

***"The Church of the 21st Century -  
The Challenge of Community"***

***Acts 4:32-37  
November 1, 2009***

***1 Corinthians 12:12-20  
St. James UCC***

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As we look ahead to the Church of the Future, one of the things that seems fairly obvious is that most people in our society live lives that are busy and filled to the point of overflowing with activities. In two parent households, it's very common for both parents to work. In addition, there are a large and ever increasing number of single parent households where all of the responsibility falls on that one parent. Between work, the activities that we're involved in, and the activities our children are involved in, most people no longer have the time or the energy for the activities that used to be considered a normal part of a person's life.

Over the years the church as a whole, as well as this particular congregation has felt the effects of this change. For example, some of our older members remember that for many years the women of this church would gather on Saturday mornings and fry donuts. These were sold to members of the community, and many people knew that this was the place to stop for fresh donuts on a Saturday morning. Through the great depression and the years that followed those donut sales helped to pay off the mortgage on our sanctuary building.

In addition, there was a large women's guild, a drama group, and many other activities that would be virtually impossible to organize today. The change is not that our members care less about their church today or that they care less about each other, but rather that they live extremely busy lives. The amount of free time that most people have today is severely limited.

It used to be that for many people their church was not only the faith center, but also the social center of their lives. The night or nights that they went to gatherings at church were often the only nights out they had. Today, when there's an evening gathering at church, most people have to decide if they want one more night away from home!

We all have a very real and very basic need for community - to be a part of a community that cares about us, that knows us as we really are, that supports us and encourages us. I suspect that this need is greater than ever. It has become more and more common that when people are at work or at home they spend time in front of a computer screen or a television screen, or they spend time in a car driving somewhere, but there is little in that time that brings us into community with other people, other people who provide that support, that nurturing, and that caring that we all need.

Today some of the more common means of communication are phone, email, text messaging, tweets and of course the social networking sites like facebook, among others, where you can literally have thousands of "friends" that you've never met.

Now all of these help to fill a need that is very real - our need for human companionship.

We're all aware that one of the special punishments sometimes given to disruptive prisoners is solitary confinement. That's a real punishment because it deprives us of something that we need.

Yet, while we are not in solitary confinement, many times the sense of community that we find with our co-workers or other friends, doesn't fill all of our need, because we need an experience of community that runs deeper than games, pastimes, or casual conversation. We have a need for communication that runs deeper than tweets or text messages or even phone conversations. We need a community where we can express our innermost aches and pains, our yearnings, our deepest joys, and know that someone cares. We need a community where we can look one another in the eye, and touch each other as we really are.

Here at St. James we may not always be that kind of community, but when we're at our best, then that is the kind of community that we're trying to be. That is the kind of community that we have the potential to be for each one of us. Our concern is with more than the superficial, in fact our concern needs to reach to the center of our beings, to the very depths of our spirits.

That's the kind of community that we find described in our text from Acts. We're told that "The group of believers was one in mind and heart." Now many times when we read this passage what catches our attention is that they shared their possessions with each other - not just some of their possessions, but everything that they had. This is so different than our concept of ownership, that it often becomes our focus when we read this passage. But, I think that the real point of what this passage is describing is the spirit of community that existed. Their church community was like one big family. They cared about each other. They nurtured each other, and they were willing to share all that they had, because that was the kind of oneness that they felt inside, a oneness that went to the very depths of their spirits.

It's easy to romanticize life in times that are past, so we also have to remind ourselves that the early church didn't always experience that kind of oneness. In fact, Corinth is a good example of something very different. The church there was split into different factions and the disagreements ran so deep that one group didn't really care about the other, and it was to that kind of divisiveness, that kind of uncaring and very shallow concern for one another, that Paul wrote this powerful passage about being one body with many parts.

He describes Christ as a single body with many parts. Just as our body needs different parts for different functions, so too does the body of Christ. Unless we were great gymnasts, we wouldn't be able to walk very well if we had all hands and no feet, and we wouldn't be able to hear very well if we had all eyes and no ears. We need people with a variety of talents and abilities. If we were all exactly the same, not only would life be much more boring, but we would be able to do far less, because the diversity which we find in our midst gives us a tremendous variety of abilities, and that is what makes us whole.

It is our diversity that makes us complete. You see, we are not complete by ourselves. We need the variety of gifts and challenges and concerns that others bring. We need the insights that others have to offer. We need their strengths and their weaknesses. We need to care, and to be cared for.

I believe that one of the biggest challenges and also the biggest opportunities that the

church faces today and as we walk into God's future is the Challenge of Community. While people's lives have become busier and busier, they also seem to have fewer and fewer people and groups where they experience a real deep sense of community. One of the greatest privileges that I have experienced in ministry is the privilege of sharing with people at some very important moments of their lives. Whether that moment be the celebration of a marriage, the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, or one of a myriad of other possibilities, we often turn to our church family when our need is the greatest and our feelings are the strongest.

We need the support and the caring of others. We need to know that someone is there, willing to share that moment with us. That's the kind of community that is greatly needed in our hectic world. We need to know that someone is there and that we can share what's really going on deep inside ourselves when we need to. We need to know that someone cares about us as we really are.

Lois Wyse says it very well in this poem:

"In a world where  
    Bad deeds are celebrated  
    And good ones relegated  
        To page 49 of the paper,  
Where first places goes to push and shove  
    And the cost of things is put above  
        the cost of time together,  
Isn't it wonderful that,  
    From time to time,  
    the best of us  
    Reach out and touch  
        the rest of us?"

Let us reach out and try to live as the best of us - touching the lives of each other in very special and intimate ways as we share with one another as we really are. May we all work together at seeking to be that genuine community that God is calling us to be!

Amen