

## Proper 18, Year A: 4 September 2011

Long ago the great Anglican priest and poet John Donne reminded us that, “no man is an island, entire unto himself.” For centuries we have considered a person living totally alone to be a hermit. More and more we are discovering that even in densely populated cities loneliness is a chronic, debilitating, and common condition. Studies have shown that lonely people frequently have impaired immune systems, making them more vulnerable to colds and other illnesses; they are often prone to depression; and among the elderly who live alone, have no friends or a bad relationship with their children 60% are more likely to develop dementia than their more social counterparts.

There’s a reason for this: Solitary experience is contrary to human nature because we are social animals. For all human history, life has been lived in the context of communities of one sort or another. This, of course, is simply sociology or anthropology. It is a neutral observation, because communities can be good and bad.

The bad is easy to recognize, because the history of humankind is as much as anything a history of war and conflict. We read in the record of the past and see in the news of our day that humans have great difficulty getting along with one another—whether it be in the neighborhood, village, city, state, nation, or world.

As Christians we understand the negative side of community life, and we confess it. Yet we do not give in to the dark side; we make no peace with the powers that divide community and isolate individuals. Further, our faith and commitment presses us to develop the best side of our lives as social creatures.

The primary prayer of Christian faith begins—OUR—not “my,” but “our.” It is a shared prayer for a shared faith. We understand ourselves as part of a family in which we are all brothers and sisters. We recognize that our lives in the context of community must be mutually supportive. This is the reason that at every baptism we *all* stand and repeat the promises of the baptismal covenant: these form the bedrock understanding of what it means for us as Episcopalians to be a Christian community; therefore, every time we welcome a new member into the household, as they commit themselves to Christ we renew our pledge in their presence, and we also pledge to mutually support each other in the life of faith. It is such a powerful and important act, that baptism or not we remind ourselves by regularly renewing the covenant, at least once a quarter, lest we forget that this is how we are called to live out our communal life in Christ.

Today's Gospel reminds us further of the good we can do together, and how we can do it. Jesus says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” If *any* group of us will gather, work, act with the Holy Spirit guiding us, with God’s spirit intentionally a part of what we do, we become much more than simply the collective number of people we are. Two becomes more than two, and three becomes more than three. The sum of our individual ideas and resources and abilities becomes much more because of the synergy that God’s presence provides.

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing. Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

We do gather in Jesus' name. We re-call him to presence with us. And that makes him a part of us and of what we do. That is what we experience at each Eucharist—we in him and he in us. But we don't celebrate Eucharist alone. If only the priest shows up for a mid-week service, for instance, there will be no celebration of the Eucharist. There is no community with whom to break bread.

Ours is a faith of community—of twos and threes and fours—but never of individuals. We act together so we can help one another and so we can work in God's name, thereby multiplying our resources and ability to do what God calls us to do. Our community is our lifeline to the experience of God and to the power of God moving among God's people.

This makes us decidedly counter-cultural. We live in a country and a social ethos that places a high value on individualism, most often to the detriment of community or at least communal well-being. "Love does no wrong to a neighbor" won't play very well in today's economic arena, whose slogan seems more to be "I got mine; get your own."

This individualism leaches over into religion as well. More people don't go to church than do, these days. And I'm only counting those of Christian heritage in the first place, who might be expected to "belong" somewhere. If they do go, they often "shop" for a place that will offer the right combination of goods to "meet their needs." Or they hold to a belief that they should "get something" out of the service, that it should "speak" to them or somehow be tailored for their individual preference—hymns they know, the same prayers every week, comfortable words from the preacher. God forbid worship should ever inconvenience them or make them uncomfortable! Often they give up entirely or lapse into some vague private spiritual practice.

Here too we run counter to the prevailing current. We believe that while a private spiritual and prayer life is essential for each of us—we're going to be talking about this at our first two adult forums this year—but it is likely to become dry and turn inward if it is not infused with regular doses of shared worship and connection with others, gathered in Christ's name, and for *his* sake, not our own. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." The gathering—the connectedness — magnifies the Spirit for us and in us and with us. And so we hold it necessary that I should go to church—I need to be in church, even on Labor Day weekend—as much for my neighbor as for myself; we believe that the Body is weakened for each member it lacks.

Perhaps we just don't realize how important we are one to another. Today Jesus makes it clear. Through our link to one another through Christ, there is a power in our community, uniting the values of God to our values on earth. This is how Jesus enables us to use God's power for making healing and life-giving love more effective among God's people. We come together, we stay together, we work together, we even disagree together—all in our Lord's name, bringing to focus the presence of God and unleashing the power of the Spirit to transform our lives and the lives of all God's children.

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