

God is Community!

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Scriptures

1 Corinthians 12:12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

15 If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.

16 And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.

17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

19 If all were a single member, where would the body be?

20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable...

25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.

26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Sermon

Community is one of the greatest legacies that Mennonites inherited from our Anabaptist ancestors of the 16th century. For them, community was not merely a convenient way to care for each other or to share resources, but community was crucial for their very survival. The "community of believers," as they called themselves, arose from the conviction that no individual could possibly follow the hard teaching of Jesus on their own. A community of support, accountability, and mutual forgiveness was necessary to remain faithful. And as they were being arrested, tortured, and killed by both Catholic and Protestant governments, they also needed each other just to stay alive.

Community was also the environment where God spoke. God's words in the Bible, as well as the contemporaneous leadings of the Holy Spirit, could only be fully understood or "discerned" with in the larger community that "tested" what was true.

Now to be sure, the early Anabaptists, as well as us Mennonites who inherited that tradition, have failed heartily at times in this endeavor. Too often we have turned accountability into abusive legalism. Too often we have failed to listen to our own dissenters and have also chosen the easier way of dividing rather than the harder work necessary to maintain unity. And far too often in our endeavor to be a "peculiar people" committed to following Jesus, we have often remained "odd" for maybe the wrong reasons.

But some good things have also managed to survive, such as, a belief that all of us are called to be priests, or ministers of the gospel and that power within the body must be shared equally regardless of social

status. And for the most part, we have maintained what I call “a healthy mistrust” of earthly rulers and kingdoms as we seek a primary allegiance to a higher calling of a citizenship in the reality of God’s Kingdom.

Another major inspiration has been the writings of M. Scott Peck, who, in the introduction to his book, *“The Different Drum, Community and Peacemaking,”* opens with this rather audacious sentence: *“In and through community is the salvation of the world. Nothing is more important.”* And even though this was written over 30 years ago, under the very real threat of nuclear annihilation, I still believe it to be true.

For it is in true community that we can become a part of something greater than ourselves, something that will open us up to a fuller experience of the Divine. Spiritually-based community, therefore is indeed one of the best antidotes for the rampant alienation and separation (especially in the “west”) that cause most of the problems in our current world.

But make no mistake, any journey toward true community can be a little scary, because those of us who have tried “to go there” have found it fraught with both perils and failures. In a nearly impossible endeavor, Peck lists eight characteristics of true communities. True communities, he says, are: 1) inclusive, 2) realistic, 3) contemplative, 4) safe, 5) “a laboratory for personal disarmament,” 6) “a group that fights gracefully,” 7) a group “that is made up of all leaders,” and finally 8) they are also “a spirit.” I find his descriptions ring true and are actually quite practical, considering my own experience living in a spiritually based intentional community.

True community is and must be inclusive. Unfortunately, most Christian churches tend to be the opposite! However, Jesus calls us, I believe to, build community with the outcasts of society; the poor, the sick, the homeless, the thieves, adulterers and even tax collectors. Jesus also consistently attacked those social structures that excluded others, especially those who were considered impure or at the bottom of society. Of course, there are certainly limits to inclusion, but Peck stresses that true communities are always reaching out to extend themselves.

Exclusivity, he adds, is “the great enemy of community.” “Communities do not ask, ‘How can we justify taking this person in?’ Instead, the question is, ‘Is it justifiable to keep this person out?’” True community not only takes commitment and hard work, it also “requires that we hang in there when the going gets a little rough.” Theologically we would say that true community seeks to transcend or literally “get over” our differences rather than obliterate, convert, or ignore them.

True communities must also be realistic. “Because a community includes members with many different points of view and the freedom to express them, it comes to appreciate the whole of a situation far better than any individual can.” Peck says. In the Gospels, it is usually the “sinner” who has the most realistic self evaluation. After all, it is “Those who know that they are sick who look for a doctor.” It is when we account for our own inadequacies and imperfections, as well as our strengths that we begin the journey toward wholeness. Contemplation is a great way to maintain humility. Now we Mennonites pride ourselves in being humble! But like a lot of Christians, we are not very contemplative. Communities such as you all, that practice and promote meditation, are desperately needed to help us to recapture this once vibrant Christian spiritual practice.

True communities must also be safe places. A safe place for tears, fears, pain, forgiveness, and real heart-felt joy. They are places where we can finally lay down our guard and open ourselves to become truly vulnerable. Feeling truly safe is a rare experience for most in our society. Instead, we spend so much of our time and energy trying to project false exteriors, and yet, true safety actually comes when we disassemble those facades and break down the barriers between us through true vulnerability. Peck adds,

“Paradoxically, then, a group of humans actually becomes healing and converting only after they have learned to stop trying to heal and convert.”

True communities are, “laboratories for personal disarmament.” Vulnerability is a two-way street, we must be willing to both expose our wounds as well as become deeply affected by the wounds of others. Good laboratories are safe places for experimentation, and so, true communities are safe places “to begin to experiment more deeply than ever before with the critical necessities of life, like love and trust.” True communities he also says are made up of folks “that can fight gracefully.” As pacifist, we Mennonites have not done this one at all well! In our attempts to be peaceful, we avoid conflict, direct communication, and end up being “passive aggressive” instead. In genuine community there should be no sides, cliques, or factions, but there will be many conflicts. Even healthy communities are, after all, made up of real human beings, and so even intense disagreements will arise, but since there is mutual respect, true learning and healthy compromises can occur.

A true community is a group where everyone is a leader. One of the central values at FCMF, is our commitment “that everyone in the group is a minister.” From our very beginnings in the 16th century, “pastors” have been called to be simply that, “a shepherd that guides the flock.” In our fellowship, decisions are made by consensus and leadership is shared as well as routinely rotated amongst everyone.

Peck’s final characteristic is that true communities are “a spirit.” A community is a spiritual endeavor that must be infused at all levels by spiritual beliefs and practices. “The spirit of true community is the spirit of peace,” says Peck. And “peace,” for followers of Jesus, derives from the Hebrew word, Shalom. This word, when appropriately translated, is not the simple absence of conflict, but the sense of wellbeing for each and every part of God’s creation. But the spirit, in Peck’s words, is also “slippery” and “does not submit itself to definition, or to be captured in the way that other material things do.”

True community may not always feel peaceful and it will not always be free of difficulties, conflicts, and hard times. There will be struggles and they will be hard, but ultimately they will lead to growth, not only of the community but in each individual as well. But those of us who seek to follow a Spiritual path believe that we are not alone, left merely to our own devices to travel this path. It is a good and necessary thing that we have the Holy Spirit now with us since Pentecost - as a critical conduit of God’s power! And by this grace and through the experience the Holy Spirit’s power, we can actually begin to travel toward this true community. Led by this bold and audacious spirit we are not kept where it is safe, but we are led on an adventure toward true community. Some of us also believe that true community is the very essence of God.

So, allow me to finish my comments by wading into some more theology. I must admit that the classical Christian Doctrine of the Trinity never really made much sense to me. That was until I started reading the Catholic priest, Richard Rohr, a few years ago, who literally “blew my mind” helping me to understand why it’s important. If God is really a being that is seeking a real relationship with us and not merely a far distant (and mostly angry) monarch, perhaps then the members of the Trinity are actually a community. Three distinct and yet fully unified hands, holding one another in a circle, dancing. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or as I prefer to recite: God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer, in perfect relationship to one another, with no hierarchy of position or efficacy, their roles flowing continually.

Pure joy, love and relationship flowing seamlessly from one to the other. Yes, it is still a mystery to be sure, and one that our simple human minds may never be able to fully understand! Especially for those of us raised in western styles of thought that are so linear and rigid. But the important thing we must keep in mind, is not the intellectual understanding, but our actual participation in that dance - in that flow that is “the Divine.” God is relationship, dance, flow, and thus true community. We are, then, simply invited to join The Dance, to participate in The Flow and be a part of Divine Community.