

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on August 21, 2022

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a helper fit for Him. Genesis 2:18

The last several years of pandemic and cultural turmoil have revealed weaknesses in many of our major institutions. It is apparent that there is very little trust in so many organizations that used to be seen as reliable. Think of the important actors in society that have been questioned over the last five years or so. We have seen any number of long-time establishment institutions come under attack from the left, right and center. In a short period of time we have heard voices that evoke distrust of police, public schools, the FBI, elections, public health officials, the church and of course politicians.

The level of discontent has raised fears of increased conflict. Many people worry that the inflammatory rhetoric may lead to violence. It certainly weakens our sense of community.

The weakness of major institutions should not be surprising, because for a long time, sociologists have been warning us of the increasing weakness of all the smaller mediating communities in our culture. Over the last fifty years author after author has documented the decreasing participation of Americans in larger communities. From Robert Bellah's book, *Habits of the Heart*, to Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, to Charles Murray's book *Coming Apart: The State of White America*, sociologists have catalogued the decline of Americans participation in life beyond the cocoon of their families.

For example, Putnam reports that between 1980 and 1993 the total number of bowlers in America increased by 10 percent, while league bowling decreased by 40 percent. Nor, he points out, is this a trivial example: nearly 80 million Americans went bowling at least once in 1993, nearly a third more than voted in the 1994 congressional elections. People are bowling but not committing to leagues. Putnam uses bowling as a symbol for the decline of American associational life.

We see this decline in participation in civic life. Remember the fastest growing voting block in America is independents. These are people who do not want to have to affiliate with any political party. All kinds of groups organized to facilitate civic life are under stress. The folding of our local League of Woman Voters is paradigmatic of what has been happening.

Fraternal and service clubs such as the Masons, Eastern Star, Elks, Lions, Rotary and Kiwanis all struggle to attract members.

All the historic Christian Churches in America have lost members and influence over the last fifty years. In the last ten years this same process has begun in the so-called mega-churches. These new churches have begun to experience the same slow loss. We live in a time when people increasingly claim to be spiritual but will not become a part of a religious community.

Why has this happened? Robert Bellah tells us:

Individualism lies at the very core of American culture. Anything that would violate our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live our lives as we see fit, is not only morally wrong, it is sacrilegious.

Our emphasis on individualism and the self-made person can lead us to believe that we do not need other people. That we can go it alone. Some would teach us to aspire to be an Ayn Randian super-man or super-woman who does not care what other people think. They would tell us to find meaning in the self.

Then we come to the Book of Genesis. In the first chapter of Genesis we learn the value of each human person. In the second chapter of Genesis we learn of the human need for community. In this chapter God created Adam and then says **It is not good for the man to be alone**. God then tries to bring to the man something that will fulfill him. All the animals are brought before the man and he names them. Yet there is nothing in all of creation that can satisfy the man. Even the presence of God is not enough to meet the deep human need for community.

Thus, God finally created the woman; women are both the same as men and yet also different from men. It is only other human beings who are similar and yet unique that can make a person complete. God has created human beings with a need for human companionship. Most of the great thinkers of the past have agreed on the truth, "man is a social animal."

The Presbyterian Missionary Ben Weir was one of the hostages held in Lebanon during the 1980's. He tells us that the most difficult times for these hostages were the early days when they were held in isolation. They were left alone in cells. Life became more tolerable when they began to be held in groups. This was because human beings have a built-in need for community.

As we have noted most of the small communities, which have knit our society together, are under stress. Most people today are involved in fewer supportive communities than in the past. Americans have moved increasingly to living individualistic human lives. Bowling alone is a metaphor of the way Americans have increasingly lived isolated lonely lives. We sometimes forget God's word; **It is not good for the man to be alone**.

I once read an article that included the fact that geese flying in a flock have a seventy percent greater range than a single goose flying on its own. It also appears to be true that geese flying in formation can fly seventy-five percent faster than one flying alone.

This is a great image for the power given to human beings living in community. The truth is not only do we have a longing for community, but we also gain strength and power from others.

All the studies have shown that, in general, children that come from stable homes have an easier time learning in school. They gain strength from the strong community.

Strong ethnic neighborhoods or small towns with a sense of community have fewer problems of crime and homelessness than places such as public housing projects that sometimes lack a sense of community.

One way of reading the Bible is to see God at work creating communities. God created Adam and Eve for each other. God called Abraham and through him created Israel. Jesus called a group of disciples to follow him and then at Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon a group gathered in the upper room. That group became the Church which shared the Gospel around the world There is power in community. **It is not good for man to be alone.**

As Christians we need to be concerned with supporting all levels of community, yet we are responsible together for one important community called the church.

We can begin rebuilding communities by treating other people as gifts from God. Scott Peck tells a story.

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, as a result of waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy years of age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again," they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So, the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving – it was something cryptic – was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly, Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that

Thomas is a man of light. Certainly, he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in peoples' sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course, the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, and to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So, within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

Healing begins with individuals treating each human being with respect. In fact, Jesus tells us that when we show love for each other, we can discover him.

If you and I can begin to treat others as gifts from God, if we give ourselves to the communities to which we belong, healing can begin. We are to seek Christ in others.

A couple of years ago, PBS broadcast a series called *Broken*. The series told the story of a Roman Catholic Parish in run down city in Northern England. The parish priest played by Sean Bean was haunted by personal demons. His flock were largely people who had been wounded by life. They were able to survive because they cared for each other. As individuals they could not have moved forward, but community support saved them. This truth was captured in the title song written by Ray Davies that Mike will sing in a moment. It includes these words:

**We are lost, we are scattered
We're barmy and we're battered
We might be bruised but we're not broken**

May we commit ourselves to continue to build community in our families and in this congregation.

It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a helper fit for Him.