looked like last week. They were stories below the radar of most people here, stories that you might not have noticed amidst the beauty of the sanctuary and the power of the music. But they were stories of the Easter story coming alive in our midst.

One story involved a newly homeless couple that was with us last week. They had spent the night before sleeping in their car in our parking lot. Through the Pastor's Discretionary Fund that you made possible, I was able to get them a night's lodging at a motel until they could connect with the Interfaith Hospitality Network of the Road Home.

But there was more. Someone else here volunteered to get them another night. People welcomed them at breakfast. For a few hours at least, they had a home here.

The second story involved the small child of a visitor. The child had a major meltdown after one of the services. A member here stepped in, got the child to a safe place, stayed with the child until he calmed down.

Later, she found resources that might help the mom deal with an extraordinarily challenging child. Other members have been trying to help her navigate the world as a single mom with very little money.

The third story involves a prayer for a mom whose baby died four days after birth. Another mom here who knew the pain of losing a newborn got in touch Easter Sunday afternoon to offer to be a support person for the grieving mom.

At those moments, we as a community were of one heart and soul. People were sharing what they had – money, time, skills – to strive so there would be no one needy among us. In very tangible ways, that was their testimony to the resurrection of Jesus.

That is what community looks like.

Have we achieved perfection? Hardly. We are all human beings around here. Things go much better on some days than others.

We all have our own worries about making ends meet financially. We disagree on everything from national and state politics to whether we should have donuts once a month or every Sunday.

Somehow within all of that, though, the people of Memorial UCC have managed to hang on to the ideals taught by Jesus and sought by the early Christian community.

In times of fear, we listen for the words Jesus spoke that Easter night behind locked doors: “Peace be with you... Receive the Holy Spirit.”

In times of anger, we listen for more words from Jesus: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.” And we remember earlier words in the prayer he taught us: “Forgive us our sins ... just as we forgive those who sin against us.”

In times of division, we have learned that we can get past the issues that divide us. We know that we can listen to one another with love and respect even if we don't agree.

We know that forging unity does *not* mean we'll all be united once you see things my way. It means that we have open hearts and open minds, that we learn from another and that we stay together because we keep Jesus at the center of who we are as a community.

And when we keep Jesus at the center, then we will echo the adaptation of Psalm 133 that we said in our Call to Worship today: "When men and women dwell in harmony, the star of Truth appears!"

And when we keep Jesus at the center, then we'll make sure that we don't cling so tightly to what we have, that we'll find ways to share so that those who are needy will find both care and sustenance. We'll look out for the good of the community – our church community, our wider community, our global community.

In a state that is so sharply polarized, we can offer a model of how things could be different. We can be a light to the world by the way we live as a community of Jesus' followers.

This is what community looks like.

So let's sing about it with Hymn #309, "We Are Your People."  
Let's sing all six verses.

