

Acts 2: 1-4; 41-47
Community – A Place to Belong
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When my spouse and I traveled to France a few years ago during my Sabbatical, we visited two monastic communities. The first one was the community of Taizé in Burgundy. I had always wanted to go there because throughout my upbringing in the church I sang and listened to the music of Taizé, music that is known around the world.

The community of Taizé was founded by Brother Roger right after WWII as a place of reconciliation and peace between divided Christians and separated peoples. Today, the 100 + brothers come from various religious backgrounds, Protestant and Catholic alike.

Thousands of people from all over the world travel to Taizé each year to worship, participate in programs and in community life. Taizé is not a closed community. You see the brothers attend to their daily chores – from mowing the meadows and working the fields and running the programs to overseeing the retail store to cooking meals for two to three thousand people at a time. You are able to talk and interact with them.

After Taizé we came across another monastic community called the Carthusians at Chartreux in the French Alps. They are contemplative Catholic monks. These monks live a solitary lifestyle in community. The only goal of the Carthusian way is CONTEMPLATION; living by the power of the Spirit as closely as possible in the light of the love of God for us, made manifest in Christ. Each monk has their own self-contained two-story apartment with a garden attached within the cloister walls. They occupy their time with prayer, study, writing, and work. They worship together. They eat some meals together but in silence and twice a month they meet up to go on a day's hike on which they can talk to each other. No stranger is allowed to enter the cloister and monks may receive visitors from outside twice a year.

I have to admit that I am fascinated with these kinds of religious communities. I love to visit these holy places – even the ones in New England. For some reason I always feel so much closer to God there than going to the grocery store.

Religious communities have a long history within the Christian Church, starting with the desert Father of 250 AD. Throughout the centuries, many people thought that the best way to live out their commitment to God and Christ could only be done by removing themselves from the world.

You might think that these kinds of religious communities are a thing of the past. Maybe some are (I certainly would never consider becoming a Carthusian nun) but even today, new intentional religious/Christian communities are popping up in some unlikely places. (1) They are not communities separated by gender or from the world but are simply made up of people like you and me - single, married, with kids, without kids, divorced, straight, gay, poor, rich, you name it. They hold day jobs, and go about life as we all do, but in the evening they return to their home within the community.

Their goal is to give God priority in their lives, to follow Jesus faithfully in their daily lives, to study the word of God together, to pray together, to care for each other and the neighborhood they have adopted, and to share their resources. Sounds a little familiar?

That is what we do, right? We are an intentional Christian community. We have been for 300 years. Even though we don't live together 24/7, we are here because we seek to give God priority in our lives and seek to follow Jesus faithfully. We pray together, worship together, care for one another, be good stewards to the town we live in, and share our resources. What we do here at the Needham Congregational Church is firmly rooted in Holy Scripture.

Today is Pentecost. Today we remember the biblical narrative where the 11 Disciples of Christ along with about 109 individuals, including many women, received the Baptism in the Holy Spirit in the Upper room. As the Holy Spirit filled them, they began to speak in other languages to the people around them, realizing that Jesus' prophecy has come true, that they would receive the Holy Spirit from God. From that moment on, the disciples truly began to proclaim the risen Christ. They began

to tell his story. They must have done it very persuasively because many people “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

And we get a first picture of what these early Christian communities looked like. They lived in the world but held all things in common, would share their resources, worship and pray together, care for one another, and break bread together. This is the way the church began. Pentecost is considered the birthday of the church, the moment in time when it all started.

I don’t know what comes to your mind when you hear the word “church.” You might think of church being a building, or an institution, a place of worship, a place that has maybe too much power, or too little power.

My primary image when I hear the word church is people, the body of Christ. The word church for me brings up positive images – the church being a place of refuge and peace, of courage and encouragement; a place of love; a place where I can be who I am and where I am accepted for who I am; a place that has created incredible and faithful people, people I admire and try to imitate.

As we preach this month about legacy of faith, I decided to preach on the legacy of the church as we celebrate Pentecost and the confirmation of 13 young people. It all kind of comes together today.

For me, the most important legacy of the church is this invitation to create intentional community that is dedicated to love God with heart and mind, to follow Christ’s way, and is willing to listen and be guided by the Holy Spirit.

To live and participate in an intentional Christian community today is very counter-cultural. The world we live in believes in individualism and promotes personal independence; it believes that ‘my interests take precedence over the interests of any social group, and that nothing should be allowed to limit my choice of action.’

This kind of thinking actually has a very negative effect on society. People lose their connections to each other (do you know all your neighbors, and do you know them well?). People

become lonely and isolated. People will not work for the common good unless they get something out of it. (What's in it for me?)

What do people do when they need to fill a need that is not filled by relationship? They go shopping. Research has proven that consumerism seeks to curb the negative feelings of isolation; we spend increasing amounts of money in an attempt to feel better. We might feel better for a moment, but we are still lonely.

Do you know what the "i" in Apple's 'i' products means? I always thought it stands for 'me', the "I", like in my ipod, my playlist, my iphone, my apps, etc. That was not the intention at first; the 'i' stands for: internet, inspire, inform, instruct, individual. But if you think about it, the 'i' does stand for the individual. The Apple naming strategy of its products is genius: it strokes a person's ego and promotes individualism at the same time.

I don't think that participating in an intentional Christian community can cure this kind of individualism – that is the sad news here - but it can give people, us and our young people included, a different direction and maybe an option that is saner and healthier for all. Community is good for our spiritual well-being.

We all, at one time or another, have asked the question: What do I get out of belonging to a church, a community of faith? Here are some of my thoughts:

First of all we need to acknowledge that God has created us with a hunger for relationship – to God and to one another. At our core we are relational beings. Our soul cannot flourish without being connected. To say it much simpler: we need each other to survive and prosper.

When we belong to a community of faith I believe we are more apt to find the strength to overcome the inevitable temptations, trials, troubles and tragedies of life because here we are supported, strengthened, encouraged and empowered. When we wonder if God really loves us and cares for us, we just have to turn to our right or left and see God's love and care in the friend or

person sitting next to us or just a phone call away. When we belong to a community, the world does not look quite as scary as when we have to face it by ourselves, alone.

The community of faith is crucial to our well-being because it is the source of much needed guidance and direction. As someone has aptly said, “we need the community of believers because none of us is as smart as all of us!” God yearns to guide us safely through our earthly pilgrimage, sparing us many wrong turns and harmful paths. In community we can draw on each others experiences, advice, and help.

The community of faith is crucial to our spiritual well-being because it is the place where we find special opportunities to minister. As Christians we are not meant to absorb Christ’s love individually and keep it for ourselves, but we are to pass on that love through our ministries and service.

We might use the word "church" in different ways and have different opinions of what community should look like. For me, it's a group of people covenanted to walk together as we explore the questions of human and faithful living. We each bring ourselves - our hopes and ideals, our energies and questions - to form the community that is the church. It includes our different viewpoints and perspectives, our foibles and our failings right along with everything else.

But most importantly, a church (or any religious community) is to make a home for hope. It is there to help us find a way of living that finds joy and meaning in each other, in simpler ways of being, in slowing down, and in giving time to the things that matter most. They enable us to create a good life together - a community of resistance, a covenant of joyful interdependence - that will support us when we are here or when we go out into the world. (2)

The church helps us to embrace our calling: to love God with all our heart and might and strength, to follow Christ’s way, and to be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sources:

(1) *Alternative Christian Communities* by Jason Byassee, *The Christian Century*, (October 15, 2005. pp. 38-47 .)

(2) *Idea taken from Rebecca Parker, A House of Hope*