

“You have acted with ignorance, as have your leaders.”

In this moment Peter is speaking to a crowd of people gathered around to witness a healing. He is calling out the community’s role in Jesus’ crucifixion. The disciples deserted Jesus. The crowd encouraged his cruel crucifixion. The authorities acted inhumanly. All of them acted with ignorance.

Is this ignorance really a lack of knowledge? Or was it fear of joining Jesus on the cross? Were they next? Was it a mob mentality that caused people to call out for the crucifixion?

Let’s talk about a little thing called *group think*. You’ve surely heard of, witnessed, or been personally a part of group think. As a reminder, group think is the psychological phenomenon that makes us strive for group consensus even in the face of our individual thoughts, values, and commitments. It makes evolutionary sense but it can put us in some dangerous or highly ignorant positions.

Group cohesion can accomplish some really beautiful things too. But when the insistence on cohesion forces us to forget our own values and join into a mob mentality, we are in trouble.

In Matthew’s gospel he quotes Jesus as saying, “Either make the tree good. And its fruit is good. Or make the tree bad and its fruit is bad. For the tree is known by its fruit.”

Southern trees bear strange fruit  
Blood in the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

These words sung and made famous by Billie Holiday were originally written by Abel Meeropol, a Jewish American teacher in the Bronx. Meeropol was motivated to write the poem after seeing a photo of two Black teens being lynched in Indiana in 1930. His words speak of the strange fruits of racism. The toxic thinking that comes when we forget our commitment to one another as fellow humans and fall into hateful group norms that quite literally kill and create death. Lynching and crucifixion bear similarly strange fruit.

Throughout our Christian history, our American history, and individual social histories, we have been a part of the strange fruits of group think and mob mentality. We have been silent in the face of injustice and even been the direct perpetrators of injustice. All in the name of cohesion. Of not making waves. For the purpose of building group strength—creating an in group so we can dominate, subdue, and kill an out group. Take Christian colonialism which killed Native peoples and punished would be prophets who challenged empire. See the harnessing of Black bodies and souls in slavery, Jim Crow era segregation, lynching used as a public example and tragic warning. Are these really the fruits of Christian community? In history and even in the present... sometimes the sad truth is yes, Christianity has borne some strange and evil fruit.

So what is the alternative? In the same speech where Peter names the ignorance of the people and their leaders, he also calls them to repentance, to a return to the Lord. He names the possibility! How? What if a crowd governed by group think can instead become a genuine community?

Looking to Jesus' life in community, we can see that true community is filled with generosity, love, and care. Communities do not avoid hard conversations—

conversations about wealth, about how to follow and interpret God's law, and about the mysteries of God. Communities break bread together, grow in shared experiences, and support the flourishing of each member.

Where group think can bear the fruits of harm and death... Genuine community bears the fruits of growth, healing, and life.

Building community needs some group cohesion too, but NOT at the cost of individual values and voices. Community, when working as it should, allows for conversation, dissent, and reevaluation.

Genuine community requires us to listen to the prophets who say, "I love you, but you have acted a fool for far too long." And genuine community invites us to notice when our group has gone off track and has strayed from our values.

True community calls us to name the need for repentance, to say to our churches — it's time for some inside the house work that returns to us God, and only then take our efforts outside the house. We have a lot of internal work to do as we recalibrate to God's will.

Now this might not sounds like good news... but I assure you it is. In Christ, we know the truth of life after death. We are a resurrection people who believe that the seemingly impossible is indeed possible. If resurrection is real, than surely repentance and newness of life in God is possible!

Peter names the ignorance of the community and calls for repentance. To repent is to turn to a new way of life, to turn and *return* to God.

Communities are intentionally built, intentionally sustained, and intentionally redirected. When a community moves outside of its values or needs to shift direction because of growth or new learnings, members of the group must be empowered to name it. That means actively resisting group think that might silence values-based concerns.

The prophet, the whistle blower, the canary in the coal mine. In this moment, it is Peter calling the community to put away its ignorance that caused harm and death and to turn to the knowledge and love of God, a God who bears our burdens and forgives our sins.

And then we, as a community, repent and do the courageous work of change making. I see that work happening here at St. Columba's. We are seeking to look honestly at our misdeeds and are praying for guidance in repentance and repair. And looking for the Spirit in our next steps together.

We have researched our history as it relates to racism. We have spent time lamenting the injustice in which we have taken part. We are working through a master plan that prioritizes community welcome and accessibility. We continue to make efforts in reducing and eventually ending family homelessness. This work is not easy and there is still much to do, but we must hold fast. We must hold to each other and cling to Jesus.

We have acted with ignorance, and as we learn better we must do better. As we know the good tree from the bad, we will know the work of community by the fruits it bears.

We will prune and tend and fertilize and grow until we see a community that is so generous we surprise ourselves. A community that learns about love and lives that love in every way, big and small. A community that can hold one another accountable, speak a prophetic word, and hear the prophetic word. A community that lives so fully in the resurrected Christ that we know the deep possibility of the kin-dom of God. A community that welcomes, affirms, and celebrates each of its members and draws more sheep into the fold.

In God, resurrection is possible. In God, deep repentance is possible. In Communities of God, there is a precious and life giving fruit. Amen.