

How Do We Live in Community?

Genesis 1: 1, 2; 24-31

Luke 6: 12-16

Philippians 2: 1-13

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(*SERMON NOTES*)

I remember speaking to a friend who is a Roman Catholic priest one day several years ago. This was at the height of the sex scandals that was rocking the church. I asked him about the scandal and what was it about the system that would enable such behavior. One of the things that he said was that he could almost always tell which priest for be heading for misconduct, not only sexually but financially and morally as well. They begin to withdraw into themselves. As he spoke I realized that the same is true in our own faith tradition. One of the earliest indicators of trouble in a congregation or with a pastor is when they begin to withdraw from their denomination or fellow clergy.

This withdrawal is also a sign of spousal abuse, especially when the abusing spouse begins to limit and even forbid contact with others. It is one of the signs of cult, as members withdraw within a compound, isolated from the outside world. Withdrawal is a telltale sign of clinical depression.

One of the cruelest punishments known to humanity is isolation, solitary confinement. When we are isolated the mind begins to do funny things to us.

We were not created to be alone, solitary beings. Even the ancients knew this. The Old Testament book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, the book whose name literally means “beginnings”, understood this. You may or may know that Genesis has two creation stories. The first one, the one that opens with the words, “In the beginning” was most likely written during the time of Babylonian captivity. The Hebrews feared that they were losing their story and their children to the culture of Babylon. So, they took a predominant cultural myth and transformed it into a teaching tool.

One of the lessons that they were trying to teach was that humanity stands at the pinnacle of God’s Creation. As the Psalmist marveled, “What are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than angels.” (Psalm 8: 4, 5)

There is an interesting element in this creation story. At verse 27 of chapter one, we read, “So God created humanity in the divine image, in the image of God they were created; male and female, they were created.” Human beings were created simultaneously. They were created in community.

The second story of Creation which is found in chapter two is older in its origins, but its point is the same. God created what is literally a “mud person”, breathed the break of life into that person and sat him in a perfect garden—paradise—a place we call Eden. But, this individual was all alone and incomplete. So God created all of the beasts of the field to see if a suitable companion could be found, but none could. So God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the mud person and took a bone from the side and created another human being. When the first human being awoke, lo and behold, the person was no longer alone for they had a companion!

Jesus knew the importance of community. In the gospels he called people to be his disciples. In Luke's gospel, today's lesson, he called many disciples and from the many he chose a select group—12 in number—to be exact. Luke says that he called them apostles or those who have been given special authority.

Over the course of three years many of the disciples and all of the apostles shared their lives with Jesus. They walked with him and talked with him. They heard his teachings, they saw his example. At times he challenged them to live larger lives; “Treat others as you would want to be treated,” “If someone strikes you on one cheek, offer then the other cheek also. If someone requires you to walk one mile with them, cheerfully walk a second mile, too.” People said that he was not like other teachers because he taught as one who had authority. When the time was right he gave this authority to his disciples. And when he sent them out, he did not send them out alone. He sent them out first in groups of seven, then in groups of two. They were promised that as long as they remained in community, he would be with them in a very special way. “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name,” he promised, “I will be in your midst.”

From that small handful his disciples grew to number over two billion disciples worldwide today.

We were created to be in community. But as I often tell people, “Wherever two or three are gathered you will not only have Jesus, but you will have conflict!” As a matter of fact, every New Testament epistle deals with conflict at one level or another!

Our epistle lesson from Philippians gives us a few insights in how to live in community with one another.

The first insight is to remember that we share a vision and purpose.

“Complete my joy,” Paul writes, “by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” (2)

This is a call for “unity” not “uniformity.” “Uniformity” means that we look alike, think alike and act alike. “Unity”, though, acknowledges that we are different. We come from different backgrounds, we've had different experiences, we all have different spiritual gifts and we may even look at things differently. But, it also believes that we are united in our purpose, that we are all pulling in the same direction, that we have the same goal, namely, to follow Jesus and to do the work of the Kingdom of God—to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, free the captive!

The second insight is to remember to have a little humility. “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” In other words, “it's not about *you*.”

We live in a time when the cultural discourse is course. This is equally true of “The Jerry Springer Show” and political discourse, music lyrics and movies. Our text reminds us that people of good conscience and intention can look at the same set of facts and draw radically different conclusions or approaches. Different conclusion does not mean that a person is malevolent. We need to find a little mutual respect born of humility. It challenges us to listen in order to understand rather than listening to respond.

A third insight is to remember that we are in this together. Each one of us, in the words of the apostle has to “work out your own salvation with fear and

trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

We were created, hard-wired to be in community. Inasmuch as we learn to pray together, worship together, work together, play together, we are being transformed into the individuals and the community that God wants us to be.

Disciples *know each other*. That is the community that the writer of Acts was talking about when he wrote: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and prayers.” (2:42)

To God Be the Glory. Amen.