

Neighbors, Communities, and Mirrors
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It was just over a week ago when I awoke to a rainy day- I'd had a full summer, and was very grateful, for once, to be at home for the entire day - I started my day as I always do- making my tea and reading the newspaper- and catching up with news online. Hurricane Harvey was on its way and people were preparing in TX for an unprecedented deluge- President Trump had just pardoned Sheriff Arpaio- and I was reading these Scripture verses in prep for this morning-- holding it all as I listened to the drum of the rain falling on our rubber roof.

The violence- and pain of these stories were very present- killing of innocents... and... at the hand of God, even? words of **praise** in our Psalm which include the celebration over the *punishment of the people and vengeance executed against the nations*. And I was very aware, as I unfortunately too often- am- of the injustices all around us, and I kept thinking- how how do we live with our neighbor? when there is so much violence and fear in our world? How do we live with the vengeful one in our community? the sexual predator? the addict, the liar, the cheat, the greedy, the gossipy neighbor? How do we live with the annoying, attention- seeking, hurting-so-much-that -all-they-can-do-is-hurt-others neighbor? And maybe the question that is too difficult for us to ask, how do others live with us. How do my neighbors live with me?

In community we tend to seek places of belonging and acceptance- but in this world, where can we find a place where we are not afraid... of someone? Not hurt by- someone? As this all was swimming around in my head-

Our dog began barking wildly and looking out the picture window- I walked over to see what had caught her attention-(she doesn't normally bark unnecessarily) and as I stepped toward the window I saw an amazingly regal Great Blue Heron- standing in our yard- it had to be 6 feet tall- stretched to its fullest and was holding itself so proudly and almost even looking down its nose at the world.

And it struck me-- that amazing bird was totally unfazed by the barking dog- and yet- as it caught a glimpse of me through the window, it lifted its wings and it flew off- it was breath-taking...

And in that moment it seemed very evident to me that- - at least on the question of **who** is my neighbor- I have a sense of the answer.

Anything that comes into my world that has life is my neighbor.
even this- amazing bird is my neighbor- the barking dog-
Arpaio, whom I read about in the paper, whose presence and what he stands for has
become a part of my world, -even he is my neighbor.

Those who have lost homes in Texas are my neighbors-
YOU are my neighbors...
but- what does that mean?

What responsibility do we have to one another as neighbors? as members of the
same community? And where are the boundaries of that community?

Neighbors, Communities, and Mirrors- is what I chose for the title of my reflection
this morning- and we are going to spend a little time teasing out of the Scripture
readings some insights, I hope, about community- suggestions on- how to do it well,
and perhaps a cautionary tale or two.

But, let's begin with prayer...

Holy God and Great Goddess- You who hold many names and encompass so many
images of hope and pain and mystery... we come to this space now- because we care
about who we are becoming, who we see when we look in the mirror. We care about
each other, and about the world around us- our neighbors, our community... and we
strive to make this world a better world. Help us to listen to one another and to
learn and stretch and grow - Help us to be love... and to be hope... and sometimes
just to BE ... ourselves freely in this space where we can be assured that we are
known, and loved, and accepted- and from that place, may we be emboldened to
confidently act out our love in a way that is pleasing to you and beneficial to the
world around us, and to ourselves. Amen...

We are trying to hold together a number of seemingly different stories from
Scripture this morning. They are all from the common lectionary reading for the
day, and tie into this idea of community.

As I've been reflecting on the idea of community and what it means-one of the
observations I've made is that we often don't want to admit, in our culture, that we
need one another- that we **need** community. The American Dream is based on a
myth that anyone (and everyone) can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and
become successful on their own, foregoing the reality that those bootstraps were
probably made by someone else, as were the boots and the pants and the shirt, and
as anyone steps up with those boots, they are inevitably stepping **on** someone else.

Our responsibility to one another has been ignored, underplayed and forgotten at
times. And our fear of the other - the unknown - the different - contributes to our
justification of building walls around our small circles of friends.

And when we do find a way for a group of people to have a sense of identity and belonging and commonality- There is still another catch...in so doing, we are also identifying a group of people who are NOT like us- who are outside of our us-ness. And this is the core of what I most struggle with.

It is the reality that when we build a safe wall that holds people in a place of belonging and community, we have drawn a line that excludes others from that safe space.

Our challenge, then, is twofold. (One)-to be humble enough to acknowledge that we NEED community- No man is an island, right?- and second, to find a balance of holding in tension this desire, and perhaps even need, for a safe place of Us-ness- with the reality of that Other-ness and how to work hard to keep the lines that separate the two as permeable as possible-

Each of the Scripture verses we read today give us some pointers on community... guidelines on building community well- and some cautions-

Let's begin with the Exodus story. There are so many layers of challenge in this story, which we won't get into this morning, but perhaps you can talk about on your way home. Really, the spirit of God killed all the innocent first born children? What comes out of it for us on community that I want to name is the importance of ... Ritual. This story is the foundation for the Jewish holiday of Passover- which is essential to the identity of the Jewish people. The ritualistic celebrations of historical events give us a way to remember-who we are- where we have been, and what is important to us.

Any healthy and growing community can benefit from regular rituals that remind them of the past. If that past is dark and painful, the ritual can help us to remember the pain of those who have gone before us, and hopefully keep us from repeating that painful history. If the past is a celebration of joy, then we can have an excuse to live in joy even when the present may be less than joyful. Rituals then become ways for a people to come together to remember and to hope for a better tomorrow by reflecting on the past.

In the Christian Church we have the ritual of coming to the table together to share the Eucharist- Jesus' sacrifice, our sharing in that sacrifice, and what it means for us today. And here at CMCL we have a number of rituals- that help to make our community more cohesive. Just this morning we had the blessing of the backpacks for the beginning of school-there is the pinning of the parrots, the giving of Bibles in 1st and 8th grade, as well as the 4th grade blessing, and the presentation of hymnals to our graduates. I imagine the offering of Peace School to the community each year also serves as a ritual to us - a reminder that our church community is bound to live lives of peacemaking, and we want to be teaching that to our children.

There are other rituals, I am sure that we have- in our homes, in our families, in our neighborhoods that help us to create our sense of belonging and that "Us-ness" that strengthens our souls.

And yet, I can't help but wonder how these rituals intentionally or unintentionally exclude others.

One of the cautions I see in this story, is what remains unsaid. I think of Mark Twain's satire, *The War Prayer*. During a time of war a preacher stands in the pulpit praying for the protection of the community's boys, who are off at war- or heading off to war. The prayer asks for them to be victorious in battle.- an unknown man walks up the aisle and takes the mic and states the prayer that is unsaid... may our enemies be dashed to pieces and killed- may their parents spend the rest of their lives grieving over the loss of their children... and he goes on.

You see- every commentary I read and website I searched defined the Passover ritual celebration as one of FREEDOM. But the story is also a story of grief and death. Of violence and destruction of the innocent lives of the first born of the Egyptian families. I wonder what kind of rituals they would create to remember the same event for their people?

Yes, rituals are important and necessary, and help us to create that community we so need in order to learn and grow as human beings. But we cannot blindly celebrate our own rituals without being aware of how they may negatively be affecting those others who are not in our circle of community. And I am not saying we stop our rituals- quite the contrary- But we have to be aware that our celebration is not the whole picture.

There is more we could say about this Psalm- but I really just want to name how the Psalms in general call us to come together in community and to remember to sing and be thankful for what we have. There is a sense in which (gratitude shared) bonds us to those with whom we share it-regardless of the differences between us. We still need to acknowledge and be aware of those differences. To ignore them takes away from that other beauty - or it could set us or our community up to be hurt for lack of discernment.

I think of our Safe Church policy here. It was created in response to our desire to protect our children from people who would wish to harm our them. That doesn't mean we don't embrace all people- but we do not allow anyone to work with our children who hasn't been vetted and proven safe.

Amanda Kemp is an author, teacher, speaker right here in Lancaster- she speaks need to leave room for transformation between ourselves and the other. I have been chewing on this idea for months since I heard her speak. Can you imagine how our communities would be so much healthier and more honest and better functioning if we could do this with every encounter? To allow space for the other to hear me and be transformed by me- and to allow space within myself to listen and be transformed by the other.

Matthew's rendition of Jesus' words seem pretty clear. If we want to communicate well with our neighbors, we need to be direct and honest. If your brother or sister sins against you, go to them individually and talk with them.

This kind of confrontation is one we try to avoid, right? Boy is it hard. First of all, to say, "you hurt me" is an acknowledgment of weakness- because it says the other has power over you in the first place and **could** hurt you.

Then you are giving them a chance to apologize, and what if they don't? Go again, with a witness. And if they still refuse to fess up- bring them before the whole church. Now, how would you like that kind of accountability. We often do things that hurt other people- or see those around us saying and doing things that hurt others. And how do we normally respond? We usually turn the other direction. Not my responsibility. Not my place. That is between them... I don't want to get involved, right?

And yet, I wonder how much hurt and pain could be avoided in communities if we could figure out how to more directly and humbly communicate with one another? If I hurt you, and you told me that my actions hurt you, rather than avoid me, how might our conversation bring about a reconciliation and a friendship between us - perhaps even stronger than we had before that interaction?

When I was a senior in High School, I started attending Willow Street Mennonite Church, and there was a couple there married and with kids, who had some marital issues. The man had had an affair with a neighbor. After she became aware of it, the wife confronted him, and they struggled for a number of weeks on their own. At some point, she stood before the congregation and confessed that she had really pulled away from the marriage and it wasn't fair of the church to condemn him without also condemning her- and she apologized to him... which led to his apology. The church paid for them to go to counselling- and took them out of leadership positions in the church for at least one year- and rallied around them to support them. They wanted to make things work. This could all have ended differently, with just as happy an ending- but they are still married today, 25 years later, and happily so. I remember their story every time I read Matthew 18.

Sisella Bok wrote a book entitled "Lying"- and she talks in it about how lies separate us, even when the one being lied to never finds out- because in the mind of the lie-teller, there is a wall of distrust that is built.

And I wonder, how harboring hurt and anger at someone for a wrong they have done to me is a way of not being honest that puts unnecessary walls up between us, and germinates fear?

The other side of this story was brought to my attention by my husband, Mark. When I was reading him the scripture, he got a little indignant. His whole take on

this story was, how do we know the person is not being wrongly accused? Maybe they didn't sin against anyone?

Oh, life and human beings are messy, aren't we?

But it is true- false accusations are made all the time. One family member might think you have lost your faith because you are Pro Choice, and want to have you brought before the church to confess your sins. But at least in the confrontation, there is conversation about what is going on, rather than assumptions and false assumptions. Lord have mercy- we so need grace and discernment.

Finally we read in the words of Paul that we should owe nothing to anyone- excepting LOVE, but "love your neighbor as yourself." And he goes on to clarify that to love our neighbor means to do no wrong to that person. To do no wrong to another human being. Certainly easier said than done.

I have a really good friend- who is one of the best people I know. In a recent conversation he made an observation- that whenever I am around and there is some kind of physical work to do that I jump into that work as if I have something to prove. I suggested that he is very similar- that when others are physically working hard at something and he walks up- he usually jumps in to help too-. He replied that his dad taught him the value of hard physical labor. When I acknowledged that my dad taught me, too, the value of hard physical labor (maybe because he didn't have boys to teach it to)... and I was aware of wondering if he was seeing it differently because I was a woman. I thought- about how my friend didn't mean to hurt me in that exchange. I know he loves me dearly. But it brought to my attention how we can hurt one another, even with the best of intentions.

Which brings us full circle back to the challenges of community building and living in community. Right?

We can create rituals that help us have a sense of cohesion- but we need to be aware of how those rituals hurtfully exclude others.

We can work really hard to see what we have in common with others so we can celebrate and enjoy that part, while still acknowledging and celebrating our differences, and always discerning whether that other seeks to cause us harm.

We can honestly talk to others when they hurt us, and we can work like the dickens to be open when others confront us about how we have wronged or hurt them.

And we can try our best at loving our neighbor as ourselves...
and often we will succeed-

And yet we will still sometimes fail and hurt one another.

So in order to have strong communities, we need to find ways to **keep trying**.

And if we can strive to leave space for transformation between ourselves and the other- if I am willing to change, and to hold the other as flexible enough to change as well.... might we be able to build stronger, safer, more open and healthy communities? And might the fears that separate us begin to dissipate even a little?

As I looked out the window after the Great Blue Heron flew away, I wondered- why- why was it not afraid of the barking dog, but it was afraid of this little human- What in me was so terrifying that it needed to flee?

How could I be so scary to something else?

But I was.

And I am...

and then I looked over to the other picture window and saw a hummingbird fly up to the feeder- look at me- perch on the feeder- pause for a moment- then start to drink... It was less than two feet away from the edge of my nose.

and I thought- not all of my neighbors are afraid of me- and maybe one day-if I continue to prove myself as safe- the Great Blue Heron won't be afraid either.