
Christian Community is Both Holy and Familiar: Both Transcendent and Immanent

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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Perhaps you have heard me, and others at the Cathedral of St. Philip, speak about the amazing sense of community that exists here. It is "community" that sparks the amazing energy of this place. It is "community" that invites and sustains new members here. It is "community" that draws older members back to our life.

However, when I say "community," I mean something more than what people might think ordinarily. Our community is something far more than just the local area where we live—like our neighborhood or something. Instead, "community" at the Cathedral of St. Philip means both intimate community and awe-inspiring community. We are both immanent (meaning near) and transcendent.

Let me use a particular verse from the Bible to explain. In my major Bible studies this Fall, we have been studying the Book of Exodus; in that book is told the great story of the very formation of God's people. It was the Exodus that truly formed and identified the Hebrew people; as they left the empire and imperialism of this world, they became free—yes—but they also wandered into a new sense of identity and community. They were formed and structured.

At Exodus 6:2-3, we read that "God also spoke to Moses and said to him: "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty [El Shaddai] but by my name "The LORD' [YHWH] I did not make myself known to them." In those two verses, we see the combination of both a transcendent and an immanent God.

Most of us remember the story of Moses seeing the burning bush and asking for the name of God in that mystical incident. The response of God is certain, but also elusive; God says "I am who I am," or, at least, that is how the four letters YHWH [Yahweh] are usually translated. In whatever way we might translate them ("I am becoming who I am becoming" is also acceptable), those letters reveal a transcendent God, one who is way-way-way above humanity. Even God's name cannot be easily understood; God's ways are above our ways. It is that transcendent God who reveals himself to Moses in such a way that Moses is truly inspired; Moses knows he has received something from beyond himself, and from beyond anyone else.

However, in Exodus 6:2-3, that same transcendent God says that he is the same God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In other words, this transcendent God is also the familiar God, the one known to our ancestors and friends. This transcendent God is also the immanent God, the nearby, close, God.

The community that we know here at the Cathedral of St. Philip, and at any healthy Christian Church, is the community that is inspired by both transcendence and immanence. In order to have true Christian community, we have to experience something from above, from outside us, from the Holy. We hope that is what our worship and prayer provide. But that experience has also to be correlated with the familiar, with our family and friends. That, too, is what we know at the Cathedral of St. Philip; we experience the same God as our ancestors, and our family members, and our friends. That is the immanent, nearby, God.

It is true Christian community that I love here at the Cathedral of St. Philip. We touch the transcendent "the fire that burns but does not consume; but we also touch the immanent" the flesh who are friends and strangers, and through whom God loves and cares for us. This is the community that no other earthly organization can imitate. It is why I go to church. I need the transcendent and nearby. I need the holy and the familiar; when they are the same, I am in heaven!

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