Sermon, January 21, 2024
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
A Sermon by Rev. John Balicki
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.

That's the first line of a hymn we're going to sing during the Offertory, "Blest Be the Tie That Binds", thank you to Diane and Tim for bringing it to my attention, because it seems perfect for Annual Meeting Sunday. It was written in 1782 by John Fawcett who was the Baptist minister in a little village called Wainsgate in rural England. Here's how his congregation is described (no correlation intended):

"The people were all farmers and shepherds, poor as Job's turkey; an uncouth lot whose speech one could hardly understand, unable to read or write; most of them pagans cursed with vice and ignorance and wild tempers. The Established Church had never touched them; only the humble Baptists had sent an itinerant preacher there and he had made a good beginning."

John and Mary Fawcett went to live there in 1765 following his ordination. By engaging families house-to-house, he built a congregation that grew to the point that a gallery had to be added to the modest meetinghouse. With the addition of four children to the family, a modest salary that was supplemented by parishioners' donations of wool and potatoes was barely adequate, especially during the long winters.

A prestigious parish with more financial resources in London extended a call to Fawcett. John and Mary decided to accept. The announcement was made to the church, and the farewell sermon was preached, the bulky items of his furniture and some of his older books were sold and the day of departure arrived. The two-wheeled cart came for the rest of his belongings, and likewise came the parishioners to say good-by."

The crowd was despondent and in tears. Mary is quoted as saying, "I can't stand it, John! I know not how to go." John responded, "Lord help me Mary, nor can I stand it! We will unload the wagon. . . . [To the crowd], We've changed our minds! We are going to stay!" Mr. Bailey describes a scene of pandemonium as the crowd broke out in joyful acclamations.

Now it was the practice of many ministers to write hymns on the theme of the day to be sung at the conclusion of the sermon, a practice no doubt that you are thankful has been discontinued. We do not know if this hymn was written in conjunction with his decision to remain in Wainsgate, but its language connects well with congregations, identifying with the struggles of life and our unity in Christ. And Fawcett did remain with his congregation for 54 years.

I think this hymn, "Blest Be the Tie that Binds", is the perfect metaphor for why we are here, not only today but throughout the years. So why are we here? On Annual Meeting Sunday we should get clearer about our mission. What are we doing here anyway? I know many of you live with someone in the same house or have family that aren't here. Now those being relatively nice folks don't come up to you and say, "What in the h_ _ _ are you going there for again?" But the question, though a bit harsh, is a good one. Why are you here? I don't think it has too much to do with theism, believing in a God no matter how you might describe that God. There are plenty of people who believe in a Higher Being that don't darken the doors of this or any church. I think it has something to do with a tradition received from Jesus of Nazareth, but again there are many who claim to be Christian that don't belong to any Christian community. I think it's that last word "community" the tie that binds, the metaphor Bishop Curry uses to describe why we are here "Becoming Beloved Community". The third verse of the hymn says it well,

We share each other's woes,
Our mutual burdens bear
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.

The term, Beloved Community, was believed to be coined by the apostle John whose call we heard this morning. What was it that attracted those four men, Peter and Andrew, James and John, to drop their nets and follow this man they possibly had never met before. It wasn't the sermon Jesus preached, my God it was only one sentence. Fishing for people instead of fish? Was it that appealing? Sure my hands and clothes would stink less but the fish never talk back to me and once you've caught them, you've caught them. No I think it was something about Jesus himself, call it charisma if you want, and the opportunity to form a tie that binds, certainly with Jesus but with the others who abandoned their livelihoods to go on mission to proclaim that the Kingdom of God has come near, that good news was at hand. No there was a tie that bound them together, not only while Jesus was alive, but enlivened by the Spirit after his crucifixion and resurrection, that bound them to carry on the mission of proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was near. Bound them to the very end as we just sang in the previous hymn, "They cast their nets in Galilee"; James was the first of the apostles to be martyred, beheaded by Herod; Andrew was crucified on an X-shaped cross; Peter crucified upside down, John who died as an old man in exile on the island of Patmos. Those ties ran very deep.

So come downstairs after worship. We'll talk about how we can strengthen and more tightly bind our little church, how we can invite others in to share our mission. And that mission again is? The mission is to share in something we heard described in today's

gospel, the start of that mission. Three years ago yesterday at President Biden's inauguration, a young girl made a big splash by reading a poem called "The Hill We Climb". With apologies to Amanda Gorman, let's apply it to today's gospel and Jesus of Nazareth.

And yet the dawn is ours (the Kingdom of God has come near)
before we knew it
Somehow we do it
Somehow we've weathered and witnessed
a heritage, a faith, the people of Israel, descendants of Abraham and Moses and David
who aren't broken
but simply unfinished
We the successors of a faith and a time
Where an unmarried (what's wrong with him why isn't he married?)
Jewish carpenter from a nowhere backwater town
descended from peasants and raised by a single mother (probably)
can dream of becoming Messiah
only to find himself being one

and finding himself being one, he invited – four fisherfolk to start – but the invitation continued and continued and continued right to the present day. And here we are. May we continue to invite. May we continue to work on becoming Beloved Community. Blest be the tie that binds.

Annual Meeting Address:

Four Ties that Bind us. They're not the only ones but they are significant.

1. Worship – main thing. Always work on keeping the main thing the main thing. But we need more help and every bit of helping strengthens the tie.
    a. We need chalice bearers. No need to be holier than thou – in fact if you were we wouldn't want you – we need to expand our roster of people. If we have enough, maybe we can come up with a schedule
    b. Readers have lots but don't need to be exclusive Anyone?
    c. Altar guild can use more help. Chris describe the duties. Anyone?
    d. Music – explain situation Our ties are strengthened by singing together but we need help.
2. Prayer – Compline – it's a strong tie for those that do it regularly. All welcome 7:30 Monday thru Thursday.
3. Adult Discussion – I think that was truly one of the highlights of this past year that I didn't even mention in my report. So many of you have been truly great staying week after week and really engaging in discussion. In Lent my plan is to start a more formal program that looks at, yes, the ties that bind us. It's called "Being With" and it's started by the Anglican bishop, Sam Wells. More on that later.
4. Service to Community – Lenten project, food bank volunteering, our fundraisers, Yard sale and Lobster roll sales, Halloween, Santa's workshop. Working on these not only connect us more to community but to each other.