

THE SACRAMENT OF COMMUNITY

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

October 7, 2018; 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B; World Communion
Sunday

Genesis 2:18-24; 1 Corinthians 11:17-26

“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone...’”

– Genesis 2:18a

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep...”

Into the darkness, God spoke light. And there was light. “And,” God said, regarding the new-made light, “It’s good!”

God said the same of all the other wonders of creation: sky... sea and dry land... sun, moon and shining stars... swarms of living creatures, and green the plants on which they feed... and finally *adam*, the man. Of all these things God had created, God said, “It’s good!”

It is not until the second chapter of Genesis — not until the selection we read this morning — that God says of anything in creation, “It is not good.” God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” [Genesis 2: 18-19]

“It is not good that the man should be alone.” It’s God’s first condemnation in all of scripture. What God condemns is loneliness.

Loneliness is all too common in our society. It was but a generation or two ago, in most of our families, that our ancestors left the farm behind — or the village, or the close-knit urban neighborhood (where generations of a single family dwelt together, or in close proximity). They left those tight communities behind and ventured into a new way of living. That way of living was symbolized, here in America (and especially in New Jersey) by the suburbs: one lot per family, one house per lot.

Within each house there dwelt a single generation — although, for a time the next generation lived with them (until the children grew up, that is, and set off to find first apartments, and then houses, of their own).

This pattern of living sociologists call the “nuclear family.” It’s what we know: but it’s just about unheard of, in all of human history. It’s also just about unheard of today, in most countries of the world. Only in wealthy, industrialized economies (such as Europe and North America) can large numbers of people afford to live either alone, or with just one or two others.

It is not good for us to be alone, says the Lord: but look at what we’ve gone and done! We’ve built fences that separate us from others: not literal fences in most cases, but fences made of real-estate deeds and leases. We’ve said to our neighbors, and they’ve said to us in return, ‘This is mine. I may invite you in, or I

may not — but whether I do or don't is no affair of yours.”

In one of his most famous poems, “Mending Wall,” Robert Frost reflects upon the low, fieldstone walls that separated his New England farm from that of his nearest neighbor. Whenever he noticed that winter freeze and spring thaw had toppled one stone from another, there was something he felt duty-bound to do:

**“I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
‘Stay where you are until our backs are turned!’
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side...”**

Whenever Frost suggests to his neighbor that perhaps they don't really need a wall, the neighbor replies with an old adage he learned from his father (and probably from his father before him), “Good fences make good neighbors.”

Perhaps there's some wisdom in that, but I fear that in our society, we've probably taken that advice to extremes. Haven't we built our personal fences so secure and so high that many of us are aching with secret loneliness?

Mother Teresa of Calcutta picked up on this, after a visit she made to New

York City some years back. She wrote:

“The spiritual poverty of the Western world is much greater than the physical poverty of our people. You in the West have millions of people who suffer such terrible loneliness and emptiness. They feel unloved and unwanted. These people are not hungry in the physical sense but they are in another way. They know they need something more than money, yet they don’t know what it is. What they are missing really is a living relationship with God.” [*Love: A Fruit Always in Season* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 226.]

Yet how — in these days when the extended family’s but a memory — and many of our neighbors are holed up behind their home-security systems — do we recover that sense of community we’re lacking? As Robert Frost wonders in his poem, how can one neighbor decide not to have a stone wall, when the other wants one?

One of the reasons I continue to be in the occupation I am — and continue to be enthusiastic about the church’s prospects — is that this ancient institution of which we’re all a part is one of our society’s last, best hopes for tearing down the walls that divide us.

Those walls have been displayed with frightening clarity this week, as the fight in Washington over a Supreme Court nomination has parted the people of these United States straight down the middle. Some of us today — yes, even here in this room — are celebrating because our guy got in. Others — yes, even here in

this room — are grieving that he did. A phrase has surfaced in the news media in recent days, and I think it's all too apt: "Tribal politics." We belong to hostile tribes, here in these so-called United States. And we're armed to the teeth.

But what about that other tribe to which we of those other tribes both belong: the tribe of Jesus Christ? Is the unity of that tribe sundered by the dissension between the others?

If we're doing it right, our unity as Christians is never threatened by the disunity between political parties. On the contrary: I believe (and I hope you do, too) that our unity can actually serve to heal those other divisions.

Think about it: there's no other place where people of such diversity come together, once a week, to consider subjects of deep importance and powerful emotion. The church of Jesus Christ is intergenerational... we're interracial... we're international. Not that this particular congregation always demonstrates such diversity — we can only draw, after all, from the people who live in the neighborhood — but we are open to all comers. Every once in a while, we welcome a visitor, like the Rev. Perline Cooper from Madagascar, who was here last week. When friends like Perline are among us, we reflect just a little bit more clearly, the unity of the church universal.

The Catholic writer Ron Rolheiser likens the church to a huge dinner party. In doing so, he's in good company: Jesus himself portrayed the reign of God as a great banquet. Rolheiser's hypothetical dinner party is being thrown by a woman named Betzy.

Betzy, he says, "has a heart the size of the Grand Canyon." She also has an unusually large and diverse circle of friends. She decides one day to rent a hall and invite all of them to a huge party:

"A curious mixture of persons fills that hall. Liberals and conservatives, fundamentalists and feminists, Promise Keepers and New Agers, priests and anticlerics, union presidents and bankers, animal rights activists and persons involved in the seal hunt, meat-eaters and militant vegetarians mingle with each other. Present is the president of the local prolife association, but the president of pro-choice is also there. Ian Paisley is there, as is the leader of the Irish Republican Army.

Given the mix, there is a fair amount of tension, but because Betzy is there, because she's in the center of the room, and because they respect who she is and what she stands for, every one, for that night at least, is polite to one another...

As you can imagine, such a gathering would work only while

Betzy was actually present. Should she have to excuse herself and leave, or should persons get preoccupied in ways that would make them forget the real reason why they are there, you would soon enough get a combination of fireworks and dissipation that would

empty the room. This particular mix of persons can be brought together and kept together only around one person, Betzy. Everything depends upon her presence and upon those present having her wide empathy while they are in that presence, that is, upon being in her spirit. [Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), pp. 119-120.]

You've figured out, by now, that Rolheiser's gracious and welcoming host, the woman named Betzy, symbolizes Jesus Christ. Just as in his earthly life Jesus broke bread with tax collectors and pharisees, with prostitutes and presidents of synagogues, so in the great heavenly banquet he calls all people to take their places around his table.

Michael Lindvall, now retired as pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, tells of a book he once read, a personal memoir of a woman who grew up in a small town in Iowa during the Great Depression. The author was a young girl at the time. She tells of sitting down at the dinner table with her parents and her six brothers and sisters, when suddenly they hear a knock at the door. It's a hobo — one of those unemployed men who drifted from town to town during the Depression, hitchhiking or riding the rails. The man is hungry; he asks if the family

can spare a little food.

Without a word, the mother returns to the table, picks up her own plate, and carries it to the door, so the hungry man can sit on the steps and eat. When she comes back into the room, her husband and children look around at one another. They know the food's already been dished out and is sitting on their plates. There is no more. Her father directs one of the older boys to fetch an empty plate from the cupboard. Everyone passes it around the table, each one sharing something of his or her own food, until the empty plate is filled.

Michael Lindvall writes,

“It’s as a fine tale of loving your neighbor as I’ve heard. But that’s not what intrigued me. What impressed me was this: of all the dinners this family sat down to nearly three-quarters of a century ago, hundreds and hundreds of dinners, this is the one that was remembered. This dinner alone was remembered because it was such a feast. Oh, not the pot roast or whatever it was literally on the plates. That’s long forgotten. It was the richest of feasts because love was served every which way.” [From an April 2, 2000 sermon, posted on the First Presbyterian Church, Ann Arbor, Michigan web site.]

That's always true at the Table of the Lord. As Jesus declares, "This is my body, broken for you," and "This is my blood, shed for the forgiveness of sins," love is served every which way.

In our own daily lives, you and I may not rise to the occasion so often. We may struggle to demonstrate the radical openness to others displayed by Jesus, again and again, in the gospels. Yet here, at his table, you and I just may realize that it is in our power — despite everything else, all the pressures of society to hole up in our castles of individualism — to live in such an open, welcoming way. At our Lord's table, you and I may glimpse just a little of what his heavenly banquet must be like: believers from every race and nation and human condition, coming together to break bread and share one cup.

Truly, as the Creator God says in Genesis, it is not good that we, or anyone else, should be alone. Truly, at his table, the invitation's extended to all.

Before we proceed any further, though, we're going to sing our hymn, "Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ." On this World Communion Sunday, we take this hymn from another culture and make it our own. It's not the sort of Western European or North American melody we're used to singing in church. It comes from the sunny shores of Jamaica. But Jesus is there, serving as host at the Communion table, just as he is here. Maybe, in the singing of this melody, we will

sense the sacrament of community — which, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is always bigger than we imagine.

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