



From the Pulpit: September 26, 2021

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Annual Church Meeting

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Acts 5:12–16

The (Re)Birth of the Church, III: Community

This fall Katie, Christine, and I are talking about the birth and the (Re)Birth of the church. We're doing this by looking at the book of *The Acts of the Apostles*. This Pandemic as severally stressed global congregations and Christendom. So we're looking at what the church might look like in its (Re)Birth, and to do that, we're looking at the early church in the first century.

The Apostles Heal Many

Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by. A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

“We must invite God to join the company by gathering every seven days for divine worship, and we must ever and always be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth. Each other is not enough.”

Do you remember Martin Scorsese's film *The Departed*, about vile gangsters and corrupt cops in Boston, present day? The Motion Picture Academy named it the Best Film of 2006, partly because it featured so many compelling performances from so many of America's best actors it was hard to choose whom to honor—DiCaprio, Damon, Nicholson, Wahlberg. There's more violence than *Hamlet* and a higher body count than *King Lear*.

So imagine my surprise when the film begins with very uplifting sentiment. Jack Nicholson delivers the quip in voiceover. “Years ago we had the Church, which is just another way of saying we had each other.” The very first words in the script. Jack Nicholson, of all people.

One of the things the Church means is that we have each other. Having each other is not all there is to it of course. What if *all* we had is each other? What if God were not part of the mix? What you'd get then is *The Departed*,

with crooked Irish cops worshiping in one church and wicked Italian thugs in another. That's what happens when the Church is only “each other.” We must invite God to join the company by gathering every seven days for divine worship, and we must ever and always be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth. Each other is not enough.

Years ago we had the Church, which is just another way of saying we had each other. And it's more than scant comfort. In his seminal little book called *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare it is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brothers [and sisters]."¹¹ We take it so for granted, said Bonhoeffer, and he knew it years before they shut him up in German prison camps completely isolated from the consolation of Christian community.

'Each Other' is so important because life can be hard and life can be lonely and there's nothing worse than loneliness, right? Years ago Bruno Bettelheim said that the greatest human fear of them all, greater even than death, is the fear that we will be deserted, that we will be left alone. Psychologists call it 'separation anxiety,' and it is not limited to infants; it is in us all.²² We can face even death if we are not alone, yes? But to be left alone, even with health, wealth, and every creature comfort, that we can't face.

If you read through the *Acts of the Apostles*, and I hope you will, if you read through to the end, you'll notice that Luke uses every tool in his colloquial cabinet to convince us that Peter, James, John, and the rest of the Apostles are Superheroes. He might even exaggerate a little here and there. He tells us for instance that the first Christians packed their sick friends onto gurneys, and rickshaws, and wheelbarrows, and schlepped them out to the street so that they fell within Peter's shadow. Peter's **shadow** can make the blind see and the lame walk. I don't know about you, but my shadow can't cure cancer.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), p. 20.

² Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 145.

"Peter's shadow can make the blind see and the lame walk. I don't know about you, but my shadow can't cure cancer."

Still we have a Superpower. Our Superpower is each other. Superman has his cape, and Batman has his bat spotlight and his bat mobile, and Spiderman has his sticky web fingers, and Captain America has his shield, and Wonder Woman has her magic bracelets, and Aquaman has his trident, and Dead Pool has Ryan Reynolds' inimitable smirk and ironic sense of humor. All we've got is each other, but it's a Superpower.

This is what I mean: Someone here is kinder than you. She spends 20 hours/week bringing comfort food to new parents and the injured.

Someone here is defter than you at saying just the right word at just the right moment, at the awfulest moments—at the graveside, or in the hospital room, or at the hospice center. She's a Stephen Minister.

Someone here is more articulate than you. He listens to a heated discussion at the Board Meeting for 45 minutes and doesn't say a word but then

wraps it all up with a brief, brilliant compendium so that it's absolutely clear what we need to do.

Someone here is a better teacher than you. She's with the third-grade Bible class right now.

Someone here has a more gracious gift of hospitality than you, like Christine Hides or Diana Connolly—food truck, bubble man, rock concert, makes us all feel happy and welcome.

Someone here is more organized than you—Meg Revord, or Peter Schaff, or Scott Fowkes, or John Sharp. They're more organized than Marie Kondo.

Someone here is a better evangelist for Jesus than you: She could sell gasoline to Elon Musk or convince Richard Dawkins to join this church.

Someone here is smarter than you.

Someone here is saying, right now, "Wait, What? There's no one here smarter than me."

None of us can do it all, but every one of us can do something, and together we are almost invincible.

During this pandemic, masks and social distancing tried to put kryptonite on our superpower, but they failed. We still have each other. We used phones and Zoom and the outdoors to cripple, cancel, curb, and kill the kryptonite.

I was going through my files the other day and found an old *New York Times* article from 2018 entitled “Internet Church Is Not Church.”³ Good thing she was wrong, right? She didn’t see Covid coming. These last 18 months we have had to expand our definition of what it means to be in community with each other.

On the other hand, one church consultant pointed out that you can have a great relationship on the internet. You might have an internet friend or a colleague you’ve never met in person. You might be looking for a date or a partner during quarantine. You might be using Match.com, or Bumble, or whatever. You can have a great relationship on the internet, but eventually you want to be together.⁴ I hope that’s as true at church as it is at OkCupid.

I’ll leave you with a wise word from that venerable philosopher Scotty the Engineer on the Starship Enterprise. Scotty the Scot: “My wee granny used to say you cannot break a stick in a bundle.” Our bundle is our superpower.

“During this pandemic, masks and social distancing tried to put kryptonite on our super-power, but they failed. We still have each other. We used phones and Zoom and the outdoors to cripple, cancel, curb, and kill the kryptonite.”

³ Laura Turner, “Internet Church Isn’t Really Church,” *The New York Times*, Dec. 15, 2018.

⁴ Carey Nieuwhof, “Ten Predictions About the Future Church and Shifting Attendance Patterns,” careynieuwhof.com

—Prayers of the People—
By The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

God, you are incomprehensible and ordinary, found in the hum of the farthest spinning galaxies as much as the hidden heartbeat within. “All earth’s dust has held life, held soul, is holy” (“Come to Dust” by Ursula K. Ke Guin in her book *So Far So Good*) and so we tremble, every breath and step sacred. We gather here, in awe, ready to rehearse our thank you thank you thank you for the opening of your presence to us.

For the staccato rain upon the roof, we give you thanks. For the silhouetted trees against the pink evening sky, we sing your praise. For the clouds against bluest sky, that move and change as if sketched “by an artist who keeps changing her mind,” we praise you. For the something-more between us at once solid and insubstantial, we lift our hearts to you, O God. (inspired by and drawn from the poem “Things I Didn’t Know I Loved: After Nazim Hikmet” by Linda Pastan, from the book *Queen of a Rainy Country: Poems*).

Gratitude unfurls, even as we acknowledge the many sorrows of this life: the grief of loss, the burden of illness, the politics of division, the storms and struggles and impossibilities. At the same time, we come here carrying superficial worries, the geometry of our nagging go-do list distracting us from the more centered, mutual unity to which you call us. And so we ask that all burdens fall from our shoulders, all anxiety slip from my mind, so that we might be present anew to you and one another, renewed for the work of love to which you call us. We carry our weary bodies to this sacred place, aching to be recognized, anchored, enfolded into your unfolding presence. Be with us, O God. Hear our prayer, O God. Fill us with your nearness, O God. Amen.

KENILWORTH UNION CHURCH
211 Kenilworth Avenue, Kenilworth Illinois 60043
847-251-4272 | kuc.org
facebook.com/kenilworthunionchurch