

## **APRIL 20**

If you have spent time in corporate America, been part of a large, long-term project in a research setting or legal proceeding, if you have committed yourself to a group activity for music or theatre or the arts, if you have engaged in political or social justice organizations, if you have spent time in the military, then you have direct experience of—if not necessarily much formal education about—the realities of group formation and cohesion. Or, put more simply, gathering and maintaining a team or committee.

A LOT of social science research has been conducted on the matter—after all, learning how and why groups of humans chose to co-operate or work to destroy each other is about the oldest topic in human behavior there is.

Just for clarification, there is a rough—not equivalent—concordance between what social scientists in analyzing civilian groups are dealing with and the concept of unit cohesion in military science. For my purposes here, though, I don't think there is much distinction to be drawn.

As I think about it, six major things are required for forming and making a successful and productive group, team, or unit—and these are present in men's, women's, and mixed groups, though in differing proportions to some observers. These are:

- 1) the value and importance of membership (why am I here and why should I care),
- 2) group identity, (who do we say we are),
- 3) purpose of the group (what are we trying to do),
- 4) social relations among group members (interpersonal dynamics),
- 5) orientation to task (are we keeping the main thing the main thing),
- 6) how are we doing our work so we know what success/failure look like (leadership, management, and measurement).

If you think about your own experience and satisfaction taken from being part of a group of any kind, from the military to a craft group, I think you'll see that if these elements are present, things "work"; if they are not, neither desire nor necessity will be sufficient for good results.

You'll notice that "liking each other" is not required nor must everyone have the same values, background, experience, and life goals. A good local example is the Chicago Bulls basketball team in their championship years. The team members focused on winning on the court and built their identity and work together around that. Apart from that, their lives, attitudes, behavior, and aspirations were quite different.

All of this leads up to taking a look at the gospel reading for this Sunday, the story of Jesus and Thomas.

By now you may feel that wading through all the foregoing is like the first time you sat through Arlo Guthrie's famous singspiel opus, "Alice's Restaurant". Remember how you

felt when, after his really, really long, rambling discourse on being arrested for littering on Thanksgiving, you heard him say, “But I didn't come to talk about getting arrested. I came to talk about the draft...”? You could sense a payoff was near (and you were grateful) and that the purpose of the song would become clear. Here, I hope, is the payoff.

The story of Jesus and Thomas in John 20 begins with Thomas missing out on a group resurrection appearance. Thomas doesn't reject their experience, but says he needs to have his own encounter with Jesus. Eight days later Thomas meets the risen Lord. Notice that Thomas has been steadfast in remaining with the others even though he is in some sense an outsider. That takes a remarkable amount of hospitality on the part of the group, doesn't it? They keep him included. If you think this is just the group being polite, remember it was not long ago that this same motley crew was arguing over who was going to be greatest of them all—hardly a foreshadowing of an open-hearted group not worried about their status. But they're past all that baloney, and we never see that kind of behavior again.

Thomas, for his part, is willing to remain as a non-member of the resurrection group in part because he feels welcome, and also because he is willing to trust that if he does stay something wonderful will happen. But the group dynamics make this possible. Eight days later, Jesus again is among them all and addresses himself to Thomas.

In this encounter, as he so often did, Jesus discerns and addresses a person's need. Thomas needs to know that Jesus is risen. Jesus offers more than Thomas actually takes advantage of (Thomas doesn't put his finger in the holes), and Thomas declares, “My Lord and my God”. Again, the hospitality of God in Christ is displayed, and we see further that Jesus has formed his group again (without Judas Iscariot).

In the weeks ahead, we are going to be reading the resurrection stories. We will see Jesus doing the “group work” I have outlined above and see the provision he makes for the growth and continuity of the Resurrection community, the women (remember Mary Magdalene was the first to meet the risen Lord) and men, which through the millennia has reached a small band of comrades in Christ on Walters Avenue.

We are the heirs of this companionship that found a way through humility and faith to remain together. There could be no back biting, no putting on airs, no claims of superiority among them if they were to hold fast to the truth—the men had all failed Jesus, none of the women could do anything for him either. Can you imagine what it cost each of them to look at each other? Conjure it up in your mind's eye. Sad, humiliated, frightened, and none too proud of themselves. They'd seen one another as broken, naked failures in an emotional and spiritual way and they were going to either run and hide from each other or drop their pride and pretense. It may be my AA experience, but I see a fellow pull himself together a bit and say, “Hi, I'm Peter, and I denied Jesus”, and the group goes from there, women and men together.

It is not wrong for members to look at significant moments in a congregation's life and try to draw some strength from the whole wide history of the Church. St. Giles is doing that in it's priest search, the wider Christian community will have much to do in the aftermath of the pandemic. As we go about this, I believe we will do it best when we do it with an eye to carrying on with the hospitality of the gospel.