

August, 2006 Community and the Shared Life

A year or so ago, a phrase popped into my mind and I wrote it down. Since then I have considered this phrase with a few others. The phrase still stands. Now I wish to share it with you to see what you think. In fact, I may be sharing implications of this phrase for the next few NewsLetters. Here it is:

*Modern society has produced many collectives but few real communities, many individuals, but few real solitaires.*

Just think about this for a few seconds.

If this statement is true, and I believe that it is (at least to some extent), then two of the tasks of the postmodern world are (1) the rediscovery of the community, and (2) the rediscovery of the solitary. I will not waste time here defending the truth of the statement itself (this is not a journal of history, but a NewsLetter of spirituality). And I will save discussion of the life of a solitary for some future NewsLetter(s). This leaves the issue of community.

I can't tell you how many times I have heard someone tell me, "I just can't seem to find community here." One person joins a "house church" in order to worship more community-centered, only to discover that most of the members are not really interested in sharing their lives (or even their food). What they wanted (consciously or unconsciously) was a small group Bible study where they could have the chance to give input to the direction of the group. Another joined a large "full service" church years ago because they had programs to meet the needs of their growing family. But years later they still don't know anyone deeply. They live life "plugging in" to this or that program. Still another decides to serve the neighborhood by volunteering at the local food bank, only to discover that the conveyer belts used to move the food from one section of the building to the next are so loud that it is hard to talk with anyone near you. We change jobs, we change residences, and at times we change marriages, stimulated by a deeply-rooted passion for community.

Community is about sharing. We share time together. We share a meal. We share a conversation. We share our hurts. We share ritual. We share a home (and not just a house). And from these (and more) community is built. Community develops from that which is shared. Think about it. What have you shared with others? How has your sharing contributed toward community? Sharing is a two-way dynamic. What is shared-between must be offered-by-each. Hence, no sharing without some self-disclosure. If I am afraid to reveal something of myself through a meal (or through ritual) less is shared. Furthermore, what is disclosed or offered, must be received. Perhaps you are familiar with the relationship where one does all the offering and others neither receive what is offered nor consider ours a "shared" offering. Think of those unshared offerings of time together, of conversations, of hurts, of a home.

Yet this offering-to-another that is sharing is a sharing of *difference*. That is the whole point.

You are not me. You share a bite of your meal with me. And your experience becomes part of mine. That vanilla-bean ice cream--with a shot of espresso and some dried espresso sprinkled over the top, along with a little chocolate syrup--which has been a part of your life for the past ten minutes now, through this little bite offered to me, becomes part of my experience. And together we share the experience. We know it together. What was your difference becomes our sharedness. Such it is with meals, as differences become part of shared experience. Now think of something a little deeper. Think of sharing an idea. Your ideas are not mine. The risk is greater as I share, not simply a bite of food, but my idea with you, perhaps during our dessert. We clarify the idea together. And perhaps in the end we walk away with an idea which is still not identical, but sufficiently similar to be called a "shared" idea.

Our sharing of what we disclose develops into "communication," and further, into the "common." To the degree that you understand my self-disclosure and respond in a way that I might understand (whether through language, gesture, tone, or action), we begin to communicate, and still more is shared-between. Through communication, we clarify the degree to which each understands the other and the degree to which what is offered is truly shared. And as our difference is shared through communication it gradually becomes part of the "common," what we consider to be mutually held together (whether ideas, possessions, time, responsibilities, feelings, or the like). Community is built from what is held in common, and from the process of working from difference through communication into the common.

We can offer ourselves at different levels of depth. I tell you that it is hot today. I am disclosing something of my experience. Not too deep. I choose to eat dinner with you. Again, an offer of choice, but not too deep, but we share that choice together. When we choose to eat together regularly, then we are not only sharing a meal and a choice, but a *habit*. A common habit is deeper than a common choice, just as sharing a belief is deeper than sharing a simple thought. But we can share deeper still. We decide to share finances, vacation plans, proximity of residence, fundamental goals of life. Now we are sharing much more deeply. Many differences must be worked-through. But the level of commonness is deep.

My phrase states that "modern society has produced many collectives, but few real communities." What do I mean by that? What I mean is that modern society, with its emphases on efficiency, order, and individualism, has been able to bring a large number of people together but at a very low level of depth-of-shared-difference. By way of example, we could consider supermarkets, suburbs, or insurance programs.

Consider the transformation from the general store to the supermarket. The general store was a place of different methods of payment (some just didn't have money, but in their difference they still had something to offer--say eggs, for example), small individual choice (there wasn't all that much to choose from), and shared time/space (often the general store was a "hang out" for folks). The supermarket is a place of a single method of payment (there is only one thing you really have to offer a supermarket - your money), large individual choice (including fruits shipped from who-knows-where so they can be available to you out of season), and little shared

space/time (ever notice how upset you get when the checker actually has a lengthy conversation with the person in front of you?). Modern society protects individual choice/difference by minimizing the need for depth of sharing. The point of efficiency (and convenience) is to let you do what you want without interference--the more mechanized the better. Now, having thought about supermarkets, perhaps you might want to reflect on the modern suburb or the modern insurance program. How might the modern emphases on individual, efficiency, order and such have shaped the development of arrangements of houses or systems of insurance coverage such that they collected large numbers of people into a system at the expense of depth of sharing?

Or the church. How might modern society have influenced the development of our expectations of church life? What *do* we expect from church? What do we expect church to expect of us? Or consider your neighborhood, or your circles of relationships. What has modern society done to our sense of community? We share less and less of ourselves with more and more people. We change locations and relationships again and again such that there is little occasion to build the "common." And we are left lonely and alienated from others and from ourselves.

We long for community and yet we don't know how to find it or how to make it. This confession is where we must begin. Hundreds of years and massive developments have conspired to blur our vision of community. And we cannot simply "go back" anyway. We must create community anew here where we are.

How do we begin to change? I offer three suggestions here. Perhaps more will come later.

First, start small. I have been advocating a slogan lately, "Do something small for Jesus." Real community is so new and so difficult, especially for those of us who have been hurt in relationships, that I think it must begin with the very simple. Of course this will be messy. The whole point of modernization was to eliminate all the mess. So we must go back to facing the mess of trying to integrate deep differences within a common life together. And this doesn't happen easy. So don't try to transform your whole church and "create community here" all at once. Just begin to offer and to receive love from others, one person at a time, no matter how different they are.

Second, consider making community more than "fellowship." Or perhaps another way of putting it would be to say, "recover fellowship." The Greek term *koinonia*, which the term "fellowship" translates, originally had a strong economic dimension (see Acts 2-5). Cheri and I, along with Wendell Berry, have long considered marriage to be not only a linking of personalities, but a joining of mutually interdependent basic responsibilities. When our sharing is offered only from the worlds of conversations and ideas, and we do not link ourselves with others through the sharing of basic responsibilities and possessions, we create an easy way out of the commitments that press us into working through the differences of real community. When community grows out of the sharing of a number of different levels and horizons of life, a kind of bond develops that is harder to break and leads to increasing depth.

And finally (third), take some risks. Be creative. Explore what might be held in common. We may not know exactly what we want in community--though may we have a strong sense of what we *don't* want--but at least we can experiment. Give yourself the freedom to try and fail. Your failure may provide the wisdom the next generation needs to forge a new embodiment of the body of Christ. We give ourselves freedom to experiment in science, knowing that many of our experiments will fail. Let us, in the confidence of the love of God, give ourselves the same freedom to explore community together.

Start small; make community more than fellowship; take some risks. Give Christian community a try, even if you don't know where you are going. Perhaps the Spirit will lead us into something new.

May God the Father bless you with riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit