

# What is the Community of God?

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This week I traveled to a small town in Michigan called Manistee. It sits on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. The summer season was over and the town and harbor had a quiet atmosphere. Still being a little leary of crowds, it was comforting to not deal with lots of people, and the weather cooperated enough to allow us to tour the town, the harbor, and lakeshore on foot and by bike.

With so few people mulling around, the locals were very friendly and attentive; open to tell us all about the community and the history of this Victorian Port City. The town had an important but shortlived place in the logging industry. During the lumber boom of the 1880s, Manistee was the headquarters of its own railroad, the Manistee and North-Eastern, and had more millionaires per capita than anywhere else in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Today, it is focused on preserving its maritime heritage. The community takes great pride in their heritage. Like many cities and towns, there are a few important names that can be seen on most of the historical buildings and plaques line the walkways and trails, relaying tales of folks that made positive contributions to the community.

It was during this time, in this little town, I reflected on today's scripture and the importance of community, how we engage in it, how we look to others to lead community to help it thrive and grow. This small town worked to keep community going and invited my family and me to get to know them and feel welcome. The

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.manisteemi.gov/248/History-of-Manistee>

letter from James teaches about how community members support and help each other. Mark's gospel talks about inclusion and right living. Both readings remind us that it is by the power of God that we are brought together for God's work, Jesus's mission. Given James's three central concerns earlier in the letter; taking care of how we speak, giving care to those suffering, and being careful about what we let into our lives, he concludes with how prayer can bring all three of the concerns together in community.

First, after sternly telling us the importance of our words, and admitting that everyone makes mistakes, James reassures us that wise speech simply is prayer. The wise speak always as if before and to God. Second, prayer for James is not a private matter. It helps shape a community in which people are committed to each other. We pray for the needs of those we know personally and those whose needs are known to us in the wider world. And though it is only mentioned once, praying "in the name of the Lord" is paramount. For the prayers of the righteous are powerful but only through the power of the one whose name is invoked, the Lord.

Third James treats prayer as a kind of therapy for the toxic environments in the world. In his time, illness and sinfulness went hand in hand.<sup>2</sup> This was a great characteristic of the early church, to be a "healing" Church. Caring for the the sick, whether in mind, body or spirit, is woven into the fabric of the social gospel of Christianity as the very essence of Christian faith and life.<sup>3</sup>

James concludes the letter with one of the most uplifting thoughts in the New Testament. The person that rescues another from the error of his ways not only saves his brothers soul but has covered a multitude of his own sins. This is a thought that shines forth every now and then from the pages of scripture. In Daniel

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Douglas. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year B. Volume 4. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville KY. 2009. Pgs. 112, 114.

<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*. The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA. Revised Edition, 1976. Pgs. 129-130.

12:3 (NRSV) “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” Paul’s advice to young Timothy, “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (1Timothy 4:16. NRSV)<sup>4</sup>

This leads into our second reading from Mark. For a strong community enhances the lives of its members but there are risks. There is a constant tension between being inclusive and being exclusive. A strong community may be so focused on itself that it loses the capacity to relate to those outside. The church community is bound together not just by common interests or mutual enjoyment but by what we believe most deeply, what gives value and meaning to our existence, who we are.<sup>5</sup>

The first followers of Jesus confronted the issue of exclusion from community when they questioned the man casting out demons in Jesus name. In verses 38, John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” They wanted to keep the integrity of the power of Jesus and the power Jesus had given them. I think Jesus surprised them when he responded, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.”

Preserving the power of his own group was not a priority for Jesus. If good was being done by others, their actions were to be confirmed. Good done by and to outsiders will come as a blessing to all. “For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Barclay. Pgs. 133-134

<sup>5</sup> Harry B. Adams. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year B. Volume 4. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville KY. 2009. Pgs. 116, 118.

<sup>6</sup> Adams. Pg. 118.

And for those who would do the opposite; lead a person astray, put up stumbling blocks to cause a person to sin, Jesus gives very stern warnings. The results seem cruel and in our modern, western community the idea of cutting off a hand or foot, is foreign to us. What Jesus states tells us how seriously causing someone to sin will be. These details remind us that any doctrine or belief must finally be judged by the kind of people it produces.

The American short story writer, O. Henry, tells of a little girl whose mother was dead. Her father used to come home from work, take off his jacket, sit down, and open his paper. The little girl would come in and ask him to play with her for she was lonely. He told her he was tired and to let him be in peace. He told her to go out to the street and play. She played on the streets. The inevitable happened – she took to the streets. The years passed on and she died. Her soul arrived in heaven. Peter saw her and said to Jesus, “Master here’s a girl who was a bad lot. I suppose we send her straight to hell?” “No,” said Jesus gently, “let her in. Let her in.” And then his eyes grew stern. “But look for a man who refused to play with his little girl and sent her out to the streets and send him to hell.”<sup>7</sup>

The passage in Mark is deliberately stern but as a Christian, every person in need has a claim upon us because they are dear to Christ. We are not asked to do great things for others, things beyond our power. Often, we are asked to give the simple things that any person can give.<sup>8</sup>

The images of punishment segway into an emphasis on purification. Jesus speaks of us having salt in us. In the ancient world, salt was a precious commodity. It was used to preserve and flavor food, for medicinal purposes, and as salary. The Roman soldiers would be paid with salt rations. Here the reference is not about

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<sup>7</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA. Revised Edition, 1975. Pg. 230.

<sup>8</sup> Barclay. Pg. 228.

Rome but about the community having that resource within themselves. The final verse “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another” also emphasizes the gathered life of the community and the use of salt to seal the covenants with God and with one another. From Lev 2:13 “You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.”<sup>9</sup> From all that Jesus said as he traveled with his disciples, it becomes clear that their saltiness involves being humble in relationships with each other, giving of themselves for others, and reaching out and accepting all the people around them.<sup>10</sup>

Just as the kind people of the community of Manistee opened themselves up to share their pride of history and stories of courage and kindness with my family and me, I am called to open my heart and mind to others, both inside and outside of my community. Lifting up, caring, praying for those in need. Encouraging those who do good for others and making sure I am not a stumbling block for anyone.

We are joined together under one name, Jesus Christ. For me invoking Jesus name is not, as some interpret, acting on his behalf or adding power to the prayer. It states my faith in the continuing presence of Christ in the world and in the many communities I encounter. I know that I am prone to err but I am reassured that when I call on the name of the Lord, my help comes from the maker of all heaven and earth.

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<sup>9</sup> Sharon H. Ringe. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year B. Volume 4. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville KY. 2009. Pg. 121.

<sup>10</sup> Adams. *Feasting on the Word*. Pg. 120.