

From Connections to Community
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Reading: Ephesians 4: 1-6 (NRSV)

I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Can there be any doubt that human beings are social creatures, created for society? I think not. What is more, people belong to many different kinds of organizations and societies for a variety of reasons. Some organizations that we belong to are personal, civic, recreational, professional, and religious. We enter into these organizations for companionship, physical fitness, business relationships, and civic health. People belong to Rotary, the Art Museum, the YMCA, Junior League, the Garden Club, and any number of professional organizations that exist to strengthen our credentials, collegial relationships, or sales opportunities. You will hear people say that they meet a lot of business connections in these organizations. And on top of all of that we might belong to a church, or maybe even more than one. Within all of these organizations

and congregations there might be a myriad of committees or subgroups that we belong to such as the Women's guild and the Board of Deacons.

Mission statements, organizational goals, and guidelines for membership can be found in every organization that we belong to. Many of these values and principles are so similar that they are interchangeable from one organization to another, including a lot of churches I know of. Many of them are engaged in charitable work that any congregation could be proud of.

Even the mission and purpose of the church often seems confused or blurred. There was once a time when everyone thought that the church was meant to be a place where souls were saved from hellfire and damnation. At other times in history the work of the church and the advancement of nations were one in the same. Missionaries accompanied explorers to discover and conquer new nations in the name of God and this or that crowned head. There were even some who thought that the church ought to rule over city and state.

I have been in the ministry 34 years, and during that time the purpose of ministry and the work of clergy has been redefined multiple times. When I entered seminary in 1970 the dominant model was the medical model. Pastoral care looked a great deal like the

psychotherapeutic models of Karen Horney and Howard Clinebell.

Pastoral care borrowed heavily from clinical practice. The problem was, of course, that clergy could not spend fifty-minute hours with half a dozen parishioners a day in counseling and expect to accomplish anything else.

Support groups worked their way into the agenda and you could meet singles, attend marriage awareness weekends, find a divorce encounter group, and finally grief support groups.

A decade later the minister as manager or administrator worked its way into professional expectations. Clergy went to organizational behavior workshops and time management seminars. Personal planners and tickler files became essential pastoral equipment. People jumped onto the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator so the extroverts would learn how to better relate to introverts on the church staff or board of trustees.

Program development marched down the aisle and ministers were learning how to create every kind of event to meet every kind of social need. Churches began offering basic car mechanics for single moms, body imaging for teens, understanding football for weekend widows, and enriching your life with basic digital photography.

Now we are fronting the rising challenge of the virtual or electronic church. We are told that 85% of church shoppers begin with the Internet,

not the newspaper or yellow pages. Churches are buying up television and radio time or learning about live streaming and pod casting. Worship is being recast with image and movement. Ministers and worship committees are weighing the entertainment values of Advent and Easter. I know of some congregations that actually have producers, set designers, and stage managers for the Sunday service. One of them is a large Congregational Church in Ohio.

My question is, finally, what is it all about? What finally distinguishes the church from all of the social and professional organizations that we belong to? Is there not some understanding of church that stays the course through all of the new ideas, technology, and changes in society and culture? Is there a way to know the difference between a Kiwanis meeting and a worship service – except for the fact that the singing at Kiwanis might be better than that it is church?

I would like to propose that we recover a term from the Greek New Testament, *koinonia*. *Koinonia* can be simply translated to mean community. But when the church speaks of community it is something called apart from the Red Hat Society, Chamber of Commerce, and the Lions Club. The community we call church is set aside as that place of sacred and human fellowship. The community called church is the

communion of women and men whose relationships reveal divine qualities. *Koinonia* is the community of life in Christ. At University Congregational Church our covenant reads that we gather in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ. I submit that the name and spirit of Jesus Christ shapes the values and character of our relationships with one another. Jurgen Moltmann described this kind of authentic relationship in his book, *The Passion for Life*. In every day terms the Christian community is:

“...an open and hospitable community which would bring friendliness into the unfriendly corners of this society...The Congregation is rather a new kind of living together for human beings that affirms that no one is alone with his or her problems, that no one has to conceal his or her disabilities, that there are not some who have the say and others who have nothing to say, that neither the old nor the little ones are isolated, that one bears the other even when it is unpleasant and there is no agreement, and that finally, the one can also at times leave the other in peace when the other needs it.”¹

This description of the Christian community can only become a reality if we are embraced by the qualities of relationships that are typical of those who gather in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ. This was what Paul was writing to the Ephesians about.

Paul declared that the body of Christ holds characteristics that make it unique. These are humility, meekness or gentleness, patience, and

¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Passion for Life*, translated from the German by Douglas Meeks (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 33.

love. I would like to focus on the quality of humility. I propose that humility may serve as a foundation for the other three. Pride makes it impossible for us to be gentle, patient, and loving.

Humility was not a favored virtue in the ancient world. To be humble suggested that one was either of lowly station or that one must submit his or her will to that of another. Poor peasants, the working class, the indebted and indentured, slaves, and women were the “humble.” Nobody wanted to become like the “humble poor.” The humble poor didn’t much like it either. Indeed, in the Hebrew to be humble or humiliated was most closely associated with the words oppression and affliction.

And the truth is that those of us in the modern world have a difficult time with the idea of humility. We most closely identify with slogans such as “independent,” “self-reliant,” and “self-made.” Think of the terms, “stand on your own two feet,” and “I take my hat off to no-one.” We would prefer to be seen as strong and courageous rather than humble or self-effacing.

What we do not understand is that humility requires a tremendous amount of courage and strength. To begin with, the humility of faith must withstand the social assumptions of society and its cultural norms. And if

you do not think that there are no social values that we need to withstand today turn on your television. Watch these so called “reality” shows that are demeaning, debasing, and debilitating of human dignity. Christian faith calls us to side step the braggadocio, bravado, and machismo that are so typical of our society. In fact, the gospels tell us over and over again that the first shall be last and the master must become like the servant. Jesus does not invite rebellion against the Roman Empire with sword and spear, but with sharing the suffering of the poor and breaking bread with the hungry. He does not ride into Jerusalem on the back of a great white steed in a full suit of armor, but the humble back of a burro wearing faded robes and sandals. Jesus calls the children of God peacemakers and refuses even the physical defense of his own body.

We would like our Christian values and faith to be at home in the world. But the fact of the matter is that there is often a conflict between our society and humility, gentleness, patience, and love. There is often a conflict between the nation and the Christian virtues of peacemaking, forgiveness, and mercy. We are sometimes at odds with the values of free-market capitalism and the love that Christ calls us to with regard to the poor, oppressed, and alien in our country. I do not mean this in a confrontational or judgmental way. I offer this reality as a struggle of

conscience that ultimately exposes and humbles my own weak and compromising values.

When I am honest with myself and I look to the life and spirit of Jesus I am reminded of the depth of his humility. I see my own pride that often expresses itself as anger, or sarcasm, or even self-pity. I see fully in the mirror that I am more tempted to do my own will rather than what the gospel compels me to do. Humility means that I set aside the assumptions that I can fix everybody or everything. Humility means that I dare not presume to speak for others when they are perfectly capable of speaking for themselves. Humility means putting to rest the idea that I know what is best for another person, or my church, or the world at large. Humility means setting down my ego, no matter how educated or experienced or well placed. Humility means setting my life beside the life of Christ and learning from the master.

Humility is Jesus suffering the children, no matter how old they are; having the time of day for the blind, the lame, and the bleeding ones. Humility is Jesus who makes no distinctions between Centurions, tax collectors, women, foreigners, and leaders of the synagogue. Humility is Jesus breaking bread; washing the feet of friend and foe; and making breakfast for the disciples.

Paul Reps wrote my favorite Japanese Zen story about Master Hakuin. Zen Master Hakuin was admired and praised by his neighbors. He had a stellar reputation, not only as an enlightened teacher but also as a man of moral character.

In a village near his temple lived a beautiful Japanese girl. Her parents owned a grocery store. One day her parents learned that she was pregnant. Like a lot of parents in that situation they were angry and bitterly disappointed. They demanded to know who was the father. With unrelenting pressure they forced their daughter to name the father. Finally, she named Zen Master Hakuin.

With great sound and fury they marched up to the temple and confronted the teacher. He listened patiently. But all that he said was, “Is that so?”

After the baby was born the girl’s parents marched back up to the temple with the bundle of birth and handed the baby to Hakuin. The entire region was scandalized by this story. Hakuin lost his reputation. His students abandoned him. People no longer contributed to the temple and Hakuin was forced to leave it. He never seemed troubled or angry. All he ever said was, “Is that so?”

Hakuin built a small hut for himself and the baby. He raised a vegetable garden and kept a few chickens for eggs. Neighbors sold him goat's milk for the baby. Hakuin cared for the baby with gentle hands and a soft voice.

After a year the young woman could stand it no longer. She finally told her parents the truth. The real father of the baby was a young man who worked in the fish market.

Her mother and father took her up to Hakuin's hut. They asked for Hakuin's forgiveness and went to great lengths to apologize to the Zen master. And with that the retrieved the baby and returned to their village.

Hakuin returned the child as if it was a cherished offering. In yielding up the baby he said, "Is that so?"²

In hearing this story we can see the kindness of Hakuin, his patience, and his love. Can we not also see the profound humility of this man? These are the qualities of Christian *koinonia*. Humility is an essential characteristic of the community of faith. St. Paul declares that it is a primary descriptor of the body of Christ. It is what sets the church apart from all the other organizations that we belong to, no matter how fine they may be. I would like to think that when people gather at

² Paul Reps, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (Garden City: Anchor Books), pp. 7-8.

Starbucks or Paneras and ask about that beautiful, white colonial church on 29th Street North someone might say, “Oh, they are humble people.”

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