

New Beginnings: Community
1 John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green
April 26, 2015

A few weeks ago I was away on Study Leave to attend the “NEXT Church” Conference in Chicago. This annual gathering of Presbyterian church leaders is devoted to dreaming, imagining and preparing churches for faithful witness in a changing world. I chose to attend this conference because it fit perfectly with the New Beginnings work we are doing here at the Church on the Green to discern what is NEXT for our ministry here in Bloomfield.

One afternoon of the three-day conference took us off site. We could choose from a number of different ministry settings to visit in the Chicago area and I chose to visit Lakeview Presbyterian Church, north of downtown, to learn the story of its revitalization. Lakeview Church had dwindled to 48 members in the late 1990s, with the only two children in the Sunday School being the pastor’s children. Now the church has a solid 240+ members with dozens of Sunday School children and a clear sense of mission and identity. It is brimming with energy and hope.

As the Rev. Joy Strome told the story of the church’s rebirth, she drew a big arc on a piece of paper to represent the life cycle of congregation. Those of you who attended the first New Beginnings Appreciative Inquiry Session with the Rev. John Blewitt back in January will remember him drawing a similar arc. Rev. Strome showed points on the arc that represent 1) the birth of a congregation, and **2) the “formation” stage where a sense of vision and purpose are forged.** Then the peak of the arc represents 3) a period of stability. She then drew three more points on the downward sweep of the arc, representing 4) stagnation, 5) decline and 6) the eventual death (closure) of a church.

A church on the downward side of its lifecycle generally remembers how it was during the previous stage of its life and generally focuses its energy on “getting back” to where things used to be. Effort is expended to reclaim “what we had” and get back to doing “what we used to do” at a previous stage. That seems to everyone like the logical way to reverse the downward trend. Unfortunately, that doesn’t work.

A declining church will continue to decline unless the church goes straight over to the early upward segment of the arc to revisit the “formation” stage of its ministry.

By revisiting the “formation” stage, a church gets excited about **a vision.** (I preached about that two weeks ago). During the “formation” stage, a church gets energized about **discipleship.** (I preached about that last Sunday.) During the “formation” stage, a

church imagines its future ***as if it were starting over***. What we “used to do” becomes less important than what we “hope to do.”

I’m going to say that again. What we “used to do” becomes less important than what we “hope to do.”

That is the work of formation. Or re-formation, if you will. That is the work of New Beginnings. The preaching that I will continue to do over the next six weeks or so will be my contribution to the New Beginnings process. I am preaching about first things. Core principles. Building blocks of Christian faith and practice. Today’s topic is ***community***.

In common everyday speech we use the term community to refer to the people around us in our neighborhood or in our town. In its secular sense, community refers to our life together as citizens of a particular geographical area. Sometimes we use the term to refer to a collection of people with similar habits, interests or jobs as in “the medical community” or “the scientific community”. The internet is making it possible for us to create or participate in “on-line communities” organized around a variety of specialties.

The New Testament Greek work for community is “koinonia” and it refers to something quite specific. It refers to the “common life” that the early Christians shared as followers of Jesus. Being a Christian meant joining the Christians and participating in Christian koinonia.

From John’s gospel on Good Shepherd Sunday we have a handy metaphor for the church community don’t we? Like a flock of sheep, we follow the good shepherd—who is so good that he lays down his life for his sheep. From John’s epistle, we have words of encouragement for the early church to model its behavior on the attributes of the good shepherd. “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” (1 John 3:16)

The early Christian koinonia should not be all talk and all show, but all action and all truth: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” (1 John 3:17)

What makes Christian koinonia different from every other kind of community is the abiding presence of the good shepherd with the flock at all times, Jesus’ indwelling through the power of the Holy Spirit. “All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them.” (1 John 3:24a)

So this is really important! Because I think people are hungry—no, starving!—for authentic community in the year 2015 in New Jersey, USA. I think there are a lot of lonely people—alot of Eleanor Rigbys—in our hyper-connected world. Some people stay busy so they won’t feel lonely. Some mute their loneliness with alcohol, drugs, gambling or other addictions. Everybody wants to look good, look strong, look like they’ve got it all together.

Isn't there someplace where we can be open about who we are and what we're going through and how hard it is, sometimes, to fit in (or not fit in) to the groups around us, and how hard it is, sometimes, to get out of bed in the morning and put one foot in front of the other?

People can be miserably lonely inside a marriage. People can feel disconnected even in people-oriented jobs. In a recent Psychology Today article, Dr. John T. Cacioppo writes about what he calls a "worldwide epidemic of disconnection."¹ This, despite our ability to email, call, text or tweet anything to anyone anytime 24/7.

Not only are people hungry for authentic community. They are also spiritually hungry. OK, I know 20% of millennials profess no religious faith whatsoever and I know fewer and fewer people are going to church but that does not mean those people are not spiritually hungry.

You know as well as I do that what people are saying, more and more, more and more, is that they *are* "spiritual." They're just not "*religious*."

Some people wring their hands over this and say "isn't it terrible?" But I think we can work with this! So you're spiritual but not religious? I'd say, "OK, let me introduce you to a character in this favorite book of mine, a character who was spiritual but not religious, in the bravest possible way—his name was Jesus." That's our foot in the door for a spiritually hungry generation.

The point I'm working toward making is that people are ***lonely and spiritually hungry*** and ***we are a community of faith***. Look how that matches up! Look how much we can give simply by being who we already are!

We are ***a community***. (OK not a perfect one but on this side of eternity we'll never be perfect.)

But we ***are*** a community—formed around our belief in the good shepherd and our desire to love as he loved. So, as long as we are cultivating our awareness of God's presence, and as long as we are backing up our words of faith with actions as described in the epistle to John, then we are more than capable of meeting the needs of our neighbors...***if we can just make that initial connection***.

At this stage in our life as a congregation I'm not sure we need to add new programs or add new "bells and whistles" to what we are doing to attract new members. I think it would serve us better simply to ***focus more intentionally on what it means to be a Christian community***.

Maybe we need to have fewer committee meetings but more meals together. Maybe we need to form prayer partners or triplets so we can say to each other in all honesty, "this is what is going on in my life. Will you pray for me? Now how about you?"

Maybe we need to have more fun. You know: less work, more play. Maybe we need to learn our way around our Bibles a bit better. Maybe we could learn to tell our faith stories to each other and get inspired.

Authentic spiritual community functions like a magnet. Like the smell of warm chocolate chip cookies fresh from the oven, authentic spiritual community attracts and makes a person hungry for more. Authentic spiritual community also happens to be how God changes lives!

Through relationships that nourish the spirit, the faithful are inspired to act. Someone has an idea to Feed the World right here on the Green once a month. It happens. Someone is inspired to become a court appointed special advocate for a child in the foster care system. It happens. Someone is inspired to provide tutoring for at risk kids. It happens. Someone else says, "I think God is calling me to be a deacon." It happens.

One quick story: I have a 17-year-old kid, as you know, who grew up in a smallish church (about this size) with a mediocre (by my standards) Sunday School program, a mediocre choir (also by my standards), and a quirky utterly unreliable pipe organ. If we were to look for deficits in that church we could find them and make a long list of them.

But what the First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills Church has in spades is what you also have: **community**. Every single adult in that congregation knew my child by name from age two on up to the day he was called and invited to serve on the Board of Deacons. Do I wish he was here with me at the Church on the Green in Bloomfield on Sundays? Yes, I do. But I can't argue with the choice he has made. He spends his Sundays with the faith community that formed and shaped him and loved him at every stage of his life. He has his own church.

Similarly, I don't think we need anything fancy or polished or expensive to welcome children and learn their names and love them. We don't need anything fancy or polished or expensive to make a beeline for new visitors and make sure that they know that they have a home here if they want it from the moment they first step in the door.

Friends, do not underestimate the enormous power of the one thing you already do marvelously amazingly well just the way you are: **just being a Christian community**. That doesn't require a sanctuary, or a 3-manual 48-rank French Romantic pipe organ. That doesn't require an agenda, or meetings, or money from the budget, or Session approval for anything.

What you already have amongst yourselves is the capacity for relationships of great depth and caring. What you already are now is a community in which the Holy Spirit lives and moves and breathes and works to inspire, heal and make whole.

"Koinonia,"— that ancient Greek word that described the common life of the early Christians, is a great word for us to become familiar with and start to use amongst

ourselves. The early church grew the entire Jesus movement out of koinonia, and they were making it up as they went along!

As you meet together in your small groups to discern a bold New Beginning for the Church on the Green, think “community.” Think “koinonia.” It’s already a strength of yours. And it’s how God changes lives.

May the Good Shepherd lead our flock into the future that God has prepared for us, calling us each by name out of the sheepfold into the mission field.

To the glory of God. Amen.

~Ruth L. Boling

¹Caciappo, John. “Epidemic of Loneliness.” *Psychology Today*. May 3, 2009.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/connections/200905/epidemic-loneliness>

Good Shepherd, within your embrace we are safe and secure. Within your embrace we know that we are precious in your sight. Within your embrace we feel the warmth of belonging. Within your embrace we grow and are nurtured together as one flock, the people of your pasture under your loving care and protection. For these blessings we give you thanks and praise.

Good Shepherd, within your embrace we find comfort and healing. We bring to you those who are weak, or struggling with physical, mental or spiritual health. You are the great healer, and we pray for healing of mind and body for those we have named out loud and for those we now name in the silence of our hearts.

Good Shepherd, within your embrace we find justice. We bring to you the brave voices who cry out for freedom, those prepared to stand up and be heard without counting the cost. We pray for those who have been imprisoned or tortured for their race, color, gender, caste, sexual orientation or faith. For all Christians who have taken up the Cross and know its weight and pain, we ask your dear presence to sustain and encourage.

Good Shepherd, within your embrace we find peace. We bring to you those orphaned, crippled or dispossessed by war, for refugees wandering this earth in search of a home, for all victims of strife and warfare, and for all those who have dedicated their lives for the search for peace and reconciliation. We pray for those migrants lost in the Mediterranean Sea this week, for their families and loved ones, and we pray for solutions to the living conditions that lead desperate people to take desperate measures. We pray for those who lost their lives and those who lost loved ones in the earthquake and its aftershocks in Nepal, and we pray especially for the people of Kathmadu, for first responders, rescue workers and aid agencies near and far to respond quickly and effectively to this natural disaster. May the love of Christ be everywhere evident in the work to help, heal, recover and rebuild.

Good Shepherd, we thank you for every good thing in our lives—
for all the beauty and loveliness in the world about us
which lifts our hearts and makes us glad;
for life itself with all its promise and possibility.
We thank you that in every great experience of life,
when it seemed as if we were passing through water and fire
we were not alone, but you were there as companion and friend.

We thank you that you come to us again and again
in ordinary and everyday circumstances, in our work and in our leisure.
Help us there to seek you and find you and serve you,
to love as you loved,
and to lay down our agendas, when needed, to take up yours as our own.

We pray now and always in the name of Jesus, and using the words he taught his disciples to pray together, saying...