

At Peace

Mark 9:38-50

A strong community enhances the lives of its members. The community is a place of identity, where people have a sense of belonging because they are known and recognized. The community provides protection and support. The community shapes values and provides cultural norms.

But there are risks in a strong community. The expectations and demands of a social order may restrict the freedom and creativity of a person. The past ways may not be suitable for the challenges of the future. A strong community may be so focused on itself that it loses the capacity to relate to those outside.

There is a constant tension between being inclusive and being exclusive, with serious questions to be faced. How far should a community go in relating to other people who are different, and how far should it go in excluding those who have different standards and values and customs? How far must a community go in isolating itself from outsiders to keep its values? How does a community keep its identity if it recognizes the validity of differing ways and structures of other communities? How do people in a community fellowship with others without losing their defining distinctiveness?

The concern about inclusiveness and exclusiveness is particularly intense for the church. For the church community is bound together not just by common interest or mutual enjoyment, but by convictions about the fundamental issues of human existence: what we believe most deeply, what gives value and meaning to our existence, under what obligations we live, how we define and achieve the good life, who we are.

When we deal with such fundamental and significant issues, it often becomes more difficult to be sensitive and accepting of those who have different convictions. To offer one example: Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, at an outdoor service at a baseball stadium in New York, prayers were offered by religious leaders from many different traditions. A group in the diocese of a bishop who participated in this service started a movement to depose him because by participating he had recognized the legitimacy of the prayers of others.

How do we keep the integrity of our own community without isolating ourselves from others? The first followers of Jesus confronted the issue when they came across someone who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. They tried to stop him "because he was not following us." He was not one of "us," one of their group, and they wanted to keep the integrity of the way of Jesus and the power of Jesus. What would happen if everybody started doing things in the name of Jesus? Jesus had certain powers, and through him the disciples had been given powers. The disciples were averse to allowing others outside their own group to exercise such power, even if it was in the good cause of casting out demons.

When they told Jesus about the person, he somehow did not seem as concerned about the situation. He said to them, "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." Preserving the power of his own group was not a priority for Jesus. If good were being done by others, their actions were to be affirmed. Jesus went on to say to the disciples that as they were ministered to by outsiders, it would come as blessing both to themselves and to those who aided them: "For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward."

How can a community keep its own identity and still be open to those outside? There is no simple answer to that question, but every community needs to be aware of where the line is drawn between insider and outsider, and of the impact that the decision of how to relate to others has on both those within and those without. The word of Jesus to his disciples reminds us to be sensitive to the issues involved, and his word pushes us to run some risk in relating to those who are not part of our community.

After dealing with the disciples' unwillingness to welcome the outsider, Jesus pointed to some other concerns his disciples would face as leaders, concerns that all of us who seek to minister in Christ's name will face. First, he warned against putting stumbling blocks in the way of others who are seeking to find their way toward faith in him. In vivid language he warned that "it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." We need to ponder the risks for us if our failures of love, our distortions of the way of Christ, our too narrow understandings of the truth, our quickness to pronounce judgment cause others to stumble as they are trying to find the way of faithful living.

Second, Jesus warned his disciples and us about the risk that we may stumble ourselves. Again in vivid language, he declared that if our hand or foot or eye causes us to stumble, it is better to get rid of it than to miss the way of God and end up in the torments of hell. These words were spoken not to outsiders but to those who were seeking to follow him. His vivid words alerted them and us that the righteousness of God must be taken seriously.

Finally, Jesus talked about the salt of the disciples, the qualities that would preserve and enhance their community. From all that Jesus said as he journeyed the way to Jerusalem with his disciples, it becomes clear that their saltiness involves being humble in their relationships with each other, giving of

themselves for others, reaching out and accepting all the people around them.

They are to "be at peace with one another." **Harry B. Adams**

At the end of August members of Unity worshiped with and served a meal at Carriage Town Ministries. I have learned a great deal over the past five years of being a part of that ministry. (I also appreciate and thank those who minister at the South End Soup Kitchen – another important serve by members of our congregation!)

The first two times I preached at Carriage Town I met Brother Hezekiah, a middle-aged man who came up for special prayer. I wondered if he was a preacher's kid with a name like Hezekiah. We talked of faith, as he believed in the power of prayer and that God would help him find a job so he could be independently and self-sufficient.

I met a young man, Philip, who asked if I would baptize him. He explained that he was doing Bible study with three different groups; however, none of the pastors would agree to baptize him. I sent him back to ask each pastor again. The next time we worshiped at Carriage Town he explained that he had followed instructions, but still had found no one to baptize him. The elders of Unity met, discussed the situation, and agreed to baptize him. Philip explained that he wanted baptism before migrating to the South for winter. One weekday afternoon we met and baptized Philip, who went on his way rejoicing!

This spring I mentioned in a sermon that a young woman, in her 30s had died from an aneurysm. As I shared this at Carriage Town a young man stopped me after the sermon to say that he had lived that part of the message, as he had lost his wife at 35 years of age from an aneurysm also. This brother in Christ gave me a human face to pain of such a loss. However he did tell me to grieve, but to say that God is the great Healer!

At our last Carriage Town worship I met a man and his wife visiting from Hawaii. She was originally from the Flint area and they were visiting her Michigan family. She said she had formerly been married to a preacher. Her current husband is a native of Hawaii. He wanted to meet me and tell me that I reminded him of his preacher grandmother. He shared that their worship services were filled on the Sundays that the service is done in their native language.

I use to go to Carriage Town with the attitude that I needed to come with an evangelistic sermon to save their poor untaught and heathen souls. Now I listen to their stories and understand that many have a deeper theological knowledge than I have with my 60+ years of Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and Seminary training. They have lived in faith during hard times that I can not even begin to imagine. I have never been homeless; never did couch surfing (when you stay with friends because you don't have a permanent place to live), never been food insecure (I have never worried about my next meal)! When I listen to the brothers and sisters, I learn about real faith. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be blessed every time I go to Carriage Town!

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