The last time I spoke here at St. Paul’s, briefly as one of the Witnesses during the pledging season several years ago, I spoke about the Collect for St. Paul’s. I really love the phrases in the prayer, “in relationship with you and with one another,” “courage and compassion as we grow,” and “called into community.” It speaks so much to me about what our role is within St. Paul’s and also in our wider communities. Like many of you, I’ve been thinking a lot about the recent incidents of anti-Semitism in our town, and I’ve noticed that the collect may give us ways to think about our response to these incidents.

So what does it mean to be “in relationship with you and with one another?” What does “being in relationship” with those in our community call us to do, both in general and in response to the pain some of our neighbors are feeling? In our own hearts, we can all search for ways to remain open to our neighbors, maybe become more open, and to try to truly understand where our actions or inactions may have caused others to hurt. And that’s a tough sentence to swallow, “caused others to hurt.” Did I cause anyone to hurt? I’d never say something mean to a Jew, or someone poor or homeless or another race or ethnicity. So it can’t be me that’s causing this issue? It must be others who are doing those things. And then there’s the possibility that some people are taking things as insults when none was intended. Maybe they’re just a little too sensitive. But that’s the tricky thing with other people’s perceptions. Their perceptions *are* their reality. And I don’t know about you, but for me, if I think I’m right, it’s hard to remember about someone else’s reality. And maybe I am right, but there would still be a misunderstanding.

I feel like as I’ve gotten older, I worry less about what other people think of me. I try to speak, and live really, honestly and authentically, so if someone takes offense when none was meant, that’s their problem, not mine. I’m feeling now like that’s a little arrogant. I read recently about this concept called “microaggression,” which is perceived demeaning implications or subtle insults against someone of another race, religion, or sexual orientation. The example is the black man in a tuxedo mistaken for a waiter, or hiring the Asian applicant because he must have better technical skills, or assuming that the homeless person must be lazy. The theory is that these acts of microaggression are so subtle that they can be hard to notice, yet can be deeply felt on the receiving end. So while it’s tempting to say, “oh, an honest mistake,” or “no harm no foul,” maybe this is where we can all take a hard look and think about how we can more fully be in relationship with those we come in contact with. That maybe too pithy or too trite saying, “walk a mile in their shoes.”

What does it mean to have “courage and compassion as we grow.” What’s the courageous thing to do here, not just in response to this anti-Semitic incident? Where can we reach out to someone who isn’t like us, maybe not in our circle of friends or colleagues? Like we keep hoping our friends in Washington will do, reach across the aisle. It’s easy to stay within our own circle, and not make that extra effort to actively try to include someone outside that circle. Who do we call when we’re planning to go out for a drink or dinner? Who do we sit next to at the game? Who do we talk to at the playground or the school meeting?

There are always a lot of good things going on here at St. Paul’s, and we respond with compassion so often to others in need. We supported the Haiti mission, we sent 25 young people to the volunteer at the Special Olympics tournament, we help at the Community Table, and support the families at the Plaza. But is that enough? It’s easy to sit back and be comfortable that we’re doing all we can. Can we, should we do more?

Then what does it mean to be “called into community?” So I thought and read a lot about the Samaritan woman by the well, who really wasn’t too much a part of her community. But who was she?

She’s kind of interesting because she’s much marginalized. She’s at the well at noon and alone rather than in the morning with the other women in her community. She’s a Samaritan so Jesus, as a Jew, was expected to not talk to her at all. And John doesn’t even name her, like he did for Nicodemus last week. Oh, and she’s had 5 husbands—she’s on her 6th. Interesting that Jesus never seemed to judge her and he never said “go and sin no more” like the adulterous woman in John’s next chapter. Some scripture references believe she wasn’t a prostitute, but maybe had husbands die or leave her, maybe because she was infertile. But she was marginalized, she was alone. So she had a lot of “stuff.” But her stuff didn’t prevent her from hearing Jesus’ message, believing he was the Messiah, and going out to spread His word. Maybe that’s the analogy. She has a lot of “stuff,” like us. Our stuff is the job that is too intense and too many hours, or maybe not enough hours, the relationships or our finances that are difficult, too many hours in the carpool, too much pressure at school to be good and get into a good college. Our stuff, we all have it, and it can get in the way. Maybe the perception of not being as open or as accepting as we could be is just our thinking of our stuff too much, instead of looking more fully at those around us. So maybe that’s what this phrase is calling us to do, to put our stuff aside, and really open ourselves to those around us.

“Ever-loving and nurturing God, who has called everyone into community: Grant that St. Paul's may continue to be a place of welcome, comfort, and strength. Give us courage and compassion as we grow, and keep us always in relationship with you and with one another. All this we ask through Your Son, Jesus Christ Our Lord."

The other phrase in our service that really means a lot to me is at the end of the Eucharist, where Father Chris says, “this is God’s altar, and all are welcome.” If Jesus walked this Earth today in the flesh, I truly believe that’s how he would conclude our beautiful consecration of the bread and wine. I think it speaks to God’s hope for unity, and true acceptance. I find inspiration for this more accepting, caring and compassionate world here at St. Paul’s. And I continue to look to all of you for sources of inspiration, so I do have the courage and compassion to live that message.

Suzanne Johnson