

COMMUNITY INCARNATE
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS *Community Means Strength* ~ *Starhawk*

We are all longing to go home to some place
we have never been – a place half-remembered and half-envisioned
we can only catch glimpses of from time to time.

Community.

Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion
without having the words catch in our throats.

Somewhere a circle of hands

will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter,

voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.

Community means strength

that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done.

Arms to hold us when we falter.

A circle of healing.

A circle of friends.

Someplace where we can be free.

Come, let us enter into community, right here, right now, together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Weaving Our Path* ~ *Martha Dallas*

(This told story is about how Incan villages worked together to build bridges over deep ravines out of dried grass.)

READING *The Church Is a Body* ~ *Victoria Weinstein*

(We've substituted 'fellowship' for the word 'church'.)

This fellowship is a body.

May this body breathe and be together in the spirit of hope

May it feel held by comfort.

Those who seek consolation, may they find it in the solace of this moment.

This fellowship is a body.

It is as strong as all the people who have ever gathered within its walls.

It is the power of all they dreamed and all that they have done.

This fellowship is a body.

It is as vulnerable as the most newborn and untried of its members.

It is ancient, and it is ever new.

This fellowship is a story.

It is the story of lives that are interwoven,

brought together in this place and this time

for the simple purpose of caring for one another,

and helping one another along the arduous path from birth to death.

This fellowship is a vision.

It is a vision of unity amid diversity,

It is a vision of reverence for all of creation,
It is a vision that beckons us beyond the concerns of our own skins.
[...] may we abide as one body in the spirit of faith, hope and love that is the story and
the vision of this fellowship.

MESSAGE

Wondering about the tree? (*Our bare tree is hung with colourful 'ornaments' in geometric shape.*)
With "Community Incarnate" in mind, when looking for an image for the order of service, I
found this one (*hold up OoS*)...a picture of a bunch of different geometric shapes...hanging out
together. That picture inspired the tree decorations. And while I'm not going to talk about the
metaphor for community that they might infer...that of different shapes trying to fit together
or to find their place...I hope this offers you somewhere to 'hang' your ponderings this
morning.

Some say that every preacher ultimately has only one sermon in them. If this is true, I'd have
to say that my sermon...the one I seem to preach again and again...is about community. So
here I am, standing in the same old place saying the same old thing?

You know how some people feel like they never want to hear another Mary Oliver poem? In a
recent blog post, Parker Palmer reflected on her poem *Breakage*, saying, "I don't know how
Mary Oliver does it! But I'm very very grateful that she does." Well, I can say the same for
Parker Palmer. I don't know how he does it...keeps on saying things that zing me...but I'm so
very grateful that he does. He, like Mary Oliver, is never the 'same old' for me. It is my
humble prayer that you'll not hear the 'same old' today.

You know, I have a tendency to talk about building community as WORK...something we
have to dig into, and struggle with, and fight for. This probably results from my 'protestant'
work ethic. Anything worth doing must involve labour. Anything gratifying and meaningful
must involve sacrifice. All 'real' things are arrived at by hard experience. We sing about
it...We're BUILDING a New Way or We'll BUILD a Land. I told a story to our children today
about 'building' and 'working' together. Blah, blah, blah...

Parker Palmer wrote this almost twenty years ago, and it is just sinking in now:

"Whether we know it or not, like it or not, honor it or not, we are embedded in
community. [...] we were created in and for a complex ecology of relatedness, and
without it we wither and die. This simple fact has critical implications: community is
not a goal to be achieved but a gift to be received.

When we treat community as a product that we must manufacture instead of a gift we
have been given, it will elude us eternally. When we try to "make community happen,"
[...] we will exhaust ourselves and alienate each other, snapping the connections we
yearn for.

Too many relationships have been diminished or destroyed by a drive toward
"community-building" which evokes a grasping that is the opposite of what we need to
do: relax into our created condition and receive the gift we have been given."¹

¹ http://www.couragerenewal.org/13-ways-of-looking-at-community_parker-palmer/

I'm not very good at this, frankly, being able to...RELAX into my created condition and to simply receive what has been given to me. What Palmer is saying is that community is already in and around us, inherent in who we are, and that we just have to open our eyes...and our hearts...to it.

Years ago, when I was going through a divorce, and feeling incredibly isolated, I had a conversation with my therapist that went something like this:

"Julie, imagine yourself taking a fall on a busy city street. You're knocked unconscious briefly, and when you awake, there is a crowd of people standing around you, leaning in."

"I'm so embarrassed. They're all looking at me and I don't know what to do."

"What can you imagine yourself doing?"

"I don't know. I just want them to all go away so I can get up."

"Any other options? What if you can't get up?"

"I don't know what to do. I feel like I'm on exhibit."

And we went on like that for a while...volleying the possibilities...until frustrated (at least by my lights) my therapist said, "What if you just reached out your hand?"

What if I, what if we, were able to simply receive the gift of community? What if we just reached out our hands?

In Palmer's words, the ability to reach out our hands is a 'capacity for connectedness'... a capacity that we must develop within ourselves. See, the outward manifestation of community is dependent on an inner capacity for...openness to...community. It must be made real inside of each of us in order to be made real between us.

How to develop this capacity? Well, maybe this is where 'work' comes back into play, because it does require some intention, some discipline and some focus. It requires resisting the 'forces of disconnection' present in our culture and in our psyches. It requires the personal work of contemplation...that is...self examination and discernment that can help us to 'penetrate the illusion of separateness' and to touch 'the reality of interdependence.' Sometimes the best way to experience this is in our moments of vulnerability... those times when we fall. For indeed, it is then that we need community, and if we open our hearts, and reach out our hands, trusting, it will be there for us.

Trust. In another place, Palmer has said that "the degree to which a person yearns for community is directly related to the dimming of memory of [their] last experience of it."² Open your hands. Trust. Stop yearning. Just receive. This is the first thing I want to share today, that...simple but often illusive...community is a gift to be received.

Second, I want to talk about our visions of what true community looks like, because I think we need to be clear about what it is that we are aiming for.

I returned to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's definition of the 'beloved community' because when I think 'real' community, I usually think 'beloved community.' Here's what the King Center says about MLK's vision, one which he didn't see as utopian, but as an achievable goal:

² <http://www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/community-conflict/>

“In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because [...] standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, [...] disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, [...] Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail [...]”³

I often stop there, going no further. Which means that ‘real’ community, for me, gets defined as some kind of love fest...a place of complete peace and harmony. Probably not attainable. Which makes the struggle toward it even more arduous.

But one need only read a little further about King’s philosophy to find that he did not stop there. For him, the beloved community was not a place devoid of conflict, but rather a place where conflicts could be reconciled peacefully, with attention. And Palmer also warns that it is a trap to conflate ‘community’ with ‘intimacy’ or with something like the Garden of Eden. He writes, “My concept of community must be capacious enough to embrace everything...[an] entire range of relationships...” Community, he writes, must even embrace those who we perceive as ‘enemy.’

And here’s the kicker. Parker says community is “that place where the person you least want to live with always lives. And when that person moves away, someone else arises immediately to take [their] place.” That’s community: the place where the person who is the hardest for us to get along with lives. Still want to try to achieve it?

“Relationships in community are so close and so intense,” says Palmer, “that it is easy for us to project on another person that which we cannot abide in ourselves....or, in the immortal words of Pogo, ‘We have met the enemy and it is us.’” This is to say, real community carries us into difficult places where we have to confront ourselves. Community is always presenting us with a mirror. So, a different, more ‘alive’ vision of community is that place where we are given opportunities to stretch and grow and engage in serious self-reflection and transformation. Palmer calls this the ‘capacity for creative conflict.’

Community is work...not hard labour or a burdensome struggle. Community is hard personal work as it requires us to hang in there when times are tough. As Sheena read earlier, community will break our hearts...but not into smithereens, although it may feel that way sometimes...but rather, it will break our hearts open...open into ‘larger, more generous forms’ of relationship’...where we create and are protected by ‘the compassionate fabric of human caring.’ Community is what makes love possible.

It’s like a mobius strip...you know that infinity shaped thing where the inside cannot be separated from the outside. To learn to simply receive the gift of community, we have to do some inner work, and that work is best done in the ‘crucible’ of community. Community incarnates...becomes apparent...at times of our greatest experience of wholeness as individuals...that is, when we’re able to enter into our centers and confront what we find there. And we are best able to confront our humanity in the context of a supportive community.

³ <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>

So first, community is a gift to be received. Second, the beloved community is not a Garden of Eden. A truer picture of the beloved community is that of a crucible, where creative conflict breaks our hearts open to the fullness of life and all possibility.

I'd like to close with Rilke's beautiful words from his Book of Hours. Rilke, I believe, would say that who is speaking is god; for our purposes today, imagine that it is 'community' speaking to us.

These are the word we dimly hear:
You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flame up like a flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is a country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.

So be it. Amen.

READING *I Want To Be With People* ~ Dana E Worsnop

Often people say that they love coming to a place with so many like-minded people.

I know just what they are getting at -- and I know that they aren't getting it quite right.

I don't want to be with a bunch of people who think just like me.

I want to be in a beloved community where I don't have to think like everyone else to be loved, to be eligible for salvation.

I want to be with people who value compassion, justice, love and truth, though they have different thoughts and opinions about all sorts of things.

I want to be with independent-minded people of good heart.

I want to be with people who have many names and no name at all for God.

I want to be with people who see me in me goodness and dignity, who also see my failings and foibles, and who still love me.

I want to be with people who feel their inter-connection with all existence and let it guide their footfalls upon the earth.

I want to be with people who see life as a paradox and don't always rush to resolve it.

I want to be with people who are willing to walk the tight rope that is life and who will hold my hand as I walk mine.

I want to be with people who let church call them into a different way of being in the world.

I want to be with people who support, encourage and even challenge each other to higher and more ethical living.

I want to be with people who inspire one another to follow the call of the spirit.

I want to be with people who covenant to be honest, engaged and kind, who strive to keep their promises and hold me to the promises I make.

I want to be with people who give of themselves, who share their hearts and minds and gifts.
I want to be with people who know that human community is often warm and generous, sometimes challenging and almost always a grand adventure.
In short, I want to be with people like you.

***CLOSING WORDS** *So Are We Bound Together* ~ Elizabeth Lerner Maclay

As drops of rain that find each other and build to become a track, a rivulet, a stream, a river, a sea, so are we drawn together; so are we fortunate to find each other; so are we bound together, on this shared passage toward an unknown ocean and eternity.

Onward...along the path we are weaving together.

So be it.