

“TOGETHER IN SPIRIT: WHAT MAKES A COMMUNITY?”

Philippians 1:3-11

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

Each of us belongs to many different communities. We belong to families, geographical neighborhoods, and various local municipalities. We are part of the state of Michigan, residents of the Great Lakes region, and citizens of the United States. In addition to belonging to the human community, we form groups around various interests including sports, hobbies, politics, vocation and social issues.

I've been a fan of several Pittsburgh sports teams, participated in the world of tournament chess players, attended stamp expos, supported a few political campaigns, engaged in advocacy for the reduction of gun violence, and participated in protests for racial equity.

Some of these are more trivial by comparison to others. Some require a deep personal commitment to members of the group, while others involve almost no personal contact. Some I belonged to for a short period, while others reflect life-long commitments.

I suppose some people would say that I'm defining community much too broadly by including some of these groups, but each of these things and many others contribute to our understanding of who we are. Each of us represents a cross-section of the communities to which we belong.

I've noticed during the pandemic a recognition of communities previously unacknowledged, a realignment of some communities, and a stretching sometimes to the point of breaking of communities. In the early days of the pandemic a number of people made a commitment to doing take-out in support of the local restaurant community. We went ahead with the art festival in support of the local art community. Businesses, theatre groups, and the entertainment industry have had to reinvent themselves. Some have strengthened the bonds that form community. Some have snapped and “gone under.”

The death of George Floyd increased our awareness of the ways in which different racial and ethnic communities experienced law enforcement. In the wake of protests, the white supremacist community has become more visible. Electoral politics has always carried a bit of animosity, but I think we are seeing more relationships and communities being stretched and broken over positions than in previous years.

To say that the faith community hasn't been affected by the challenges of the day would be naïve. It isn't possible to check our commitments to other communities at the door. To do so would be to deny an important part of who we are. Jesus is very clear about bringing our whole self, the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly. To leave a part behind is to declare that there is a part of ourselves that we do not want the gospel to touch. The gospel promises transformation and it cannot happen unless we bring it all.

Among the communities I belong to, the faith community occupies center stage. Its commitment to the gospel nurtures my own faith, strengthens my love of God and neighbor, and holds me to that path of transformation that empowers me to live more fully in God's light. Communities are strong when they have a clear vision of who they are and what they are about. Would that our vision were always strong, but too often the church subordinates its commitment to the gospel to other interests.

The faithful at Philippi are the only ones among those Paul writes to that receive his unequivocal endorsement. He thanks them for "sharing in the gospel." He has received and felt their support in his own ministry, whether on the road preaching the gospel to a new community or in prison. Their witness confirms for him the truth of the gospel that he preaches.

Corinth was distracted by the charisma of various leaders and valued certain spiritual gifts above the gospel itself. The churches in Galatia were distracted by a few who insisted on the observance of certain laws above the freedom of the gospel. But the folks at Philippi bore a love with and for Paul that flowed from the grace of the gospel. At least at the writing of this letter, their vision was clear, and it supported their own ministry as well as Paul's even when absent from each other.

During this pandemic, the church has had the opportunity to refocus its vision on the gospel. Apart from each other, we have learned that it wasn't the embraces, the passing of the peace, or the warm smiles that mattered as much as what lies on our hearts. What makes this community strong is the knowledge that we share of God's unconditional love that transforms us and informs our relationships to one another and within the world.

To be clear, this is not a merely sentimental vision based on warm feelings. A purely emotional love would never survive the differences that we each bring to the community of faith. We bring different music preferences, different decorating tastes. We graduated from different colleges and root for different teams. Some of us like a crowd while others avoid them. We have different ideas about what would make the world a better place. We bring flaws that will undoubtedly irritate someone. We bring our communities that may be of no interest to anyone else. We bring all of us because God invites our whole persons, but not everyone is going to be happy about that.

Good faith communities remain focused on this vision of the gospel that celebrates God's inclusive welcome and the kind of love that both binds us together and strengthens us for change. I've become increasingly concerned over the years about the failure of churches to deliver this consistent message. If the world is receiving one message it's that "you are unacceptable to God unless you... oppose abortion, reject all love that isn't between one man and one woman, give up your extreme liberal agenda, or accept the Bible as the inerrant and infallible word of God..."

There are strong faith communities that form around these sorts of things, but they are not gospel communities. They misrepresent the faith and present a false image of God. Good communities of faith are built on the inclusive welcome of God.

But as I said, it is not just any love that will do, that is able to create strong bonds. Paul prays for the church at Philippi that, he writes, “your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best...” We are welcomed in love and sent forth in love and it is not just any love. It is an informed love, a knowledgeable love, a love that struggles to discover the best. The gospel is that God’s love welcomes us and God’s love changes us. The good faith community welcomes us and the good faith community makes us better than we would be alone.

This is what Paul is describing in his letter to the church at Philippi. This is what I see in you, even in these days when we cannot be together. You are together in spirit, strengthening the bonds of God’s love between us and to our neighbors in the world. You haven’t stopped gathering to worship. You haven’t stopped engaging the world. You haven’t stopped nurturing one another. Yes, our hearts ache to be again in one another’s presence, but it’s a good ache; an ache that is present because we are a good community of faith, built on the love of God, devoted to embodying that love in one another and carrying it forward into the world. Amen.