

MAY WE BE ONE
Ethel Hornbeck
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Lesson: John 17:6-19

We hear a lot about “community” these days -- in science, sociology, on the internet, where “virtual community” has burst the bounds of geographical limitation. Using my highly scientific google-ometer I found nearly 1.6 billion hits when I “googled” this one little word--more than “Jesus” (204 million) or “God” (499 million) or “Barak Obama is an alien” (2.5 million).

Any group that gathers around some central purpose can be a community. If we stop to reflect, we can all think of multiple communities in which we take part--sports clubs, service organizations, hobby groups, political alliances. Each one has some central intent, that draws us (and others) to join —my hobby, my child’s soccer team, my desire to do good works, my political convictions. Participation is based in some way on self-interest and on a good day, when we all join self interests together, great things can happen.

Still, the vision of community that Jesus offers in the Gospel of John is both like and unlike any other. “May they be one,” he prays, “as we are one.” The so-called “priestly prayer” in John 17 concludes Jesus’ lengthy discourse which spans chapters 14, 15, 16 and 17 and falls in the narrative between the last supper and the betrayal of Jesus. It functions, according to some, as a sort of last will and testament—Jesus’ last word to his community.

“Abide in love” (15:9)—stay there, put down roots. And while you’re there, “love one another as I have loved you” (15:12) because “I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (14:20) so to sum it all up: “we are one.”

Dorotheus of Gaza, one of the desert Abbas of the 6th century offers an image that opens up this vision. Take a compass, he said, insert the point and draw a circle. The circle is the world, and God is the center. Straight lines drawn from the circumference of the circle are the lives of people. Notice that the closer they come to God, the closer they come to one another, and the closer they come to one another, the closer they are to God. And of course, it works in reverse--when we move away from God we move away from one another; when we move away from one another we draw farther away from God. But notice too, no matter where we are, on the circle or moving toward the center—that center--of the whole world—remains constant.

I also think, although Dorotheus does not say so, that the center here exerts a power—something like gravity or magnetism—that draws people to it and that this power is amplified when others are present, also being drawn to the center.

Now hold that image alongside this one, from contemporary spiritual teacher Ronald Rolheiser: “Belief in God, for many of us, is little more than a hangover...we still make a certain space for God within our churches, but God is given a very restricted place... moral philosophies, human instinct and a not so disguised self interest are more important in motivating...than are a love and a gratitude that stem from a personal relationship to a living God.”

Two central forces at work in this, according to Rolheiser, are narcissism and pragmatism, powerful forces that draw us away from our true center. Narcissism, excessive preoccupation with self--either in love or loathing--renders us insensitive to any reality outside our own.

Pragmatism, a cherished American value, has been elevated to such a place of primacy that efficiency has become a god. We become focused on the quantity of our doing rather than the quality of our being.

God at the margins—God at the center. Of course, this is not a question of where God is actually located. “God is (always) at home”, wrote 14th century mystic Meister Eckart, “it’s we who have gone out for a walk.” The question is, where is *our* center—personally and in our life together? And I guarantee, the higher the emotion (in any given instance) the more important that question becomes.

Authentic spiritual community is centered in Love (capital “L”) and characterized by: mutual willingness for God and for one another; vulnerability and compassionate presence; a capacity for discernment; attentiveness to God in prayer; and respect for significant differences—this according to the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation.

We may be attracted to a particular community by a host of things—our tastes, our needs, our wounds—but ultimately it’s all about that center. And we do get decentered, easily, and then re-centered on a million other—often wonderful things—some person, practice, program or issue...comfort, financial security, entertainment, our desire to do good, or to satisfy everyone’s needs. Good things, not good centers. As John Calvin was fond of saying, we humans are idol making machines. In community, we help one another find the way home, again and then again.

Jesus prays that his followers may be one with one another as he is one with God. This is not a numerical calculation. It’s not a quantity, it’s a quality, a description of power that comes from mutual belonging in the Spirit. The power of one is far deeper and more mysterious than agreeing, believing, or even liking the same things or people.

This prayer concludes Jesus’ last supper with his disciples and is also the final word of the Easter season, each and every year. If we listen deeply we can hear in this prayer, not just the voice of Jesus praying for his disciples 2000 years ago, but his ongoing prayer for and with us—Jesus prays with each of us individually and as a praying body.

We are one with one another, in the Spirit. But it doesn’t stop here, because in the Spirit we are also united with all who gather “in the name”, which is to say, the power of Love—and that includes all those who have gone before us and all those yet to come. *We are one* in the great communion of saints, or we might also say Community of Bold Lovers. Turns out the Spirit burst the bounds of geography *and time*, long before the internet took over our lives.

You/we are never alone no matter how weak, wounded or lost you/we might feel at times. We are **so** in this together, and if I didn’t believe that, I would not, could not stand here today. When you lose hope, I/we hope for you. This also works in times of joy and delight...it spills over, into our life in the Spirit, *always shared*...which is not to say *easy*. “Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams,” wrote Dostoevsky. There is a reason that reconciliation—with God and one another—is an ongoing and nonnegotiable dimension of our life together. Which is not about our personal comfort or our individual salvation. It’s about, as Jesus’ prayer concludes, being one *for the sake of the world*. “As you have sent me into the world, so I send them.” Whatever that might mean, it is at least an *invitation to incarnation*, to bear the light of Christ, to carry a new possibility and a new center, with us into every relationship and every community in which we take part. Jesus’ prayer is not just his last word to his disciples, it is also the ongoing prayer of the Spirit in us. Listen, listen, listen. *May we be one*. May it be so.