

## Abiding in Community

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on May 2, 2021

Friendship Presbyterian Church

*“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.*

(John 15:1-8, NRSV)

I love to “people-watch” at the airport. Don’t you?

I wonder as I watch people walk by ... I look and wonder what their lives are like ... People I’ll never know. I wonder what their stories are ... What makes them happy? Who or what has broken their hearts? What are they most proud of? What is their greatest hope?

Sometimes the thought even enters my mind ... I wonder if anybody looks at me and wonders about the same things.

We all have stories to tell ... of everyday pleasures and irritations, of little defeats and victories ... stories of joy and pain ... of abundance and loss ... of love, of longing. In the end, we *are* our stories. It’s our stories which make us human. And I think it’s in the sharing of these stories – telling them and hearing them – that we *live into* what it really means to *be* human: To share our dreams, our laughter, our heartbreak, our hope with another, with a sympathetic ear, and to listen to another and extend the same grace.

Of course, doing this – *sharing* those stories – is ... another story. There is both deep desire and deep fear in this. There are the stories we are *eager* to tell ... the stories we *wish* we could tell ... and there are stories that we can hardly tell to ourselves. There are sensitive, personal factors which can keep us from deeper relationship. Though we might deny it, most of us really *do* care what others think. We want to be liked. We don’t want to be rejected.

But once upon a time, it was easier to find places where friendships could arise naturally and those fears could be navigated ... spaces in which our deep need for connection could be nurtured over time. And it used to be that the places and social institutions which facilitated these connections were strong, healthy, and well-supported – churches, clubs, social organizations, and the like.

But for several decades, sociologists have noticed the trend in American society towards the decline of voluntary associations, and with this decline, a slow but sure decline in what they call “social capital” or the quality and depth of our social interaction and civic engagement. *Why* this is the case is hard to pinpoint (there are surely multiple factors in play), but polls and other studies consistently indicate that what we have long sensed was happening, *is* happening.

Church membership and involvement is probably the most noticeable example for folks like us, but it’s not just about religion. As Harvard professor Robert Putnam noted in his pivotal study *Bowling Alone*, we see it in our levels of political participation ... We see it in declining participation in Parent-Teacher Associations, civic and fraternal groups, Scouts (not here, but you know what I mean!), ... and even, per his title, bowling leagues! As he points out, more Americans are bowling today than ever before, but bowling in *organized leagues* has plummeted.

In short, people aren’t as likely to put down roots, to be “joiners,” as they used to be. Now it’s true that individualism has always been central to the American character, but there has also always been a strong *balancing* force, a recognition of duties and obligations which we owe one another and to which we freely consent... a sense for the common good. To bring it bit more down-to-earth, you could call it “neighborliness.” And yet, today, the world of Mr. Rogers – “Won’t you be my neighbor?” – may appear charmingly quaint ... and far, far away.

The wild success of technology, social media, the internet, to *connect* all us self-reliant individualists may at first seem to counter the trend, but in fact only establishes it more surely. Never in history have the billions of people on our planet been more “connected,” and yet never have *more* people felt *more alone*.

We know that this is true. And it is as true in matters of the spirit as it is in other things. Now let’s be fair: Living together as a *church* can be a messy business. And no one knows that better than a pastor! When critics point out the pettiness, the insincerity, they experienced in their church adventures, they often don’t have to make stuff up. And so, it’s understandable that many have dropped all this nonsense in favor of a more gentle, more personal, path. You’ve heard it before (perhaps you’ve *said* it before!), “Oh, I’m *spiritual*, but not *religious*.” I can sympathize with the sentiment. Organized religion ... the Church ... can carry a lot of baggage.

A friend of mine who was raised in a fundamentalist church once said to me, “My worship is sitting out on the boat by myself in the middle of the lake and watching the sunrise on Sunday morning.” He just got tired of the judgment and the hypocrisy. He certainly would get no judgment from me. Between *that* or spending Sunday morning on the lake, I’d choose the lake every time.

But I did gently encourage him to consider that maybe those aren’t the only two options ... doing church with judgmental jerks on one hand, or having privately profound sublime experiences in the middle of a lake, on the other.

I share the spirit and intent of a UCC minister who recently wrote an admittedly snarky entry on her blog for *The Huffington Post*. Skipping the snarky parts, I noticed these words: “Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What *is* interesting is doing this work in *community*, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, *disagree* with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.”

Private spirituality, American-style, presents itself as a liberation, as a solution to the deepest longings of the heart, but I don't believe that in the end it can deliver on what it promises. For as long as our spirituality makes no real demands, asks nothing substantive of us ... as long as it doesn't call us out into engagement with our neighbors ... as long as it doesn't call us into meaningful commitments and root us into something bigger, deeper, than ourselves ... the hunger inside for *real communion* will grow. This hunger may remain unrecognized for a long time, but it longs to be satisfied – not in the blind acceptance of worn-out dogmas, nor in individualistic spiritual epiphanies, but rather in the glory and pathos of shared stories, shared mission, shared joys and concerns, shared *time* living into the great Mystery – with laughter, tears, work, and play.

In the face of all this, I still have hope for this empty space in the American soul. I deeply believe that the tide will turn, and in fact has already begun to turn. I believe that we will see that there is no life – “spiritual” or otherwise – apart from community. That's not an endorsement of just *any* community, but it is a recognition that we need one another. We can't be what we are and are called to be without each other. We are human. And we won't – and can't – walk this human journey before God and to God without each other.

While the issues we've raised are not just about “religion,” I do believe that Christians have a God-given, indispensable role in shaping this new consciousness. And out of this, a renewed and transformed Church might be born. Right now, while we mainline denominations struggle, much of the action seems to be happening on the edges.

One of our finest religious writers, Diana Butler Bass, tells us, “Around the edges of organized religion, the exile Christians have heard the questions and are trying to reform, re-imagine, and reformulate their churches and traditions. They are birthing a heart-centered Christianity that is both spiritual *and* religious. They meet in homes, at coffeehouses, in bars – even sometimes in church sanctuaries ☺. They are lay and clergy, wise elders and idealistic hipsters. Some teach in colleges and seminaries. They even hold denominational positions ... The questions are rising from the grassroots up – and, in some cases, the questions are reaching a transformational tipping point.”

More than a few people have noticed that – notwithstanding our deep and real problems – these developments represent the greatest opportunity for our mainline Protestant churches that we have seen in decades. As Frank Schaeffer put it recently, “If the mainline churches

would work for the next few years in a concerted effort to gather in the spiritual refugees wandering our country, they'd be bursting at the seams.”

This is *exactly* what we are aiming to do here. This is the kind of work we are called to undertake.

The church at its best is a place where seekers of all walks of life can share their lives with each other, without judgment. They are looking for a community which doesn't offer pat answers to difficult questions or serve up narrow doctrines which insult the mind and the soul. They are looking for a community which embodies an authentic gospel – not an easy gospel without sacrifice and not one that would make worship into entertainment. And they are looking for a community which can root them in something bigger than themselves ... a Story bigger than their stories ... a Story which is able to embrace and include theirs. Isn't this what we're all really looking for?

This is exactly who I believe we are – and the kind of community ... the *home* ... we can become for those seekers and those spiritual refugees of whom Frank Schaeffer spoke, because we *are* a community of diverse people made one in a Great Story, into which we were baptized and find our lives and our purpose.

Finding our place in the Great Story is what it means to *abide* in Christ, and it leads and inspires us to love one another. And we find that place in sharing our lives together in his name. In doing this, we live into the Story and become a part of it, and so abide in the life of Jesus, as his life abides in us, and as we *grow* together, rooted in his life, we can by God's grace be a community which bears witness to another way of life, another way of being in the world, and so bear fruit that will last.

To the glory of God. Amen.