

Easter 2
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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Private and Personal

Shortly after I moved to this area, I spent a lot of time bird-watching. It is a hobby I picked up in High School. I'm not hard-core, but I am a qualified birder by my son's definition because I have a life-list. When I got here, I found that a lot of the birds were ones I had not seen before. My life list grew significantly.

On one of those forays I went out to Fir Island to the Nature Reserve area. It was March, I think, toward evening, and I was standing out by the water, trying to get a fix on some seabirds resting on the shore quite a distance away. I began to hear a low roar, that grew louder and louder. At first it was hard to tell where it was coming from, but then it became obvious that whatever was approaching was coming in behind and above me. I turned and saw wave after wave of Snow Geese, headed out to roost on the water. I stood there, mouth agape!

I know now that Snow Geese are extremely flock-oriented. They don't like to be alone, and for them, not being alone means being with a group of 50 to several 1000. I have seen lone snow geese, but when I do I have to wonder. Is a lone goose sick? Is it suffering from something toxic picked up in their environment? Something is not right.

A lot of birds are like that. We see murmurations of starlings, thousands of them turning in a coordinated pattern as if on flock-wide cue. Smaller flocks of sandpipers and dunlins will sweep across the land, just a few feet above the ground, all headed in the same direction. Bald Eagles are often seen in groups. Even Red-tailed Hawks, though you usually see them alone, aren't really alone. They know exactly where the other Red-tailed Hawks are, and how close they are to what they consider THEIR hunting grounds!

Sometimes we think of certain animals as solitary. Unlike Snow Geese, we almost always see them alone rather than in groups. But are they really solitary? Except for a few exceptions, if they were really solitary, the species would not exist. They HAVE to get together sometime in order to propagate the race—and they do. Probably more significantly, however, they most likely know who their neighbors are and probably where they are. It's just WE who see only one animal and make assumptions. The world around us is a community, including us. There is just no getting around that. Like the rest of creation, human beings by nature are a communal animal, spiritually as well as physically, emotionally and socially. The two years of COVID sent ripples around the world because we couldn't be together like we needed to be.

What I don't understand is how Christians can imagine that we somehow constitute an exception. When it comes to faith, we still conceive of it in terms of our private

relationship with God. There are studies about where our hyper-individualized idea of faith came from, the rugged individualism that we idealize, a twisted narrative about the Western Frontier during the 18th and 19th centuries, and a certain reading of Scripture that emerged in the Protestant side of the Reformation that emphasized the individual response to God. All of these contribute to it, but frankly, Scripture and our tradition hold to a much more communal sense of faith.

Just look at today's readings. In the first one, the first disciples lived as one organism, sharing resources. The Psalm praises a society where people live in harmony with one another comparing it to the sacred oil of the priesthood. The Epistle lesson talks about living in the light, and being in fellowship with one another. The Gospel lesson is about Jesus and his disciples. It's even got a story about a rugged individualist, Thomas, who in the end learns that he, too, really was part of the family all along. The whole counsel of Scripture tells the story of God and people. Even the stories about individuals like Moses, Miriam, Ruth, David, Samuel and Jezebel talk about them in terms of their roles in their communities, and how pivotal their influence is on the whole. WE respond to God. God speaks to US. God made us for spiritual community, as well as social, physical and political.

Spiritual community does not mean that we lose our individuality, rather, it's just the opposite. It gives our individuality a context in which to mean something. Jay Bowen writes about how individuals and the community work among the Skagit people. He tells about a contest of strength and endurance between two young men. Colored bands of cloth were placed on the top of a high mountain. The men were to run to the top of the mountain, retrieve their assigned colored cloth, and return to the village. The one back first would win. Both of the men took off running to the top of the mountain at the same time. After waiting several hours, wondering who would prevail. The two ran into the village exhausted together, waving both colored cloths at the same time. Everyone turned to Jay's Great Grandfather for a decision. His judgment: The village won.

Running and endurance were gifts the Creator had given these two men. Grandmothers were the ones who identified a person's gifts, whose purpose was to serve the good of the village. The web of gifts and need made up the fabric of the community. It's the same with us. Each one of us in our own individuality, our gifts, brilliance, brokenness and need make up the texture of the people of God. We find our individual place in the context of community.

As we work through this Season of Easter toward Pentecost, remember that God is calling together a community around the Risen Christ. It's not that it's NOT about me, or that it's ALL about us. It's a matter of a right relationship between the two. I find it helpful to talk about it in terms of what is private and what is personal.

There are things that are private about your faith. At the core of every soul is a place where

no one else has the right to go. Letting someone in on that level means compromising one's own integrity and being. God alone meets us there, spirit enfolded in Spirit. It is the place from which our very existence emanates. A spiritually mature person knows that place and how to get there, for one's deepest prayer occurs there. The ancient Irish monks found remote rocky crags on which to build bee-hive shaped cells of stone. Part of their days were spent alone, learning to commune with God in this place. You don't need a windswept Irish headland, but you do need a time and place apart in which to learn silence, listening and openness of spirit.

Most of our faith expression, however, is personal. That is, it has to do with who you are as a person in community. Recently at one of Resurrección's services, Baudelina was in Renton, helping with their bilingual service, which she does every 3rd Sunday. I was in the Chancel alone, getting ready for communion, when one of the youths of the congregation approached me and asked if I needed help. Grateful, I accepted her offer. I quickly found that she knew what she was doing as an acolyte; in fact, she served the wine as well and did a fine job. Later, with her parents close by, I said to her, "I think you enjoyed that." Her reply was a shy smile, and her mother quickly picked up on it. Here is a person with an emerging passion and ability, something personal for the good of the community, something she can offer to make our worship better.

What is personal about your faith is where you as a person engage with the community of the faithful with all of who you are, have and hope for. The Spirit and the community, like Skagit grandmothers, may notice something about you, or maybe the Spirit of God nudges you, and you realize that something unique about you is needed for the good of the whole. It's personal for the sake of the communal.

We have lots of examples among our congregation as well. I so appreciate Maggie, our Treasurer's ability to attend to details, because I'm just not good at that. She has the time, ability and desire. Thanks be to God. Bonnie's leadership of the Altar Guild is an extension of her very organized mind, which I could quickly envy, if I didn't also value the kind of creative chaos out of which I give my best gifts. Dennis's passion for the deacon's role, going into the world, finding trouble, and bringing it back to the church. He is truly a gift to us. Keith with Angel's Aloft keeping us seen and heard. Sonshine stitchers, warming us and the world with blankets and quilts. Sandy with her gentle, pastoral approach to Bible Study, Acacia and Mary Ann's skillful management of our growing Eucharistic Visitor team, Nancy and the Choir's unique and uplifting gifts of music, if I don't stop here, we won't get out of here until Tuesday, so I will.

You get the point. It's both ME and US in creative community. The end of this season is Whitsunday, the Day of Pentecost. On it we celebrate the gifting of the Holy Spirit in the community. It is also the culmination of this season of Easter. So, before we get there, what about your personal walk with God is really a gift to the community? How are you giving it? How might you give it?