



**“Where Community is Built”**  
**Scripture – 1 Corinthians 12:12-27**  
**Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, October 15, 2017**

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks poses a simple question: What do we worship? To answer, he leaps into the future and imagines anthropologists peering back at our time. “They will take a look at the books we read on self-help, self-realization, and self-esteem. They will look at the way we talk about morality – as being true to oneself. They will look at how we talk about politics as a matter of individual rights, and they will ponder the new religious ritual we have created – the ‘selfie.’ What the anthropologists will conclude is that what we worship in our time is the ME, the SELF, the I. This is, in some ways, liberating and empowering. But remember that biologically we are social animals. We have spent our evolutionary history in groups. We need face-to-face interactions where we learn the choreography of altruism and where we create the spiritual goods of friendship, loyalty and love that deliver us from solitude. When we have too much of the ‘I’ and too little of the ‘we’ we can find ourselves vulnerable and alone.”<sup>1</sup> The more intensely we shine the spotlight on “me,” the more we cast shadows over “we.”

MIT professor, Sherry Turkle, studies the ways technology provides new possibilities. “Over the past 15 years, she has studied mobile communication and has interviewed hundreds of people, young and old, about their plugged in lives. What she has found is that these small devices we carry in our pockets are so psychologically powerful that they not only change what we do, they change who we are.”<sup>2</sup>

People can be physically together in the same place without being present emotionally. She says, “We are getting accustomed to a new way of being alone together...(Online communication) may work for gathering information...but it does not work for really getting to know and understand each other.”<sup>3</sup>

The dissolution of community has been occurring for decades. It is not simply the result of our society’s worship of the individual or the advent of the smart phone. A number of factors have been at play to dilute our ties with each other.

Over thirty years ago, Howard Snyder asked, “What strategies would you employ to destroy community?” He provided these answers: ‘Fragment family life, move people away from the neighborhoods where they grew up, set people farther apart by building bigger houses and yards, and separate the places people work from where they live. In other words, partition off people’s lives into as many worlds as possible.’ To facilitate the process, get everyone their own car. Replace meaningful communication with television, cut down on family size and fill people’s homes with things instead. The result? A disconnected culture where self is king, relationships are thin, and individuals fend for themselves.”<sup>4</sup>

The church is vital to society because it brings people together in community. We need a place where we can enlarge our family and support system. We need friends who will celebrate special occasions – births, baptisms, graduations, weddings. We need friends who will support us when life turns mean – disappointments, illnesses, disasters, and deaths.

Within two decades of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Apostle Paul wrote letters to different churches spelling out basics of this new faith, which was not initially called Christianity, but rather, “The Way.” In his correspondence, Paul spelled out core convictions and attempted to settle disputes.

Perusing his letters, we discover that Paul’s favorite image of the church is the human body. He shares this mental image with churches in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, and Colossae, and since not all of Paul’s letters survived antiquity, he may have mentioned this image to every congregation to which he wrote.

In today’s text, he reminds us that in the same way that the body is one entity with many different parts – arms, legs, eyes, ears – so it is with the church. A congregation is comprised of “different-but-similar parts arranged and functioning together.”<sup>5</sup> Some feel called to sing, some have a heart for mission, some are compassionate care-givers, and some keep an eye on finances.

The image works if we hold it loosely. In the human body, the eye literally cannot hear and the ear cannot see. In the church, some are natural care-givers, but everyone can extend compassion to others. Some have voices that might be best used in the choir, but everyone can still sing. Okay, there might be one or two of us who have never hit the right note, but our members are magnanimous and forgiving.

The notion of different parts of the body underscores that each of us is unique. We have different strengths and weaknesses. Some are wonderful teachers, but put them on the finance committee and they become apoplectic. Some are beautiful caregivers, but we would appreciate them not signing up for the Phix-it Corps. Paul urges us to recognize our gifts and use them to build up the body.

One of the beauties of Paul’s image is that a body has multiple parts and they are connected. A body cannot function if it is only comprised of one element. If a body is only eyes, it is a distortion. The eyes depend on the ears for hearing, on the legs for moving, and on the hands for working. The not too subtle point is that we need each other. We do not function properly in isolation.

Despite the fact that some are introverts and need time away from people, Homo sapiens cannot flourish in solitude only. We need people-time because we have an internal desire to belong. If we are cut off from others, it not only wounds our psyche, over time it warps us. Priest and poet, John O’Donohue points out that “The pain of rejection confirms the intensity of our longing to belong. In a soul-sense we cannot be fully ourselves without others. In order to *be*, we need to *be with*. There is something incomplete in purely individual presence. Being together with others completes something in us.”<sup>6</sup>

The church teaches us how we can best navigate all sectors of life – family life, our work environment, the dating world, political discussions, our neighborhood. The church is a perfect place to learn how to tolerate differences of opinion with grace and generosity. The church reminds us that holding a grudge is like being behind bars, while forgiving is liberating. The church reminds us of the things that help relationships flourish: patience, fairness, honesty, kindness, self-control, and respect.

Yet, as we know, community – like family – can be hard. There are no perfect spouses, no perfect children, and no perfect in-laws. The same is true in a church. I am sure you can think of certain people; if they are walking toward you, you have a visceral urge to do a quick U-turn. Some are always saying “Look at me,” some are

saying, “Poor me,” and others are saying, “Why me?” We might even prefer they not be a part of our community. But, of course, they are the ones who need it most.

And thanks be to God for those saints among us who smile at them, give them the attention they need, and patiently listen to their litanies. With time, with love, with understanding, and with God’s Spirit, their rough edges – and ours – can be sanded smooth.

A colleague writes, “Life in family and life in community is both our sorest test and our sweetest joy... the only thing harder than getting along with other people is getting along without them.”<sup>7</sup>

Of course the church is not the only place we find community. Civic groups, choral groups, sports teams, all provide community. The loneliness of aging can be lessened when a person living by herself moves into a retirement community. These communities provide important social connections, but are they as rich in spirit as the church? Do they nourish the mind, body, and soul to the same degree? Do they challenge us with wisdom that has stood the test of time and prophetic teaching that challenges us to take steps we have never attempted? Do they provide the care and support we need in times of trial? Do they provide the opportunities to share God’s love with people who are hurting? Do they provide us with the same horizon of hope?

We need times of solitude to think and reflect, but healthy community is essential. Unfortunately, not all churches are healthy. All of us know congregations that have fractured. There are congregations that are dysfunctional and consumed with conflict. We are so blessed to be a part of an exceptional community of faith filled with a positive spirit, boundless opportunities, and members who are dedicated to living faithful lives.

Community is vital because others spur new growth in us. They enhance our enjoyment of life, stand by us in dark times, and help us accomplish what we cannot accomplish alone.

It is in our bonds with others that our lives are made complete. It is in our connections that we discover not only the ecstasy of being loved, but also the deep satisfaction of *extending* love to others.

The church is vital to society because in our fractured world, we need people who will love us, inspire us, challenge us, and support us. We also need the reminder that we are dependent on one another and that when we work together toward a common goal, we can enlarge God’s kingdom on earth.

I leave you with another image of the church, to go along with the image of the human body. This image is captured by Julie Cadwallader-Staub in her poem “Blackbirds.” She writes:

I am 52 years old, and have spent  
truly the better part  
of my life out-of-doors  
but yesterday I heard a new sound above my head  
a rustling, ruffling quietness in the spring air  
  
and when I turned my face upward  
I saw a flock of blackbirds  
rounding a curve I didn't know was there  
and the sound was simply all those wings  
just feathers against air, against gravity  
and such a beautiful winning  
the whole flock taking a long, wide turn  
as if of one body and one mind.

How do they *do* that?

Oh if we lived only in human society  
with its cruelty and fear  
its apathy and exhaustion  
what a puny existence that would be

but instead we live and move and have our being  
here, in this curving and soaring world  
so that when, every now and then, mercy and tenderness triumph in our lives  
and when, even more rarely, we manage to unite and move together  
toward a common good,

we can think to ourselves:

ah yes, this is how it's meant to be.

## NOTES

1. Jonathan Sacks, "How Can We Face the Future without Fear – Together," TED talk, July 2017.
2. Sherry Turkle, "Connected, But Alone," TED talk, April 3, 2012.
3. Ibid.
4. Charles E. Moore, *Called to Community*, (Walden, New York, Plough Publishing House, 2016), p.xv.
5. Eugene Peterson's translation of 1 Corinthians 12:14 in *The Message*.
6. John O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), p.258.
7. Michael Lindvall, "Serves Them Right!" September 7, 2008.

## **Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson**

Holy God – You gather us from east and west, north and south. And so we come ... one people, gathering around a font and table that unite us. We give thanks that you claim us in the waters of baptism and bind us together as the body of Christ. Pour out your Spirit upon us, and sustain us for our common calling.

You fashion us as one body with many members, and charge each of us to care for one another. Some among us are suffering, O God. We lift before you those who grieve...those who have lost work and the security it brings; those who have lost loved ones and the joy of companionship; those who have lost hope and the courage to dream. We remember those whose own bodies are weary or worn down, or aching from illness or disease; we remember those who suffer each day from anxiety or addiction. Breathe your Spirit upon all in need of healing, we pray, that they might know your peace and experience your wholeness. And breathe your Spirit upon us, stirring us toward compassion, that we might bring comfort to members of this body in need of care.

Great God, we rejoice in the ways your Spirit is at work among us — shaping us as disciples, binding us together as the body of Christ, and sending us out to be your hands and feet. Guide us, O God, that we might serve faithfully in this community, and throughout the world. We pray for the people of California, and for *all* who have lost homes or loved ones in this season of disasters. We pray for those in distress due to conflict or terror or oppression. We pray for those who suffer in silence, whose pain is forgotten by all but you.

Commissioning God, you have called us to stand where Christ stood — with those on the margins, with those who mourn, with those who cry for justice. Send us, Lord, that we might be instruments of your comfort, of healing, of peace, until all creation experiences your wholeness.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, the head of the church, who taught us to pray together: Our Father...