

The Gift of Needing One Another

Sunday, June 12, 2022
Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Dr. Kristin Riegel

Ecclesiastes 3:1-9
Romans 12:1-8

Friends, good morning! It is such a joy to be back here at First Pres. I'm grateful to the Resident Ministry Committee and to Jay and Melissa Anne for inviting me to come and share life with you this weekend. Last night, my husband Mark and I got connected with many of you at the church picnic. Coming from Kansas City, I thought it was audacious of you to serve barbeque. I was a little skeptical, but it was pretty good!

Last night, lively jazz music filled the air. First Pres members sat in lawn chairs tapping their toes – breaking out into call and response—it was quite the party! Ushering in the summer season, the excitement in the air and sense of community and love for one another was palpable. And this morning, this same Joy, this same excitement and sense of community is here. What a joy it is to be together!

It was one of the hardest classes at Macalester College, a small liberal arts school in St. Paul, MN. Organic chemistry, O-chem for short, took a deep dive into the periodic table of elements. It focused on intricate compounds and advanced formulas. O-chem prepared undergrad students for med school. It also weeded out those who were wavering on if pre-med was right for them. The exams were intense. The homework assignments long. The professor was tough but fair. O-chem was not for the faint of heart.

Sharmila, an undergrad student, had heard about the rigors of the class—she was undeterred. She had grown up in Bangalore, a large, bustling city in southern India. As a child, she had been sick a lot. Ongoing medical conditions landed her in the hospital time and time again. Her dream was to become a pediatrician – to be like the doctors who cared for her as a child.

Sharmila had made it from southern India to the middle of Minnesota to study, to pursue her calling, and nothing, not even organic chemistry was going to stop her. So when a group of fellow O-chem students invited her to study with them, she was excited. The group consisted of herself, another international student from Sierra Leone, and handful of white American students from across the U.S.

They sat together in a small study space, textbooks wide, laptops open, lecture notes covering the long brown table, fluorescent lights flickering overhead. They pulled out their lecture notes and homework assignments.

The American students put their headphones in and heads down. Although sitting together at the same table, they studied in silos. Each using their own notes, rarely looking up.

Sharmila was bewildered. She turned to the student from Sierra Leone and began working with him. They talked through their notes together. They turned to one another when they got stuck. They shared resources and helpful hints, talking about the complex problems as they each sought to solve it. Learning together, leaning on one another, they each did their own work, together.

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When I met Sharmila for coffee a few days later, she shared about her study group – the silence and silos, each student going it alone, leaving one another on their own to figure things out for themselves. And she asked, with alarm, “Is this normal?”

Her question, “Is this normal?” has stuck with me. In part because what she described—the individualism and independence, the focus on competition rather than cooperation – is both so “normal” in American culture and also so abnormal to what it means to be human, to be part of a community, to flourish, to be faithful, to thrive.

The United States is largely an individualistic culture. We prize uniqueness, autonomy, individualism, competition. Our national mythos centers the rugged individual.

We love the story of the lone genius. Steve Jobs. Mark Zuckerberg. Larry Page. A person, almost always white and male—who works alone—whose genius is self-contained and created. Who through his hard work, intelligence and ingenuity solves problems, creates new possibilities, and single-handedly changes the course of world. The problem of course is that the myth of the lone genius is just that, a myth. It ignores the many people who work alongside these individuals—coming up with ideas, providing resources, helping bring ideas to life. It sidelines the work of women and people of color who often generate ideas and help to make things happen in front of and behind the scenes, keeping them out of the spotlight and the national narrative.

Individualism and self-reliance is expected of those who succeed. It is also expected of those who struggle. As a nation we call on people who are poor, women, and people of color who have oppressed by systems of domination, such as racism, classism, and sexism, to pull themselves up by their own metaphorical bootstraps.

We insist everyone has a fair shot, and it is each person for themselves.

Individualism shows up in our attitudes as a nation. It also shows up in our actions.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many Americans refused to wear masks – insisting their individual rights, comfort, and autonomy should take precedent over their neighbor’s health and well-being, even as the national death toll continued to climb higher.

As a nation, we focus on competition rather than cooperation. We value independence over interdependence.

We prioritize accumulating more rather than accepting that we already have enough.

Underneath this individualistic ethos is deep fear. We live with fear. We fear one another. We fear there is not enough. We fear we are not enough.

These ways of living that put individuals on pedestals, that focus on the me rather than then the we, are normative in the U.S., but they are not normal. Nor are they faithful. The good news is there is another way. As followers of Christ, we are created and called to live in relationship with God and one another. We have been given the mercy and grace to live differently in the world.

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul writes to the communities of Christ-followers living under the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire prized social status and material success. It fostered competition and hierarchy. It encouraged boasting and bragging—success was to be superior to others.

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Many of these destructive values and practices show up amongst the Christ followers in Rome. Gentile believers are claiming superiority over their Jewish siblings.

Paul knows that there is competition in the community and confusion about the gospel message. With some members claiming God's love and salvation in Jesus Christ is only for them and their group. In his letter, Paul sets them straight. In the first eleven chapters, Paul emphasizes God's love and salvation made known in Jesus Christ is not only for Jews or for Gentiles. God's love, forgiveness, and redeeming grace made known in Jesus Christ is for everyone. Full stop.

He then turns from theology to ethics – to what it means to be a follower of Christ. To live faithfully in relationship with God and others. As he emphasizes, it's not only what we believe as Christ followers, it's how we behave.

As Paul writes, “because of God's mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. . . . do not be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.”

Paul calls on the Christ-followers in Rome to stop conforming to patterns of competition and practicing superiority. He calls on them to be transformed, and to live in transformed relationship with one another.

As Paul writes, “though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ, and individually we belong to each other.”

As Paul reminds us, we belong to each other. We are part of one body in Christ. We are created for relationship. For community. We need one another to survive and to thrive.

We have each been given different gifts. God calls us to use these gifts to serve one another, to share in ministry, to practice solidarity. God calls us to practice cooperation, to build community, to love one another.

“Ubuntu” is a Zulu term that loosely translated, means, “I am because you are.” Ubuntu: “I am because you are.” The concept of Ubuntu shows up not only in Zulu but in many African languages and cultures. It is a concept—an ethos—that suggests we get our humanness—our humanity—through our relationships with others. Ubuntu speaks of interdependence as a necessity.

Solidarity as a strength. We become ourselves—we are formed in relationship with one another—we belong to one another in the most basic sense.

In August 2013, I began the Lilly Residency here at First Pres with Rev. Lal Rodawla and Rev. Lindsay Conrad. Lal, Lindsay, and I quickly learned we needed one another to survive and thrive in ministry. We each had different gifts.

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Lal had the heart of a pastor. He listened with compassion, spoke with gentleness, and provided a sense of peace in every situation. He made people feel seen, heard, and known.

Lindsay had the hands of Christ. Her hands were always busy. Delivering sleeping bags to people living on the streets. Handing homemade sandwiches to people in parks. Reaching out to shake hands with and hug those who others walked by.

I had the mind of Christ—or at least, tried to have the mind of Christ. My gift was teaching. To help others think about their faith and to learn about how to live faithfully in their relationships, families, and workplaces.

Early on, we realized competing with one another in ministry wouldn't work. We needed one another. We needed to learn from one another, to lean on one another. We needed each other's gifts, we needed one another's grace, as we sought to minister to and as part of the body of Christ.

The residency program, transformed my understanding of ministry. It helped me to realize relationships and interdependence and different gifts are a strength, not a weakness.

The residency also transformed my understanding of God and what it means to follow Christ. It shifted my relationship with God and Christ from being about me and my faith, to being focused on we and our faith – what we do together as one body in the world.

Ubuntu¹ means I am because you are. I am a pastor because of who you are—because of who this congregation is. My pastoral identity that was formed by you, and it was also through being in relationship with this congregation that I discovered my gifts for ministry and the beauty and strength of belonging to Christ and one another.

The stole that I am wearing today was given to me by the Mom's Bible study, a group that met for a long time here at this church. I met with this group of moms each month to wrestle with the biblical text and to walk humbly with God and one another. Whenever I wear this stole, I am reminded of the relationships that formed me as a pastor and a teacher. I'm reminded of what I learned from these women, from this church. I am reminded of how Christ, through this congregation, continues to form me.

As Christians, God calls us to live differently in the world. God calls us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds and to live in transformed relationship with each other. God calls us to use our gifts to bear one another's burdens, to celebrate one another's joys, to see solidarity and interdependence as a strength. As Christians, God calls us to remember we belong to God and to one another.

So, fellow followers of Christ, I ask you: how can you cooperate, rather than compete, with others this week? Where can you practice solidarity rather than charity? How can you redefine success so it brings you into deeper relationship with others, especially those who have been historically marginalized, rather than setting you farther apart?

As you ponder these questions and perhaps where to begin, the good news is that you don't have to do it alone. We have been given the gift of God's grace and the gift of one another. This is not individual work; it is the work we are called to do together.

Thanks be to God!

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu>