

May 28, 2017 – Be One, As We Are One

John 17:1-11

About a year ago, Dr. Vivek Murthy, the Surgeon General of the United States, said that the greatest public health crisis in America is not cancer or diabetes, or heart disease. It is social isolation, in other words, loneliness.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AtCsiGUb1to>

This is not surprising when you think about the increasing levels of disconnection in our society. Nearly 20 years ago a sociologist named Robert Putnam, wrote a book called *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. In his book Putnam describes how traditional forms of community have been on the decline in North American society since World War Two. Putnam shows how people have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbours, and organizations. The title of his book comes from the fact that while more people are going bowling, membership in bowling leagues has plummeted. People are literally “bowling alone.” [From Paul Miller’s Mission Health Vitality blog](#)

Now many people would argue that we are connected in new ways - that technology has provided us with opportunities to connect with our families and neighbours around the world without gathering for meals, or joining sports leagues, or service clubs, or even churches. But Dr. Murthy and Professor Putnam would argue that technology is not enough, that we need deeper, face-to-face connections for both personal and societal well-being. We need the kind of connections that can be found in a community of faith.

This is the exactly the kind of connection that Jesus wanted for his own disciples. In today's scripture reading we find Jesus gathered with his followers for their final meal together. In John's gospel, the story of the last supper includes not only the meal, but also a lengthy sermon, filled with Jesus' final words of encouragement to his disciples. As the sermon comes to an end Jesus begins to pray, "Abba, the hour has come!" Jesus knows that soon he will die and his disciples will be alone. Imagine his disciples gathered around him, listening as he prays these words,

I entrusted to them the message you entrusted to me,
and they received it.
they know that I really came from you;
they believe it was you who sent me.
and it's for them that I pray.

Jesus went on praying,

Abba, holy God,
protect those whom you have given me....
...that they may be one, even as we are one.

Jesus knew the dangers of isolation, of loneliness and so he prayed that his disciples would have deep connections in their lives. He prayed that they would stay connected to each other, "that they may be one, even we are one". He prayed that they would have a personal connection to God, that they would know the joy of the love of the Holy Spirit in their lives. That they would know God's love, and live in and through that love, just as Jesus did.

On this Graduation Sunday, I can't help but think of all the parents whose children will soon be heading out into the world on their own, parents who have provided their children with the security of family and the support this community. I can't help think of the prayers that they, that you, will be praying: prayers for health and well-being, prayers for success in life and love, prayers for family and community. No one wants their loved ones to be lonely. No one wants their loved ones to feel isolated. We all want and need community in our lives.

I know. I know from personal experience that this is true. Like many of you, I grew up in the United Church. But during my 20's I was not an active member. I was too absorbed with university and then my work at IBM to leave any space for the church. It just seemed to be irrelevant in my life. But as I neared the age of 30, I realized that there was something missing. I was living in the city of Toronto, surrounded by millions of people; but I was lonely. I didn't have a community. I walked down my street and nobody knew my name. The United Church was the community I knew from my childhood; so I started looking for a suitable congregation and I found Bellefair. The people of Bellefair United Church became my community for the next fifteen years and it was there that I found deep connection with the Spirit and with other people. It was there that my faith was nurtured and I began the process leading to my ordination.

Many in today's society describe themselves as spiritual, but not religious. They feel they can have a deep connection with God without all the doctrine and the rules connected with organized religion. But what many of them are missing is

community. Even the Desert Fathers, Christian hermits who deliberately lived alone, often many miles from each other, remained in community. They needed one another and they knew it. They needed each other to save them from the temptation of believing that they could do it on their own. At the very least, most of us need someone in our lives who will help us forget ourselves. (Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pages 90-91).

The great wisdom traditions of the world all recognize that the main impediment to living a life of meaning is being self-absorbed. This is true for individuals and for communities. Here at First United, we are blessed to live in the bosom of this community. We are blessed to have each other as both support and counsel when needed. But there are others who are not as lucky. Jesus prayed, "...that they may be one, even as we are one." The community that Jesus' created was not a closed or exclusive club. He and his followers travelled all over the known world to spread the good news of God's love. Jesus' disciples were deeply connected but he made sure they were far from self-absorbed.

Today, as we pray for our ourselves, for our graduates, for our families and friends, as we share in the celebration of communion, may we also be aware of those who have not yet found the joy of true community. May we pray for the strength and the will to reach out to those who are lonely and isolated in our neighbourhoods, in our city and in our world. And so may we be one even as Jesus and the Holy Spirit are one.