One Among Many

1 Corinthians 16:12-20

The British Methodist preacher Donald Soper was once speaking at an open-air event in London and being heckled (something preachers aren’t used to!) A man kept interrupting to argue that life was better in America than in Britain. He didn’t look like a seasoned traveler, so Soper tried to silence him,

“Ever been to America? Then don’t speak on matters you know nothing about.”

Immediately, the man shot back:

“Ever been to Heaven? Then don’t you speak on matters you know nothing about.”¹

You can hit me with that line at the church door today (!) because I’m focusing on people I know next to nothing about. In listing the resurrection appearances of Jesus, Paul mentions several we know from the gospels. But he also mentions

...more than five hundred brothers and sisters ... most of whom are still alive though some have died ... (1 Cor.15:6)

We don’t know anything about these people who they were, or when and where Jesus appeared to them, and why none of the gospels ever mention them. We know nothing about these people ...

Well, almost nothing. From the way Paul writes, we can infer a couple of things about them that may help us in our faith. There were 500 of them—They were a community. And twenty-odd years after Easter, Paul could cite them as witnesses to the resurrection and invite his readers to check them out—so they were a faithful community.

When we did Bible Study Monday, I asked posed the question: In those days there was no New Testament, no church buildings, no structured ministry. What kept them together? One immediate answer was ‘community.’ Community is central to our faith.

Remember how Jesus taught his disciples to pray, in the Sermon on the Mount?

Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret .... Pray then in this way, “Our Father who art in Heaven....²”

Our Father, not my Father!

² Matthew 6:6, 9.
Remember the Garden of Gethsemane, and how Jesus needed three disciples with him to watch and pray and support him in his trial? The fact that they disappointed him does not deny the community’s potential to offer support.

And remember how, in the central sacrament of our faith, the one that puts the elements into the hands of each of us, most personally and individually, the words Jesus used were, “This is my body, my blood...which is for you.” The ‘you’ Jesus spoke was plural: my body, my blood, “which is for all of you.”

Sometimes the community can be supportive.

During Richard Lischer’s first pastorate in a rural church in Illinois, he felt he did not belong—a Ph.D. among farmers and small town folks. When his new-born son was rushed to neo-natal intensive care, Lischer included him in worship in the list of

... the names of those in the community who needed our prayers. When I came to the name of my two-day old son, Adam, my emotions betrayed me and I bleated his name as though it were a cry for help. Which it was. I had never asked for anyone’s prayers for myself or someone I loved. When I did, my petition must have sounded like an exit wound...

After a moment or two the prayers continued and the service ended, but I felt surprised and a little humiliated by my loss of composure. As the congregation filed out, each person ministered to me in his or her own way. No two words were quite the same. Each touch or handshake bore the special character of the giver. That day marked a beginning.³

What was beginning, of course, was his experience of the church as community, as the Body of Christ, where we need one another and can minister to one another

Sometimes, though, the community can be challenging.

Gina Gilland Campbell tells of a church small group where, let’s call him Mr Jones, had been an argumentative presence for years, always finding fault with scripture, always rejecting anything he did not like or felt he could not believe.

One evening, a teenager put her hand on his arm, and told him she’d been struggling with his negativity for years. “I have listened to all you reject in the bible. I know what you don’t believe. ... It would help me if just for tonight you told me what you do believe.”

There followed a strained and embarrassed silence as her words hit home. Eventually the leader found some words to get the discussion going again and the group moved on. Some weeks later, Mrs Jones met the group leader. “I don’t know what you do in that Bible study, but it has changed my husband. He’s a different man.”⁴

We need the accountability that the faith community can bring.

The 500 brothers and sisters also remind us that we are to be a faithful community. Church as a community where together we can grow across the passing of the years. It’s important to note that this group were still there, 20-something years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Some of the people Paul lists in chapter 16 had similarly long Christian pedigrees. They were examples of the kind of faithfulness that follows when people take to heart Paul’s guidance in verses 13 and 14:

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.

I read a lovely blog last week, titled St Bob of Abilene. Jonathan Storment, is a pastor in Abilene, Tx, and he was writing about a funeral he had just conducted. He quoted a point Dallas Willard once made that there are two kinds of ways we talk about what a good life looks like. One is from Madison Avenue; the other is in a eulogy.

Storment agrees, noting “I have never had someone ask me to preach a funeral about how nice her hair was, or what a great car they drove, or how big their house was.” He wrote his blog about the funeral of Bob Allen. Bob had been a long time Christian. Loving at home, a leader in the community, faithful at church:

At church Brother Bob always had an eye out for the widows and orphans. At his funeral countless stories came out about how he and his wife would secretly sneak over to widows’ houses to mow and weed-eat. This is the president of a successful accounting firm, who was firmly convinced that wasn’t primarily who he was.

Reviewing his long and faithful life, Storment felt moved to comment,

In the evangelical world we don’t have a process for sainthood, but I would like to make a modest proposal that this is one of the ways we can have eyes to see what a good and holy life looks like: A life of ordered loves that starts with God and spills over into their city.

Saint Bob of Abilene is one among many. You know many yourself, I’m sure. It’s a wonderful devotional practice to think over your life and recall all the people whose life has made an impact because of their faithfulness. Give thanks for each one, however many on your list. Then think of all the people with whom you interact in your life and ask yourself how your faith appears to them.

A community is made strong by the faith of each one among the many.