

**Epiphany 3A, Feast of the Annual Meeting.
January 26, 2020. Matt. 4:12-23; 1 Cor. 1:10-18.**

I have a friend whose primary goal in life is to be ideologically consistent. Before he decides whether to give his approval or disapproval to any idea or public person, he first runs it through a rigorous analysis against his first principles and other approvals and disapprovals. If he agrees with sixty percent of a plan, but not the remainder, the whole plan is cast into the outer darkness as dangerous accommodationalism. He takes a good humored and affectionate delight in pointing out the many, many ways that my commitments lack purity of purpose and consistency with what I hold most dear.

I value him as a kind of prophet, but I don't want to be more like him. Because I'm convinced that the most important difference between us is not that he is smarter or more fearlessly intellectually honest than I am, though he may well be both. Rather, our most important difference is that my friend makes his judgments without reckoning with the beautiful burden of being a part of a real community. He thinks without the mess and blessing of his life being thoroughly entangled with a group who are trying to live together.

That mess and blessing is one of the major themes of what I insist on calling the Feast of the Annual Meeting. Today we receive reports on the remarkable ways that you, together, have followed Christ through the world this past year. We celebrate the ways that we have been faithful and try to talk honestly about the places where we may need to repent. We look back in gratitude for where we have been and try to discern together where God may be leading us. We elect new leaders, thank some retiring ones, and hear the budget. The day is a mix of the glorious and the mundane.

And that's kind of the point I want to make about life together, and particularly our life together. It doesn't really allow the unquestionable clarity and cleanness of my friend's thinking. Because diversity complicates things just as surely as it enriches things. A supply priest here once memorably opened his sermon, "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there will surely be an argument." That's a little pessimistic, I hope, but we will always be engaged in the work of unity, because it will always take work and it always has.

Just ask St. Paul, who in our reading today from his first letter to the church in Corinth implores the faithful there to stop bickering and remember what made them a people in the first place. The specifics of the bickering are less important to me today than the simple evidence that community, including Christian community, has always taken careful, intentional labor. Whether the congregation was founded by south Oak Parkers who thought the mile up to Lake Street was too far for Sunday travel, or was founded by St. Paul himself, this life together doesn't just happen. It needs tending, prayer, and regular reminders of why we're bothering to do it at all.

Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that the why of all this mess and blessing is Jesus Christ. If Christianity had been around a little bit longer, I wonder whether Paul might have been a bit easier on the Corinthians. But the heart of his message speaks as directly to us today: community may be complicated, but we are here because of Jesus Christ, to be together the body

of Christ. And that identity is what guides us through the muddle of mundane and magnificent that makes up the shared life of us as we are being saved.

And we are here together because the norm for Christian discipleship really is community. Sure it may be possible to be a Christian alone, but Jesus never asked anyone to try it. Today we're only in chapter four of Matthew's gospel and one of the very first things that Jesus does is start calling together a community. He preaches one sentence, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand," and then heads down to the lake to start building a people. Peter and Andrew, James and John are among our first forebears, the first to come together to try to follow Jesus.

In our budgets and reports, our elections and committees, we are actually trying to do what Andrew and Peter, James and John did. To take the tremendous risk of leaving what we know to follow Jesus to wherever he leads. It's a journey that should make us uncomfortable--it involves leaving our sources of security and heading off who knows where. Jesus says only "follow me" and adds a joke of questionable quality. He gives no indication of where they're going or what on earth fishing for people might look like. But these guys follow. And through the rest of Jesus' life and beyond they see and do incredible things. The truth is spoken on the margins of society and in the center of the government. The sick are healed, the possessed are delivered, good news is given to the poor.

The life of following Jesus is beautiful and scary and the life to which we are called. And, like these sets of brothers and the cantankerous Christians in Corinth, we are called to do it in community. Living well together, following Jesus together, can be messy and it takes work. And we're doing some of that work today. But even as we go through our budgets and committees and make hard decisions about how to structure and resource that shared life, we are doing it for the sake of mission. We are doing it so that we can follow Jesus, together. Amen.