

The Once and Future Church

4) Creating Community

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(The sermon begins with the playing of the Theme Song from “Cheers” with a corresponding slide of the Cheers cast on the screen—approximately 1 minute)

It’s a song that many of us remember fondly—the theme song of the television sit-com, “Cheers.” Cheers became one of the most popular programs on television because it invited us into a unique little community that would gather every Thursday evening at the bar. There were stories to be told, struggles to be shared, pranks to be pulled, and laughter throughout. It was if this crazy cast of characters embodied the experience of connection and community that many of us long for. Like the theme song suggests, we too want to find that place where “everybody knows our name and we’re always glad we came.”

This morning, we conclude our “Once and Future Church” sermon series by considering that last of the five challenges that author Loren Mead suggests that we must address: the challenge of creating genuine community in a time and place where community isn’t, by any means, a given.

In fact, it could be said that the actual experience of community is an increasingly rare phenomenon. If you were to walk down to Peet’s or Starbuck’s this morning and conduct an impromptu survey by asking people to name what they long for the most, my guess would be that the longing for community would be in the top three of the responses given. More likely than not, it would be the number one response.

It’s ironic that, in this time of heightened technology with all of its instruments of communication, we find ourselves more isolated than ever. We can email...we can text...we can snap chat and we can face time, but we struggle to find ways in which we can create the kind of community that truly enables us to feel like we belong, that we are a part of a connection larger than ourselves. The connection we long for is not something that even the amazing internet can satisfy.

It’s important to point out, however, that this need for community is much larger than merely a nostalgic quest to recapture the “good ol’ days” of the distant past. As John Gardner suggests, ***“No society can remain vital or even survive without a reasonable base of shared values—the values generated in the family, school and other intimate settings in which people deal with one another face to face...where community exists, it confers upon its members identity, a sense of belonging, a measure of security.”***

Individuals acquire a sense of self partly from their continuous relationships to others and from the culture of their native place.”

Had we the time, we could examine in more detail the many and varied reasons that have contributed to the disappearance of community in many places in our culture. I hope that

instead, we can all agree, that this represents one of the great hungers of our time—a hunger, suggests Loren Mead, that we, in the Church, must address if we are to have a vital future. In his estimation, the jury is still out as to whether or not we will actually choose to do that. Too often, suggests Mead, the impression of those outside of the Church is that, in spite of all of their language about inclusion and community, many churches are really nothing more than “self-satisfied conglomerations of like-minded people.” In other words, we may “talk the talk,” of community but fail to “walk the walk” of providing the genuine experience of connection and acceptance.

This morning on this World Communion Sunday, a Sunday in which we celebrate the worldwide community of Christians who gather at the Lord’s Table, it is only appropriate for us to consider two critical understandings of the nature of the community that we have to offer. Although they may sound as if they are antithetical to each other, I hope to show you that they are not.

On the one hand, the gift of community that we can offer to our culture is one without borders or boundaries. We have the wonderful opportunity to invite people into a network of relationships in which they are accepted, included, validated and celebrated for who they truly are. If we are to live up to our calling, we will be a place where people can be authentically themselves, a place where we steadfastly resist the urge to judge, pigeon hole, label and insist that others live up to our expectations. If we are to truly be a people of open hearts, open minds and open doors, as our motto suggests, we be just that—open to the amazing variety and diversity of people who happen to walk through our doors.

I think it is fair to suggest that if we can truly do that, we will surprise and delight a whole legion of skeptics in our culture who are convinced that we simply cannot overcome our judgmentalism. In their minds, the Church is all about judgment and forming like-minded cliques who will then reinforce the judgment.

How ironic that we profess to follow the One that made a habit out of acceptance, One who challenged the religious establishment for its systematic exclusion of those deemed to be “unclean.” It is not by accident that the image of the Lord’s Table is central on this day. For it was “at table” that Jesus practiced his radical and inclusive love. It was at table that Jesus demonstrated his establishment threatening practice of breaking bread with those labeled unacceptable and unworthy by the religious leaders of his day.

The rule was quite clear. If you were seen eating with one who had been labeled, “unclean,” you yourself would be considered “unclean.” It was enough of a threat to discourage some, but not Jesus. Indeed, his ministry was one that was rooted in the unapologetic practice of table fellowship. No one was to be turned away. No one was to be excluded. That is why we practice an “open table” in our communion ritual. There is room for everyone. No one is to be turned away.

There is, however, another dimension to the matter of community that I feel as if I must mention. While, on the one hand, we are called to be an accepting, welcoming

and inclusive community, this does not mean that we must be accepting, welcoming and inclusive of all the values that our culture represents.

In fact, says Mead, we must find ways to establish boundaries between the values that our culture aspires to live by and the values that we, as a people of faith, choose to live by. So, on the one hand, we must tear down the barriers that label others as unworthy and unacceptable. On the other hand, we must put barriers in place to remind us that we are a people “set apart,” a people called to live by a different standard, a different set of values, a different way of understanding ourselves as followers of Jesus. As **“The Message”** puts it so well in our lesson this morning: **“Don’t become so well adjusted to our culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God and you’ll be changed from the inside out.” (Romans 12: 1-3)**

Good advice. Fix your attention upon God—upon what God wants from you and if you do that, you are going to have “adjustment problems” with the culture. In fact, I can pretty much guarantee you that you won’t fit in. In fact, I can pretty much guarantee that you will probably stick out like a sore thumb.

How could it be otherwise? After all, we live in a “me first” culture of self-centeredness, a culture that focuses on the primary question, “What’s in it for me?” And yet, we are a part of a faith community that is called to live by a different standard—one that dares to put others first, one that chooses, for the sake of love and compassion, to elevate the needs, the hurts and the hopes of others above our own. This is precisely what Jesus meant when he advised his followers that the one who would save their life, would lose it and the one who would lose their life for the sake of others, for the sake of the Gospel, would find it.

Once again, it was Jesus who illustrated this fundamental principle of selflessness in the “last supper” that he and his followers were to share together. In the ritual of the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup, he would remind his followers—past and present—that we are called to live by a different standard, a different set of values that dares to counter the culture that surrounds us. We are called to be a people set apart.

In a time in which many are longing for authentic community, we can provide a place where people can be welcomed, included and accepted for who they are. There is indeed room for **EVERYONE** at the table of our communion.

We can also provide a place that invites and enables people to live differently—to live according to the counter cultural values that Jesus embodied...the values of radical hospitality, of limitless grace, of passionate and selfless service to others.

As our reading from Romans would remind us, if we “fix our attention on God, we will be changed from the inside out.

And I promise you that this change will not go unnoticed. It is, you see, the very change that our skeptical world is longing not only to see, but to experience for itself.

Amen.