

“Belonging to Others: Created for Community”

Romans 12:1-2, 9-21

January 19, 2020

Last Sunday, we began a two-week exploration into the meaning and significance of virtue ethics. We learned that, for philosophers and theologians alike, the formation of virtue involves both repeated actions (habits) *and* participation in communities of accountability. Last week, we focused on habits. This week we turn our attention to the value of community. Here at Second, the concept of community is central enough to have a prominent place in our identity statement—“A welcoming *community* of faith where Jesus Christ transforms lives.” It is an essential part of who we are and what we do here.

The social sciences have been seriously exploring these questions since the publication of Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam’s landmark study titled, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.¹ The book is packed with statistics that underscore the increasing individualization and isolation of our culture. But those statistics are not nearly as memorable as that wonderful title, *Bowling Alone*. The title comes from research on the decline of bowling leagues in America and the paradoxical rise of bowling as a recreational activity. That is, research found there to be fewer and fewer leagues, but, more and more bowling. Thus, Putnam suggests that Americans do bowl. But we bowl alone. Later, Putnam comes just short of saying what Christian theology has always taught: that we are created for community.

If it is true that we both need and are shaped by community, how can the church fulfill its mission to be a place of authentic belonging and deep relationships? Well, I’m glad you asked that question!

The Apostle Paul, whose writings make up a sizable portion of the New Testament, spent his life

thinking about the impact that life in community could have on Christian believers. Two thousand years later we make the mistake of thinking that his letters were dissertations designed to shape Christian theology for all time. Not so. The letters of Paul were written to communities of believers who struggled with how to live together.

In the twelfth chapter of Romans, Paul paints a picture of the church at its best. At the outset he writes to Christians in Rome who were living in the center of the political and commercial world. Paul writes, “I appeal to you...do not be conformed to this world [the better translation is “age”], but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” The rest of the chapter puts that appeal into motion. Love one another. Outdo one another in showing honor. Contribute to the needs of the saints. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live peaceably with all. In other words, don’t passively absorb the values of the culture around you. Cultivate the virtues of the gospel.

This is what the church is called to do that no other institution, no other organization, no other group, no other or association, nor any other collection of individuals is designed to do. *The unique call of the community called church is to embody the way of Jesus in the world.* To fulfill that call, we must do it together. Paul’s instructions center on communal formation. We cannot learn to love or forgive or show compassion unless we commit ourselves to the messiness of community.

Paul’s words suggest that the faithfulness of our living is determined by the quality of the relationships that we form. What if we did what Paul says? What if we loved with mutual affection? What if we extended

hospitality to strangers? What if we lived in harmony and associated with the lowly? What if the church was a place where we could tell our stories and be ourselves without fear of rejection or judgment? What if we rejoiced with those who were rejoicing and also wept with those who were weeping?

To live this way is to reject conformity to an age of isolation, division, fear, and anger. To live this way is to offer a witness to the beloved community for which so many are longing in our time.

Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life and witness we remember this week, often repeated a phrase when he spoke to church groups, denominational gatherings, and Christian conferences. “Human salvation,” King said, “lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted.” It’s a paraphrase of Paul’s call to the Romans. There are some widely assumed so-called realities of the world around us that people of faith simply must not allow ourselves to accept.

It’s a peculiar story that we as Christians tell. A story of creatively maladjusted ancestors whose weirdness transformed the world through the power of demonstrated faith. I think the time has come for us to rekindle that faithful spark that set the world on fire.

The community called church—with all its flaws, imperfections, limitations, and faults—is a holy place of encounter with God and with fellow travelers on the journey of faith. The church is a place of transformation where we are reminded of who we are and to whom we belong. The church is a diverse array of believers who join as one to worship, serve, grow, and share life together. The church is the body of Christ which is called to offer itself in mission to those who are cast aside, down and out, overlooked, and in need of hope.

If you survey the cultural landscape surrounding us, it won’t take long to notice the dire need for community. So many desperately need meaningful friendship. So many suffer from the epidemic of loneliness. So many are malnourished by feel-good messages of self-promotion or calls to demean,

dishonor, degrade, and disgrace the other. So many are searching for something deeper than the weekday grind and brunch on the weekends. The collapse of community has left its mark on us all—even if we aren’t able to fully articulate it. We know something is missing because we were created for community. We are shaped by community

Suppose someone were to ask you, “Why do you belong to a church?” “Why do you make time in your busy life to serve other?” “Why give your hard-earned money away?” “Why choose to be vulnerable to one another?” “Why invest in relationships?” “Why gather in worship?” Or, “What draws you together here?” I believe we long for community that is both a gift and a responsibility; we pray that the church that has nourished and fed our souls might do the same for others. In the deepest sense, you’re here because you have been called by God to see the world in a different way. You choose not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of your mind, heart, and soul. Character matters and our character takes shape in community. We reflect the virtues that we practice together over time.

I imagine that some of you are here for the first time. I know that some of you have been checking us out for a few weeks or many months. I would bet that some of you are considering the possibility of deeper involvement in a church, perhaps this church. The message I want you to hear is this: faith in Jesus Christ is a journey of transformation. Belonging to this congregation is no spectator sport. We aim to move beyond passive reception and into active involvement in God’s work in the world. We believe that we were created for community and that being together is the only way to be faithful to our God-given call. The need for community is built into the human spirit—without it we are missing something essential. With it, we find deeper fulfillment, greater joy, stronger character.

And finally, to be a part of this community means belonging to others—other perspectives, other backgrounds, other ideologies, and other political parties. This is not an easy time to belong to people

who don't already share all your opinions. We live in a deeply divided age. Many are finding it easier to end relationships than to listen to a different point of view. What was once disagreement has become outright disdain. It is so easy for churches to become conformed to this view of the world—a world of us versus them, polarized extremes, fractured relationships, shouting matches, and hatred spewed on social media.

Especially now, we must not be conformed to this vision of the world. To be conformed is easy. It is comfortable. It is tempting. It is not faithful.

I believe King was right—the promise of a hopeful future lies in the hands of those who refuse to conform to this age. What does creative maladjustment look like in our time? It looks, in part, like communities of faithful people whose life together bears witness to a deeper truth than that which seeks to tear us apart. It looks like people who are willing to be held accountable to the demands of a Gospel-centered life. It looks like a church that exists not for its own sake, but for the transformation of the world. By God's grace, it is possible. By God's call, it is commanded of us. Oh Lord, may it be so in our church. Amen.

ⁱ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon and Schuster, 2001. See also Putnam's *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*.