

The Whole World
Acts 2:43-47

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During my recent time in England a terrible terrorist bombing took place in Manchester in a stadium at the close of a concert. The outcome was disastrous; over twenty dead and many more than that wounded and injured.

Immediately after the tragedy and some ten days later at a memorial concert, the citizens of that city gathered in mass numbers to demonstrate their solidarity. Rather than crawling into their rabbit holes, locking the doors and shuttering the windows, they came out by the thousands. For an intense moment in time they were galvanized into a whole people, a visible and special community. The tribe had gathered around the campfire of their tragedy, grief and solidarity.

This week I joined hundreds of other Columbians in attending the Hot Summer Nights Symphony concert at Stephen's Park.

It was a wonderful evening to sit out in the open and listen to beautiful music. Each summer we form a special kind of community. This has become a tradition, of course, and friends, neighbors and strangers all form a special tribe that shares the pleasure of gathering around the campfire of nature, beauty and the arts.

So many of our younger families (and those who have grandchildren!) have already entered into the ritual of taking their places in the bleachers to watch the boys and girls of summer play baseball during the daytime and under the lights of evening.

Game after game, parents and family form a special kind of community that follows them, roots them on, congratulates them when they win and consoles them when they lose. This tribe gathers around the campfire of sport and their children.

No doubt you are thinking of the many communities and tribes of which you are a part, the ways in which they are different, and the campfire around which they gather which makes them what they are.

There are lots of tribes that have been formed around particular campfires of events, values, family bonds, and cultural traditions. Some of these communities last longer than others because they have staying power and continuity. Other communities are almost temporary by default, the accidents of history and situation.

As I think of the many tribes of which I have been a part through my life I realize how very different they have been. Some were communities of convenience and even fiat, not meant to last forever. Some were forged in the fire of adversity or intensity or common values and have lasted a lifetime.

What makes the difference? And specifically for us this morning, what is the nature of enduring *spiritual traditions and tribes*? The answer to that question has to do with the kind of campfire around which they warm their hands. And we have no better or more comprehensive summary of that campfire than in the description of the earliest Christian community we find in the book of Acts.

Listen to this summary list of the essentials of their tribe, their community:

- They reflect on a common story and teaching
- They engage in sacred ritual together
- They spend intentional time with one another
- They share meals and the table of Christ with one another
- They pray together
- They share the mystery of God together
- They share their material resources
- They welcome new ones to their midst

These are the essentials that glue a tribe together in unity and continuity. They have a common narrative, share common rituals and practices, experience mystery and transcendence together, share their resources in an interdependent way, make their gathering, connection and belonging a priority, and remain open and welcoming in the ways they include new ones.

I think these are the key ingredients that make Broadway the deep and enduring tribe that it is. Every week of the year I experience countless ways in which this community draws together around the same kind of campfire as did that earliest church.

At a choir rehearsal the engaged couple is surprised by a reception in their honor. In one evening they have set aside time to prepare to lead sacred worship, share beauty and awe-filled moments together, offer gifts of music to the whole community, and then celebrate love between two of their tribe. All of that glues together that micro-community with enduring love, solidarity, and purpose.

In an evening pot luck dinner members of the church given to ministries of caring – CareLink – gather to enjoy one another and recite the many ways in which the congregation shares spiritual and practical help. Whether it is sending cards, dropping off flowers, making calls, home repairs or bereavement meals, the community is drawn together by its compassion and service.

Week by week I see the faces of those who have gathered together for common worship, sharing the same mystery, bringing life to ritual and ritual to life, witnessing the one table, the rite of baptism, the dedication of infants, singing together, affirming ancient and new wisdom and truth, and I see how the vision of Acts is recreated anew in this place.

From singers who go to nursing homes, veterans and people of strong heart who support veterans in their struggle to become whole, our armies of the committed that make sure our children and youth are loved in Christ and experience the legacy of the faith, church leadership that rises to the occasion of a new challenge, a church staff that enjoys their shared life and mission together, I see the way that enduring community is formed.

I watch in wonder how the mystery of sharing what we have and distributing to those who have need becomes a modern day miracle. I watch as one tribe of compassion makes sure that the temporary tribe of the homeless don't stay that way.

I notice how those who engage in mission together – whether mission in Vacation Bible School, mission in El Salvador, mission in church camps or mission on youth tour changes and transforms them.

I even see the way faithful spiritual community and strengthened by something that can be as boring as a church budget! I'll tell you what a church budget really is: It is a mission spending plan. It reflects the way the congregation lives out its values and ensures that kinds of things we read in the Book of Acts. It ensures that our mission of worship, education, service, and compassion continues.

As in the early church, we all share our resources and distribute them as any have need. It is the multiplication of loaves and fishes to feed the many. It is the miracle of God's abundance. It is the miracle of faithful souls joining together.

No matter the form our common life takes, it is always the result of the working of the Spirit. It is a grace that we even exist at all.

Sharing that mystery together, living in the currents of love, living a risky faith for the sake of the Gospel – that keeps us strong, centered and clear about who and what we really are.

We are not a club or a loose association of voluntary interest. No, we are the baptized, children of God, heirs of grace, disciples of Jesus, followers in the way, who are nourished by our common story, the mystery we share together, the ways we sacrifice for the mission of God, and even the sufferings we take on for the sake of God's realm of peace and justice. No community becomes a deep tribe of the spirit without suffering for its cause.

As the mission statement of Broadway states:

“Our mission is to enable persons to encounter the living God, as disclosed through Jesus Christ; to serve and celebrate God in an ever-changing society.”

This means being willing to go the distance. We must show up and bring our full hearts to God and one another when we do. Really, folks, if you want to become a part of true spiritual community you have to show up. If you don't show up you'll never experience it; you don't get something for nothing. Oh, sure, we are connected electronically in lots of helpful ways. But there is no substitute for showing up. You have to be together. Don't fool yourselves. You have to show up and experience that mystery, recite the common story, practice the rituals, share everything in common, and break bread together with glad and generous hearts.

We must also be willing to ask what God wants more than what we want. We must be willing to share responsibility to serve and celebrate God. You never become part of spiritual community by allowing everybody else to do your part.

Deep and enduring spiritual community is also shaped by hope; it looks to the future of God and trusts it.

We know the Spirit is with us in all our ways. The answers to our present challenges are to be found in God's future.

One time many years ago Kathy and I were in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and we were attending a church from which much of our contemporary music was flowing at the time, the church where Robin Mark is the worship leader. We thought that maybe every Sunday was something like their recording, revival in Belfast. But it wasn't. You might be surprised to know that their church is a congregation very much like ours. It simply generated lots of music and worship that flowed beyond its own walls.

Some congregations are graced to become mentor or teaching congregations for others. We have become that kind of congregation when it comes to *All God's Children* and our ministries of inclusion for those with disabilities. Other congregations now turn to us to learn how to do that.

After church one of the associate pastors invited us to a church picnic that afternoon in a public park and we thanked them for the invitation and came.

It was like so many other church picnics and very enjoyable. But in the midst of all that eating and talking, we noticed a group of about ten non-hearing church members who were standing off to the side having a signed conversation among themselves. Since Kathy had trained in ASL (American Sign Language) she simply smiled in their direction and signed hello and how are you. Immediately she was swarmed by a group who were signing her all at once. I just stepped back and got out of the fray and looked on with amazement.

There suddenly formed an intense, emotion-filled micro-community that was delighted to be together with this new one who *actually knew their language*.

If you've ever been in a place and been the only one who didn't know the language when everyone else is speaking, you know what isolation is like.

And, like that group at the picnic in Belfast, you also know what it is like to be connected with people who share your language and include you in their community.

Being church is like sharing a common language. It is the language of mystery, a shared story, a common set of values and practices, mutual love and combined purpose. At its best church draws people in to be a part of that shared language and teaches them the grammar of grace and syntax of life together.

And then, day by day, we share life in the Spirit in God's community of grace, breaking bread together with glad and generous hearts.

Thanks be to God, Amen.