**Grounded in Community**

**Psalm 104:1-19, 24, 33; Acts 2:42-47**

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 Let’s start with a question. Many of us who are here today live in Ann Arbor or one its surrounding communities. As you may know, Ann Arbor makes it on to lists of “Best towns” pretty often. If you look at the city website, you’ll see a tab that takes you to community awards and accolades and find some of those lists - “Best college towns, most educated towns, etc.” So, here is your question. What do you like about living here – in Ann Arbor or nearby?

 (Invite people to share a few things.)

 It’s interesting to hear, isn’t it, what people appreciate about our community? Some things are obvious and objective – the variety of restaurants, ample cultural opportunities, low crime rate. Yet, others are less tangible – reflections of our values, our hopes, our priorities, and our perceptions of ourselves.

 As human beings, we have a natural tendency to be drawn toward those who are like us. We seek out all kinds of communities -neighborhoods and towns, schools and work places, churches and social groups - where we find people who share our interests, values, and general outlook on life. Yet, as Christ followers, there is one other community to which we belong – God’s community or the kingdom of God. God’s community challenges us to step outside our familiar social groups to engage with the whole of God’s creation with compassion and love.

 With Diana Butler Bass’s book “Grounded” as a starting point, we have been spending the Sundays of Lent exploring different ways in which we can be grounded in our faith. Lent is a time to re-connect with God and with those elements of faith that challenge, sustain, comfort and strengthen us. Today, we’re focusing on being grounded in community – particularly in God’s community.

 We live these days in a world in which two seemingly contradictory things appear to be happening at once. We are becoming ever more polarized - with deep divisions between political groups, religious groups, ethnic and racial groups. And we are becoming ever more global - with a level of interconnectedness we have never seen before. It’s interesting to note that these two trends globally also reflect what Diana Butler Bass calls a “fundamental tension in religion: the tribal tendency to divide humankind into the blessed and the blasphemous versus the sacred possibility that everyone is related in and through creation and God.”

 In the midst of this tension, how do we discern what characterizes God’s community? What does it mean to be grounded in community?

 Our two scripture passages give us a look into community as God created it to be. The first, from the Old Testament, is a beautiful hymn praising God as Creator. God created the heavens, clouds, wind, fire, earth and water, plant life, animal life, and human life. And in creating, God wove a web of interdependency. The water provides drink to the animals and grass for the cattle, plants for the people to make food, wine and bread. The trees provide shelter to us and homes for the birds. The mountains are homes to the goats. Everything is made in God’s wisdom, and we are an integral part of a whole system of life, provision, and protection.

 Perhaps no one has written with more passion and sensitivity to the interconnectedness of humanity to God and to creation than Wendell Berry. In a lovely article entitled “Men, Women and the Search for Common Ground”, Berry says, “We have in us deeply planted instructions – personal, cultural, and natural – to survive, and we do not need much experience to inform us that we cannot survive alone. The smallest possible ‘survival unit’, indeed, appears to be the universe. Inside it, everything happens in concert; not a breath is drawn but by the grace of an inconceivable series of vital connections joining an inconceivable multiplicity of things in an inconceivable unity.” To be grounded in God’s community is to recognize that we are part of this unity and to live with respect and love for the whole of God’s creation.

 Our second scripture passage gives us God’s vision for humanity in relationship with one another. The book of Acts tells the stories of the first Christians and Christian communities after Jesus’ death. In Acts 2, we hear how these Christians lived differently from those around them. They devoted themselves to learning about Jesus’ teachings and to communing with each other – sharing in fellowship and in the breaking of bread. They praised God together, lived together, and shared all things in common.” God’s vision for human community is what is called in Greek “koinonia” and means that we live peacefully with one another. We share the resources of creation and live by God’s kingdom values of love, mutuality, respect, generosity, and empathy.

 Diana Butler Bass describes this community as a dining room saying, “And around the table are many chairs. The places are marked with cards: “Christian”, “Jew”, “Muslim”, “Buddhist”, “American”, “Arab”, “Chinese”, “African”, “Human”, “Animal”, “Fish”, “Tree”, and so on. No one owns the table. No one gets to take it over. We receive this table; it is the gift of heaven to earth. Our job is to pull up more chairs. And to make sure all are fed.”

 There are times, and for some of you this may be one of them, when such a vision seems impossible to fulfill. We look around and see so much animosity, violence, anger, and selfishness. Yet, the only way we can help to fulfill it is to live it, and we can begin by moving out of the familiar places where we live and work and into the world.

 Recently, Elaine Shaw has been leading a study of Parker Palmer’s book, “Healing the Heart of Democracy”. I haven’t been in the study group, but I have had the chance to read some of the book and, as always, I am deeply grateful for Palmer’s perspective on living in community.

 Palmer tells the story of a cab driver he met in New York City. While on a crazy trip through the streets of Manhattan, Palmer asked his driver how he liked his job. The cabbie answered, “Well you never know who’s getting into the cab, so it’s a little dangerous. But you meet a lot of people. You get to know the public. This teaches you a lot in life. You exchange ideas and you learn a lot from people. It’s like going to school. Meeting all these different kinds of people, everything helps, it doesn’t hurt. If you’re with the same kind of people all the time, it’s like wearing the same suit all the time – you get sick of it. But the public – that keeps you alive!”

 Here is a cabbie who embraces the best of what diversity and disagreement have to offer – the opportunity to break down the barriers between us by asking questions and listening. Palmer goes on to talk about how in our individual homes with our ear buds and computers, televisions and telephones, we are becoming increasingly isolated from each other. If we are going to participate in the growing of God’s kingdom, we have to get out into the public. “Public life,” Palmer says, “happens in all the places and on all the occasions where strangers can freely mingle face-to-face…places where we have daily opportunities to experience the variety and vitality of the company of strangers.” Farmer’s Markets, public transportation, city parks, coffee shops, rallies, forums, museums, public schools, even just the city sidewalks. All of these are places where strangers can meet on common ground, people are drawn out of themselves, fear of the stranger is reduced, differences debated, conflict negotiated, resources shared and generated. “In the company of strangers,” says Palmer, “we can learn that we are all in this together despite our many differences.” Where might you go to intentionally interact with strangers? Could you take the bus instead of drive to work? Chat with someone sitting next to you at Starbucks? People-watch at one of our local museums? Go on a mission trip? Hand out lunches to the homeless?

 To participate in building the community of God, we have to encounter strangers, and we have to do so with empathy and compassion. Have you ever noticed how quickly a new community is formed when the binding ingredients are vulnerability and compassion? Sitting in the pediatrician’s waiting room as one child after another cries with hunger or throws a tantrum or breaks down in tears, and the parents exchange knowing smiles of empathy and support. Strangers who meet at a memorial service and become a community through their sharing of memories about the person who has died. All the people sitting on the floor of libraries across Ann Arbor last week when their power was out. Our whole country as we grieved in the wake of 9/11.

 Perhaps more than anything else, to be grounded in community is to be willing to empathize, accept the other exactly as they are. Because above all, life in the kingdom of God calls us to let go of our judgments, our fears, and our walls and reach out to each other in love.

 During this season of Lent, we remember Jesus’ life – his ministry and his teaching, his welcome of the stranger, his acceptance of each person, his compassion for the marginalized. And as we approach Holy Week, we remember again the price of fear and tribalism. We grieve the one who died on a cross for his love of “the other”. And then, in love and gratitude, we ground ourselves in God’s community, knowing that while we love our town and all the other familiar communities that are part of our lives, our hope lies in the kingdom of God.

 May it be so. Amen.