



Cultivating Community

“Cultivating Community”

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday and Sunday, September 9-10, 2017

All Services

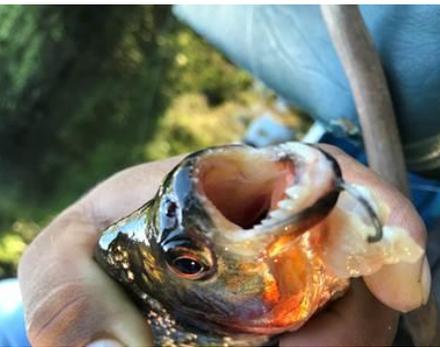
The Reverend Jennifer A. Crist
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Let us pray: God of the universe, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to You, the one who connects and nurtures us in ongoing community. Amen.



This past summer, I took my daughter Emily to the Amazon in Peru on a mother-daughter vacation to celebrate her recent graduation from high school. She and I are both science geeks and love exploration and discovery.



And so, in between fishing for piranhas, making blow dart guns, and finding poison arrow frogs (and yes, we really did do all those things), I had planned on reading a lot. In fact, I had carried about 7 books with me in my checked bag. One of the books I had brought with me was written by a forester Peter Wohlleben entitled: "The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate - Discoveries from a Secret World."

The beginning of this book was fascinating, as the author told stories about trees he had encountered and the science behind their social behavior. Trees in a forest care for each other, as family members. Sometimes they even nourish stumps for centuries, keeping them alive through networks of tree roots, along with (are you ready for this?) ...



a web of soil fungi, yes, soil fungi that allow communication and nourishment to travel underground across very large geographical areas. Fascinating, right?

Wohlleben says, and I quote: *"But why are trees such social beings? Why do they share food with their own species and sometimes even go so far as to nourish their competitors? The reasons are the same as for human communities: there are advantages to working together. A tree is not a forest. On its own, a tree cannot establish a consistent local climate. But together, many trees create an ecosystem. And in this protected environment, trees can live to be very old."* Wohlleben continues:

"To get to the point, the community must remain intact no matter what. If every tree were looking out only for itself, then quite a few of them would never reach old age. Regular fatalities would result in many large gaps in the tree canopy, which would make it easier for storms to get inside the forest and uproot more trees. The heat of summer would reach the forest floor and dry it out. Every tree would suffer.... every tree, therefore, is valuable to the community and worth keeping around for as long as possible."



Our scripture passages today are also all about community, except of the human kind, and specifically the Christian human kind. In our gospel reading from Matthew, we heard a pretty detailed account of how Christians should approach each other when feeling sinned against. And in the passage from Romans, we were reminded of some of the Ten Commandments and how they relate to love for the neighbor. How is a Christian community supposed to behave with one another? What kind of example is a Christian community supposed to be

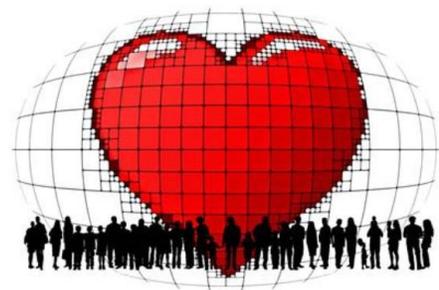
to the world around it? What are the rules? And what characteristics are unique to a Christian community?

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|-----------------|---|----------------------------|
| ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ | | |
| ΕΚ | + | ΚΑΛΕΟ |
| out from and to | | to call together or summon |

The word we translate as "church" in the Greek is ekklesia. The "ek" part of "ekklesia" means "out from and to" AND the root of ekklesia, "kaleo" means "to call together" or "summon." And so

ekklesia/CHURCH literally refers to calling together or summoning people, out from their every day contexts, into a gathered community. In fact, early churches or ekklesia gathered in peoples' homes. The book of Acts and Paul's letters in the Bible list the names of both women and men who offered their houses for ekklesia. These groups would get together for prayer, community, and a meal. They would often share what they had with others in need. They were called to be in Christian community (even though they did not call themselves Christian at that point) to be something different together than what they experienced in the world around them. And don't we do the same? Aren't we seeking what those early Christians were seeking? A gathered community that is different from the world around us. And what is our obligation to our neighbor?

In our passage from Romans, we hear some of the Ten Commandments: you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet.....these and any other commandments are summed up in this word: "Love your neighbor as yourself." And we are told Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Martin Luther explain this in a little more detail in his Small Catechism, a wonderful teaching that we have where Luther asks as a curious child "What does this mean?" For example, looking at the commandment, "You shall not murder," Luther asks, "What does this mean?" and then responds...."We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs." WOW! That is a lot more than not



Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

killing, right.....not only are we not to harm our neighbor, but we are to help and support them in ALL their needs.



Luther was challenged in his explanation, particularly in his explanation of this commandment, when the bubonic plague struck during his time. The bubonic plague, or Black Death, swept through Europe for centuries, arriving at Wittenberg, where Luther had been teaching in 1527. When asked how Christian should respond to the plague, Luther responded with a letter entitled, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague."

In this controversial letter, Luther gives permission for any who are not needed to help the sick to flee. However, he then lists, specifically, who is not excused from fleeing. Can you guess who Luther first calls out to remain in times of plague? *"Those who are engaged in a spiritual ministry such as preachers and pastors."* I was not so happy to read that. The next group? *"All those in public office such as mayors, judges, and the like are under obligation to remain."* The list goes on to include servants or anyone helping with households, parents are bound to stay with their children; children are bound to stay with their parents; paid public servants, including doctors, city clerks, nurses.... need to stay. Any if any children are orphaned, they need taken care of. And no one may leave a sick neighbor. Luther proves his point by giving an example, *"if a neighbor's house is on fire, love compels me to run to help him extinguish the flames.....anyone who does not do that for is neighbor, but forsakes him and leaves him to misfortune, becomes a murderer in the sight of God."*

And so, guess what happened? Christians were known during that period of history as those who did not flee the plague. Many DID stay and care for their neighbor at great risk to themselves and their families.



In Guatemala, there is a Spanish phrase used in daily conversation that gets at this idea of communal struggle. The phrase is "La Lucha." Let's all say that phrase together...."La Lucha." The struggle might be to find enough food for one's family; enough money for school supplies; or access to medicine. People experience this struggle together. When one's neighbor struggles, the struggle is felt by the community and many

La Lucha

pitch in, even if they don't have a whole lot to offer. This is a wonderful reminder for us, coming from a much more individualistic culture where we don't often talk about our struggles in everyday conversation. The idea is that if you struggle, then I struggle. Kind of like, "my house is your house; mi casa es tu casa," but reversed, "tu lucha esta mi lucha, your struggle is my struggle;" we struggle together. The communal *la lucha* is felt together, in solidarity, interconnecting and entwining the lives of a community together.



In our baptism, we are claimed as part of God's family that is simply asked to love one another. And we are called in this family to share God's love with all of those around us. To be that interconnected tree root system or that wide reaching fungal web to those around us in the world, cultivating and nurturing relationship and community to hold up each

other, just like the trees.

You know, I never got to finish that book. I read about 12 chapters of the "Hidden Life of Trees" book and then Emily asked to read it, and I gave it to her. I thought when she left for college I would reclaim that book and finish it. But alas, when I unpacked her a couple of weeks ago at Temple University, I found that she had decided to take that book with her.

She is now in a new community: a community of believers and non-believers, and if I am honest, she would probably identify herself, as somewhere between those two. And she has indeed begun forming a new community, while remaining connected with her home community. She has been claimed in her baptism as a child of God and is forever part of that family, and now she is expanding and growing her family to include new people. And as they grow together in community, she remains connected with her Christian family and with God through the Holy Spirit.



I guess you could even think of the Holy Spirit as her worldwide fungal network that continues to nurture and equip her to love her neighbor in her context using her unique gifts.



And doesn't the Holy Spirit work as a fungal network connecting all of us? In our daily struggles, we are continuously being transformed and cultivated, decomposed and reborn through the waters of our baptism each and every day. And as we are transformed as a Christian community, our society is transformed.



We need each other. It takes work to be in right relationship with each other and with God. We are responsible for nurturing, sustaining, and when necessary restoring those relationships with each other and with God. A healthy and alive community is one that seeks peace through mutual reconciliation, recognizing we are simultaneously saint and sinner.

We are called to live as part of a Christian community that interacts with each other in love during times where forgiveness and healing are needed. We are called to live as part of a Christian community that doesn't just take the 10 commandments literally, but expansively as Luther taught us. And we are called to live as a Christian community seen by those who are not yet part of a Christian community as those who love one another. And in these sacred spaces, Christ is present. Christ who showed us how to love sacrificially. Christ who gave his life on the cross, so that we would have life eternal.

And the Holy Spirit nourishes and guides us through our global fungal network that is messy and dirty, but continually brings new life to us and through us into the world around us.

And thanks be to God for that.... Amen!



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