

Mike Bennett  
First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC  
Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost  
October 1, 2006

James 5.13-20  
**Mark 9.38-50**

### **The Promise and Peril of Community**

“Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” -Mark 9.50

Imagine two scenes. The first: Two church members visit an elderly man in a nursing home. Noticing that he seems somewhat depressed, one cheerful visitor asks if there are any activities for residents of the nursing home. “No,” he says, “There is nothing.” Behind the man, taped to the wall, printed on brightly colored paper, is legal-sized sheet outlining numerous activities for the week.

And, the second:

A pastor celebrates an informal family Communion service and asks the group to name persons whom they knew were suffering. A little girl sitting next to her father said, “My father's suffering, but he will not tell anyone.” While the pastor was thinking of a response, she began to hug him. In embarrassment he said, “Oh...stop; you’re going to hug me to death.” “No Daddy,” she exclaimed, “I'm hugging you to life.”<sup>1</sup> ()

What is it that keeps us from reaching out to other people when we are in times of need? Why do we often forego the resources of community and friendship that would make our lives happier? Why do we put on a happy face for coffee hour and then allow ourselves to suffer quietly the rest of the week?

This morning's somewhat disjointed Gospel Lesson might help us find answers to these questions. The New Testament Gospels were not written by solitary individuals, seeking to lay

out an accurate history of Jesus' life for all eternity. Rather, they were written by people who were trying to offer an interpretation of Jesus' ministry that would sustain their communities. The Gospels are *community documents* and as such they give us clues to some of the promise and peril life in community.

Whenever people come together, there are potential problems. There are difficulties. Fear of these difficulties can keep us from even entering upon meaningful community in the first place. The first peril of community isn't directly mentioned by today's text, but it is implicit in the very idea of community.

To some extent, we all fear community because we fear togetherness with other people. We are afraid to open up and share who we really are. I suppose we think people might laugh or not take us seriously. We are afraid to offer information to other people because we think they might end up using that information against us.

When I was in college, I went on Monday nights to visit life inmates in Washington State. Along with a group of other students, I would visit each week in an upstairs classroom with individuals who were part of a group within the prison. They would share many things about themselves with those of us who visited. They were always anxious to talk and share. One week, a question occurred to me, and so I asked one of the inmates. I thought I had a great idea. "Why don't you guys share more and confide more in each other? We only come once a week, but you guys could be here for each other all of the time?" His answer was clear. "In prison you don't talk to other people about yourself. Any sign of pain or weakness might be used against you. A weak word spoken up here tonight might get me shanked down there tomorrow."

True communal life requires vulnerability. If we are going to really share something with other people, we need an environment of trust. A prison is an extreme example of an environment that doesn't offer trust. But any community...a family, a support group, a church, can have, or not have, the trust necessary to make it work.

The first peril of community is the vulnerability that all community members must offer to each other. Even in the best of communities, there are risks attached to such openness. People can

be disappointed. People can get hurt. But when the alternative is isolation, the risks are necessary.

Once we jump the hurdle of fear that keeps so many people out of community, new perils arise from the inside. A second peril of community is the tendency of all organizations to get attached to their own power and lose sight of their true purpose. In our Gospel Lesson, the disciples are upset because "outsiders" are performing miracles:

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.(9.38-40)

The disciples didn't want any unauthorized agents doing the work of God. They wanted an exclusive contract for that region. With all the vehemence of licensed taxi operators, they go after these people who are infringing on their territory.

One of the perils of community will always be a tendency to isolate and exclude those people who are not a part of the community. This is natural, and, to some extent, it is necessary. Any community must define itself. It must say who is a part of it and who is not. It must have some goals and features that distinguish it from other organizations.

But a healthy community, especially a church, will remember that its true purpose exists apart from its institutional identity. Our work is for the Kingdom of God, not merely for the glory of the white church in the center of town. We will want to look hard to see the ways God is working in the midst of our church. But we won't want to rule out the possibility that God might work through other people as well. Throughout his life, Jesus offered many warnings against the temptations of institutional pride.

Life in community holds great promise—the promise of a more meaningful and fulfilling existence. But perils like fear and pride can prevent us from experiencing the promise. And there is at least one more peril of community: fighting.

Interaction with other people always involves *potential* conflict and usually involves *actual* conflict. In my premarital work with couples, I am worried about couples who claim never to have arguments. What's wrong with them? Who's giving in? What are they holding back? Communal life simply must involve some degree of internal tension.

In last week's Gospel Lesson, the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest. Today, Jesus offers them a final word on the subject: "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." (9.50) According to Jesus, the disciples couldn't be truly effective agents of God's love for the world (salt) unless they were at peace with one another.

Much of the New Testament, especially the letters, is full of stories about churches that were fighting. We tend to think of the first Christians as having it all together, but they didn't. Like us, they disagreed about church growth—how much should we change to attract new people? They disagreed about their budget—how much should we send to the Conference Office in Jerusalem? They disagreed about their leadership—should we follow Paul, or should we follow Apollos?

Conflict is a built-in peril of community. If you would avoid conflict at all cost, then you'd best keep to yourself. But just remember that "at all cost" can be a pretty steep price. You might avoid conflict with others by remaining alone, but how happy would you be? And even if you did pull it off, who's to say that you might not have some conflict with yourself?

I've tried to take an honest look at some of the perils of community: The dangers of intimacy, the tendency to exclude outsiders, and the potential for conflict. Those can be some pretty big problems.

So why do we do it? Because God told us to, that's why? Jesus whole ministry, the whole story of the Bible, everything we know about God tells us that God wants us to be together, not alone. The challenge is great, to be sure. But so is the promise. The rewards are many and our orders are clear. So, my friends in the perilous business of community, let's keep at it!

---

<sup>1</sup> *From*, John Westerhoff, III, *A Pilgrim People*.