



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Christ, Community, and Connection: A Neuroscientist's Perspective

Dr. John. Seibyl

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Use me, God. Show me how to take who I am, who I want to be, and what I can do, and use it for a purpose greater than myself. Dr. M.L. King, Jr.

In the African language Haya there is a saying, 'Omwana taba womoi,' which translates as; 'A child belongs not to one parent or home.' Many of us are familiar with a variant of this proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child", which acknowledges the value of individuals acting in community for a common good.

Today's reading of St. Paul's first letter to the Christians in Corinth might be summarized as, "It takes a community to be a Christian". Specifically, it is in the context of an integrated, well-functioning Faith community that we are best equipped to discover and live out God's plan for our lives. Paul wrote his letter about 56 CE as a response to some troubling issues among the Corinthians. The community was divided and bickering, with members aligning themselves with different and competing religious leaders. Paul makes the case for Christian unity by describing the church as a composite of its members, akin to the human body, each with different functions and skills, yet all contributing in critical ways, to the body of Christ.

I wonder if St Paul were alive today, how he would think about Christian communities. Rather than use the simple analogy of the body's constituent parts; of eyes, ears, hands, and feet, he might employ metaphors which stress the need for connection and communication. After all we live in the age of communication, most have these miraculous little devices, our smart phones in our pockets, our smart watches on our wrists, our smart televisions in our homes; all designed to facilitate communication and the ready flow of information. And while I love gadgets and appreciate the ability to turn on the lights in my home from my phone after getting a text message from my wife- while I'm in China, the technology can lead to disconnection. I frequently see families and groups of friends out together for dinner in a restaurant, sitting quietly, each with their head down tapping away at their phone, their faces somberly shining in the glow of the touch screen, distracted from the present moment. They are disconnected and isolated, ironically, by the very device designed to facilitate communication. Smart phones remind us that true human connection is not the same thing as superficial or anonymous communication.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

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But back to Paul and his take on modern Christian community. We humans are social beings who necessarily live in community. It is in the community of our nuclear family that, we as completely helpless infants had our first experience of the power of human interaction, to nurture and foster development of consciousness, language, and conscience. Later on, it is in the context of the larger Faith community that we develop, model, and perfect for each other Christ-like attitudes and behaviors. Subsequently, we take these lessons out into the secular world as living examples of the Good News.

Yes, Faith communities are complex with an intricate web of relationships, and composed of imperfect humans, each at a different and unique place in their spiritual journey. Further, as community, we share the most precious and vulnerable experiences of our lives. We are born, baptized, confirmed, married, maybe divorced, become ill and heal, and finally we die, all in membership in this community. Our personal aspirations, joys, tragedies, and loss, the whole spectrum of change in the course of life, is played out in the supportive matrix of the community, where, through our interactions with each other, we can become a more perfect sum of imperfect parts or we can stray off course.

Were he to write his epistle today, I think Paul would focus on the brain as his metaphor for the community, because the brain is all about connections. How can we better understand this? The brain is three pounds of fat, salt, protein, and water composed of 86 billion nerve cells, each which have one job, to communicate by spreading messages in the form of little electric impulses called action potentials. While the brain is only 2% of total body weight, it uses 20 to 25% of the available energy. Each nerve cell uses this energy to communicate. The brain, this gooey, gelatinous mass of cells is changing constantly, altered by the experiences of the world, by information that comes in through the senses, as well as its own internal inputs. The fact that you can hear and understand the words I speak now is the result of millions of nerves messaging each other along circuits and pathways which developed over time to serve the functions of hearing, language, memory, and comprehension. When I utter words in a language foreign to you, 'Omwana taba womoi'' the words are heard but not comprehended (unless you were paying attention at the beginning of this sermon). You were not exposed to or developed the brain networks specific to the vocabulary and grammar of the Haya language. This is something you could learn, circuits can be modified, new connections can be enjoined, your brain can change.

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You have more nerve cells in your brain when you are two years old than when you are 22-years-old or 72-years-old. Yet despite all those nerve cells, two year olds are not running the world (well, maybe some). A 2-year-old brain is about becoming, about laying down new wiring patterns, tying together clusters of nerve cells. It's only in forming more connections that sophisticated functions emerge; language, motor coordination, consciousness, human affection. Networks develop amongst groups of nerve cells, self-assembling functional circuits organized out of the maelstrom of swirling electrical messages. Most mysteriously, from this controlled bioelectrical storm emerges the remarkable; symphonies, creativity, poetry, philosophy, humor, science, a sense of Self and Others, an appreciation of God.

It is also the source of jealousy, pettiness, and distrust, of foolishness, neglect, and violence, of the experience of pain and loneliness, the deviser of torture chambers, Inquisitions, and Holocausts. The brain can be instrument for evil or an instrument of sublime beauty and love. It permits our consciousness of and connection to our spirituality and godliness, our God-likeness.

So it is with the community constructed around Faith. Like the brain composed of it individual neurons, the community is composed of individual members whose job it is to be connected. Out of these connections emerges a community invigorated, inspired, and directed by Faith, passing messages of the Good News, living lives full of the spirit, characterized not by action potentials but the potential for action, for seeking out and implementing God's plan, for raising up each other, for being the body of Christ.

Similar to our spiritual ancestors in Corinth, the quality of our community is entirely dependent upon the integrity of our communication with each other. So how are we with one another? Are we compassionate and trusting, humble and open-minded, curious and wondering? Do each of us, crafted in God's image, see the spark (action potentials) of the Divine in one another and consequently treat one other with both awe and respect? And when we disagree and argue is it done with responsibility and integrity, knowing we are one community, one body consecrated? Finally, do we embrace a spirit of reconciliation with honest communication and an openness to the possibility of transformative forgiveness? Rev Martin Luther King, Jr in reflecting on the spiteful hatred directed toward him wrote, "I have decided to stick to love...Hate is too great a burden to bear."

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Communities may go down different pathways, choosing expedient self-centered purposes or lofty, altruistic ends, much like the good and evil potential of the individual. It is very difficult to be a functioning, ethical community. It takes energy to maintain connection and a set of shared values. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "Madness is rare in individuals - but in groups, parties, nations, and ages it is the rule." The real power that runs through a Faith community, the energy that invigorates and informs, that permits the emergence of a small piece of the Kingdom of Heaven out of a network of connected individuals is, simply.... Love. Communities are about connections and networks of Christian love. Connections transform the lives of its members. The community is the substrate in which God dwells with us collectively, and acts through us individually.

'Omwana taba womoi,' a child belongs not to one parent or home. We belong to each other; we are responsible for one another. It takes a village to raise a child and a community to be a Christian. So, go out and love one another. After all, hate is too great a burden to bear. Amen

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