

## Truth in Community Dave Stuart

*Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie together, they will keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. **Ecclesiastes 4:9-12***

*For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully. **Romans 12:4-8***

Unlike most of Paul's letters written to the early house churches or to individuals involved in Paul's missions, Romans is more of a lengthy theological guide for Jews and Gentiles who became early Christ followers in the most dangerous place at that time to be a Christian – the center of the Roman Empire.

Paul wrote his letter to the Romans around 20 years after Jesus's death. One of the things he is trying to do is help this new church in Rome – this burgeoning community – see what it means to be a community in Christ. He's urging them to think of ourselves – not as individuals – but as all together one body and as individuals, we are each members of one body. We are inextricably connected to each other.

So, that's the foundational concept. But, he goes on to say that each of us has our own calling – our own function -- in this one body! My energy, my acts, my words, my presence all impact you and yours impact me because we are one. We cannot and we do not operate independently of one another. This is literally true. A Scientific American article published just this month, reported that when people communicate with one another or share an experience, their brain waves synchronize. Neurons in corresponding locations of the two different brains fire at the same time, creating matching patterns, like dancers moving together. When we say we are "on the same wavelength" with someone, that's real! And it's visible in the activity of the brain. You know what else? The greater our brains are synchronized with others, the greater the enjoyment we have and the happier we are!

I love science because it has so often reinforced for me either how much we do not know, or it has validated my belief in the divine. This Scientific American article just validates what Paul is talking about in Romans.

Last month, the U.S. Surgeon General released a report on the public health crisis of loneliness, isolation and lack of connection in our country. This started even before the pandemic. We are experiencing an “epidemic of loneliness” the Surgeon General said. And, it’s driven by a lifestyle that has no time or tolerance for the time-consuming messiness of human relationships. I’m not making this up! The report concluded that there are literally physical health consequences of insufficient connection to one another, including increased risk of heart disease, stroke, dementia and premature death. The report further concluded: “Communities where residents are more connected with one another fare better on population health, community safety, community resilience when natural disasters strike, prosperity, and civic engagement.”

I’m here to tell you this morning that self-sufficiency is overrated. The “self-sufficient man” is a myth!

We have a long tradition of individualism in this Country. We generally regard it as good thing to “look out for number one”, to protect our tribe and property. We love and protect our individual rights – our right to own private property and do with it what we want; our right to speak freely regardless of its impact on others; our ability to pursue our individual economic interests freely without regard for how it might affect future generations. Indeed, these things have led to great innovation, exploration and creativity. And prosperity -- for some. But, sometimes it’s at the expense of caring for one another and seeing the critical importance of entering into the sort of relationships we are called by God to have.

These are what I will call non-transactional relationships – that is, truly communal relationships. I mean relationships where the relationship itself is the end goal, not a means to some other objective or economic transaction. Relationships not motivated by what we – as individuals – get out of them. Our relationships with one another – as Paul describes in Romans – are necessary for the vitality of this one body of humanity and the more we pursue our individual interests at the expense of our higher calling -- to serve and feed the one body -- we fail as a species. We are “impoverished” without community when we are a society of individuals, as Mother Teresa once said.

As we’ve gathered over this weekend to celebrate the Town of Warren, we are celebrating something deeper than the history of this Town; something more profound, more universal -- our connection to one another, our connections to those who have come before us, and to those who will come after us -- a community. A community is, perhaps, one of the most powerful forces we experience together. It is what Jesus commanded of his disciples in John 15:12-15 -- “to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Jesus says: “I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”

Jesus doesn’t keep what he knows to himself! He doesn’t hoard what he has as a precious secret so he can capitalize on it for his own individual power and gain. Everything Jesus does is in service to others -- to lift up others, to create a community of friends.

There is deep universal truth in human community.

We are not meant to be alone. You know how they torture you when you're in prison? They put you in solitary confinement. We are not meant to be alone.

When you gather -- when you devote yourselves to one another, when you prioritize the betterment of the community over your own needs -- you have an impact on each other in ways you cannot imagine.

I recently read an article where the author compares human beings to storm systems where each individual storm has its own particular set of traits, but its future depends on a multitude of elements of atmosphere and landscape -- external factors outside of the storm itself -- so that the fate of the hurricane is shaped by the air pressure in another locale and by the amount of time the hurricane spends out at sea picking up moisture before making landfall. Its path and its strength and its composition at any given time over the life of the hurricane are profoundly affected by so many things external to the hurricane -- forces the hurricane cannot control. The author writes:

“Storms are shaped by the world and by other storms and only an egomaniacal weather system believes in its absolute and unchanging individuality”

This is an excellent metaphor!

When I try to figure out how I ended up where I did in life, I keep coming back not to what is foundationally inside me, not what I accomplished on my own, by my own hard work and determination (I used to think that), but rather -- like a hurricane -- what I've seen, absorbed and been shaped by in the community of human beings -- the community of friends. What -- through no intentionality of mine -- just by being in this world with others -- has molded my view of my role in this one body or community of human beings of which I just happen to be a part.

Community comes in many forms -- connection with one another, taking part in a broader group of people, understanding our relationship with all of humanity, and -- ultimately -- internalizing our place as one with all of God's creation. With that as a focus, I've begun paying attention to things human beings do for one another. For example, a community member suffers a tragic loss and what happens? For no self-serving reason, community members are drawn to the scene to provide support, food and presence. Why? Why do community members operate a food pantry or the children's clothing exchange? Why do our church members serve missions that will have no direct benefit to them? Why do busy people drop everything they're doing to help someone who needs directions or other help? Why do we care for one another without any personal interest or gain to us? Why are we drawn to one another in unusual ways?

It's not like this is something that is easily explained by science!

The cynic will tell you it's an evolutionary survival trait we developed so that we will be helped when we are in need ourselves. The cynic will tell you the only reason we engage in acts of kindness is that we want something in return. The cynic will always find the answer based in self-serving human greed. To the cynic, nothing is beyond human understanding and reason. And, to the cynic, there is always a self-serving interest behind every human act of kindness.

There's a theologian named Stanley Hauerwas (from Duke Divinity) who writes that cynicism is "the rigorous and disciplined attempt to investigate the self-interest behind every moral claim." He says that so many people today rely on cynicism to sustain themselves because it helps us to "avoid the loss of the self by denying overriding loyalty to any cause or community." He says: "in that process we lose the very soil crucial to the growth of virtue – the self-esteem cultivated by the sense of sharing a worthy adventure."

I choose to see the beauty and love in human attraction for one another -- and the human sense of obligation to be with another in pain or loss – as the presence of God itself.

Let me approach this from another angle. There is this major push in our society to identify what brings "happiness". And why not? You've all heard the advice we give our young people to "follow your passion." I personally don't believe this is a helpful way to contemplate your life. I think we already know and have known for thousands of years what brings a fulfilling life. I think it is the life that derives from community.

Rather than "passion" – which is self-focused -- I would prefer that we ask: "where do I feel the most compelling duty in relation to serving others -- serving a community?" When Jesus says: "If you continue in my world, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free," he does not say the truth will make you "happy". This isn't about our personal passion or individual happiness. That is not what we are called to do as disciples of Christ.

It's about serving God's creation. It's about putting aside what we're taught is the most valuable thing -- individual achievement -- to recognize I have a duty, a role to play for a community. That may be in farming, business, teaching. It may be nursing or medicine; it may be art or music; it may be as a mechanic, electrician or plumber. But I do think that whatever it is, it helps to ask whether the pursuit is genuinely to serve community.

I've come to the view that, at least I -- I won't speak for anyone else – was not put on earth to pursue happiness. Jesus doesn't preach happiness. Jesus preaches liberation. It may be counterintuitive, but liberation is not found in individuality. It is not found in self-sufficiency. It is not found in empowering the self. It is found in recognizing the highest duty we are called by God to serve – community. Why? Because when we truly serve community, we are not competing with one another. We are not trying to get a leg up on the other guy. We are not obsessed with protecting what we believe we have

earned. Our goal becomes the betterment of all and, ultimately, God's creation. The power and strength of human community is enormous. It propels us when we need encouragement. It challenges us to hone our views when we think we have it all figured out. It supports us when we are celebrating life. It lifts us when we need hope. It heals us when we are in pain.

If a community -- a family of people -- can have that power, that is where God is. That is where I want to be. That is where I need to be.

Back to Romans. We each have a function as members of this body of Christ that we all are. We are "members of one another". See that, live that, be that! Amen.