

3 Epiphany Year C January 26 2025

My annual spiritual state of St. Mark's

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

I was watching a documentary television series called Untold: Swamp Kings. The documentary is about the 2000's Florida Gators football team. The series chronicles the team's transformation under the leadership of coach Urban Meyer. Coach Meyer lived in fear of failure. Although he won two national championships as a Gator it was the third one that was within his grasp that slipped away. As the story was told about that third national championship run, nothing was good enough even though the team was performing at a high level. As one reporter noted, "For an undefeated team they look miserable." And they were. As the players reflected on that year, they expressed that the fear of losing was their undoing. There was no joy in their success. Everything that did that was painful and fear of not winning and the pending hostility of fear of failing expressed toward one another broke the team.

They appeared to the public as united as a team, but beneath the surface and behind closed doors the alphas of the team were going after each other and the coach was powerless to stop it. He later said, "When the captain of the defense was going after the quarterback about the offense, I couldn't do anything about it, because I created it." Fear does create unity, and it leads to death.

I too struggle with the fear of failing. I wrestle with doubt and constantly question myself about if I am doing the right thing for the right reasons. This is why I have found having faith in Jesus becomes a gift and not a burden. Jesus is not so concerned if I get it right if I have my heart and intentions in the right place. Jesus knows that I will make mistakes and yes, even my better judgement will put me on the wrong path.

What brings me back around is that I have a community of people who have my best interest in mind and I have theirs too. My circle of friends and family want me to succeed, and they are a safe place for me to express my ideas and thoughts as I work them out in my mind and life. What makes this circle of friends and family so important is the fact they are NOT all like me. They have different perspectives, ideas, and passions, but their differences are not a liability but a gift. Fear does not drive our conversations. It is genuine concern for the entire community's well-being and the willingness to be patient with one another as people work towards a workable solution that fosters hope. I find strength with others because we are united with the spirit of love and mercy, therefore we care for one another and our differences are not a threat.

One of the major topics of discussion at the national level is how is the nation going to reunite? **I also believe that unity is the only way we can thrive as a nation.** This is a major undertaking and as I think about how this is possible, I ask myself where do we find examples of how others have accomplished coming together after being split apart?

When it comes to real world examples, I am pressed to find anything on a large scale. As far as I know, nations often will reunite after everything they have done has been exhausted, in other words working together is truly the last resort for the nation's survival. **There is a dark side to this forced unity that is born out of fear of not surviving as a nation.** The fear of dying as a society breeds anxiety and drains away energy that could be used to build up necessary to discover new life and vitality. **When unity based on fear is created this coming together depends upon an "all or nothing" behavior and it is exhausting.** This forced conformity squeezes diversity, and this forced unity cannot adjust to a changing environment and the harder society tries to make the external forces behave to their expectations the weaker society becomes.

I was visiting with a retired game warden in Wyoming, and he expressed what happens when an Elk herd gets isolated from other herds. The gene pool weakness starts to become a prominent trait. **The isolated herd is most likely going to die of a common disease similar our common cold.** He pointed out that a healthy herd needs infusions of new genes that come from the outside.

Churches operate the same way. When a church is isolated from the world out of fear of being breached, they become the same and create an echo chamber that forces out new ideas. **When the silo of ideas is created, the church's ability to adapt and thrive is compromised.** The church members become vulnerable and stuck and the gathered find themselves unable to come up with new solutions after all the true and trusted methods have failed. **The church loses its ability to adapt and live.**

Paul, being a primary contributor to the New Testament, experienced this forced unity by conformity as a Roman citizen. **In his letters to the church in Corinth, Paul was laying out a vision that would take the diverse group of Gentiles (people who were unfamiliar with the Passover story) who are now drawn to the story of Jesus' resurrection can work together.** Gentiles knew unity through the Roman Empire, but to find a common bond through a faith and belief in Jesus was a new idea. **This idea of unity based on diversity working together was a better long-term solution than forcing out all those who were different from themselves.** And It **WORKED!**

How? **Paul took the prevailing Roman cultural norms and flipped them upside down.** Paul was pointing out that together people stand strong and apart they are weakened. **He pointed out that first everyone has an important role in the church body by using the human body to make his point.**

The church, or the gathered, are made with many members. **And there is only ONE body that has many parts.** The body continues to be created every time a person is baptized and adopted into Christ's kingdom. **This baptism makes it clear that everyone belongs and is NEEDED to make the church thrive.**

The Roman and current prevailing attitude toward members of society is based on what a person can acquire to be successful. **The strongest survive and the weakest are to be disregarded.** In God's kingdom there is a prevailing attitude that it is necessary and vital that those who are the **most vulnerable are treated with the greatest respect.** We live in a dynamic world. **There will be times with the most vulnerable will be the most protected and those who are immune to weakness will find themselves in a less influential position.** When that occurs, there isn't a reason to lament. Why? **According to Paul's proposal to the church, the less influential are to be considered valuable and needed for the church to continue to flourish.** Those who are now in positions of great honor will inform those who have fallen out of favor to keep good cheer, for the least respected will return to a respected standing because that is what happens in God's kingdom. The prevailing attitude in the church is love, mercy, and joy. **It is this dynamic that creates a relational bond and leaves behind the personal fear of being rejected by others.** The cycle repeats itself and all ships rise with the tide.

Pastor Karen Stokes from Montclair Presbyterian Church has this for us to think about as we listen to what Paul was doing with a diverse church in Corinth.

(quote) The metaphor of individual members together comprising one complete body offers rich possibilities for reflection on how churches function as people come together for worship, education, fellowship, and mission. **It particularly raises the question of balance, that is, how pastors (and this case members of St. Mark's) can foster communities where there is a healthy balance between the need for connection and for a clear sense of oneself as an individual.** To paraphrase Paul, how can the ear maintain and value its essential "earness," even as it participates in the functioning of the whole body? **The family systems model is a useful tool for understanding and encouraging this process.** It speaks to the importance of "differentiation" within a family or congregation, which Edwin Friedman defines as "the capacity to be an "I" while remaining connected."

The inviting church is a tangible expression of the hospitality of God; people come in search of meaning in their lives, spiritual growth, deeper relationship with Christ, opportunities to be of service in the world. They also come in search of an authentic community, a place where they are known and accepted and where they can experience a sense of belonging. The challenge is to build a community where (as Paul says in today's 2nd reading) "there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another." There will always be differences within a congregation - differing opinions, experiences, priorities, needs - and it is dangerous to try to play down these differences in some superficial harmony. When this natural diversity within a congregation is not allowed to be expressed openly, subtle judgements are communicated: when the ear gets the message that it would really be better if it were an eye, when the foot realizes that the community values hands more highly.

This is the dynamic that Friedman refers to as "togetherness pressures," when the positive desire for closeness and connection is turned into pressure to conform in some false unity. In systems theory, this pressure makes the congregation very vulnerable to anxiety when there is any kind of change. Changes in leadership, in membership (increasing or decreasing), in the buildings or the surrounding neighborhood, can make individual members of the church anxious. Where there is excessive closeness or pressure to conform within the congregation, the anxiety of a few members can cause anxiety within the rest of the "system" (or the church as a whole), bringing about conflict and dissension. Anxiety lessens one's ability to be imaginative, creative, and self-reflective, and instead of causes reactivity, defensiveness, even paranoia. Conversely, in a church where individuality and closeness are well balanced, the eyes, ears, hands, and feet can maintain their own identities, visions, and loyalty to the Head (for us that is Triune God - God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit) without succumbing to "togetherness pressures." Then tensions within the church family, which are a normal part of life together, can be navigated with compassion and care for one another. (end of quote)

By following Paul's guidance to be a church, I believe we have a way to live into God's calling and identity for the faithful in Christ. It will take all of us to be who God intends us to be which is to be leaders who participate in the life of the church.

For life to continue to be vital at St. Mark's we need to embrace the diversity of who we are as a church. Unity will be expressed in the fact that we don't demand conformity that is driven by fear of failure but knowing that as a body of Christ we can make room for all our talents and gifts. We need to be deeply infused with grace and mercy as the "ears" push up against the "eyes" trying to determine how to work together with the arms, legs, feet, and bones. Our different roles and passions will carry us forward when we are not focused on competition that carries an unrealistic idea that we need to be perfect in other people's eyes, but we are complementary with one another, and we can laugh at our mistakes and learn from them.

I am pleased to see how the core values of St. Mark's continue to adjust to the changes in our lives. I am counting on us to continue to be adaptive in the future and to remain who we are as we alter our plans to align with what God has in mind for St. Mark's Episcopal Church.

For the past two and half years I have been working and living with St. Mark's. St. Mark's has embraced my leadership, and we have a strategic plan to guide our work together. Although we have a plan, life doesn't always work within those well-defined parameters.

I will share more details about the progress we have made with our strategic plan during our Annual Meeting. I want to take this time to set a bigger stage for the coming year.

I want St. Mark's to continue to be a place that diversity is accepted as a gift. We are a family of many different personalities and passions and that is something we celebrate rather than lament. We are a playful church and not so concerned getting everything perfect according to the rules, but we are also respectful and deeply cherish our traditions.

We also acknowledge that not everyone is the same. Some of us serve behind the scenes and that is their natural comfort zones. Others are natural leaders who gather the church and infused the gathered with the need encouragement to keep hope alive when it may appear that nothing is happening, or life is not happening fast enough.

Let us make Sundays as a reason to celebrate what we have accomplished and know that God will continue to bless our efforts to share the good news in Christ.

As we live into the coming year let us acknowledge that all of us are a child of Christ's own redeeming. Please don't focus on making others in your image but focusing on becoming the best image of Christ in ourselves.

You will be You.

I will be Me

And our focus will be on Christ.

I believe this will keep fear of failure at bay within St. Mark's and outside the walls of our lives with Jesus.

The unity that we all seek will be found in Christ. And together we can show the world around us a more excellent way to live.

This is how we will live out our core values of St. Marks by:

Taking Christ's Ministry to People

Knowing his Spirit lives

Bringing Faith to Life