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Loving Faces: Community in and after the Time of Pandemic

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Loving Faces: Community in and after the Time of Pandemic

In the time of pandemic...

...we have lived in a mix of virtual and in-person worlds. As we shift back into a more in-person world, I want to remind myself and others of the importance of community and relationships.

Why do we need community?

The bigger question might be, why do we need relationships? The answers are complex and touch on the sociological, neurological, psychological, etc. As a layman trying to understand brain science, I become lost when I try to understand the literature. I just intuitively know that I need relationships.

Robin Dunbar asked the question “How many friends does one person need?” He is an evolutionary psychologist; a vocation that immediately makes him suspect in the eyes of my people. However, he has observations that are worthwhile considering. Taking primate research, linking it with historical census data, organizational strategies, military structures, and mixing it with casual research, he suggests human beings have a reasonable capacity to have about 150 relationships. This is the number that has become known as the Dunbar number. It is not a law, but a theory. In rural communities, business settings, this is when leaders begin to consider splitting, dividing or multiplying their organizations.

Dunbar goes on to note that while numbers are markers, it is the quality of the relationships that is important. At the core, are those with whom we want to spend time; they are the ones we consider intimate and trustworthy. They are the ones we go to in times of trouble. Then the circle starts to expand to ever-expanding groups of friends, acquaintances and affinity groups. One hundred and fifty relationships are often near the capacity for what many can maintain some connection.

Social media and virtual relationships provide an odd perspective on relationship and community. A few years back, Sherry Turkle focused her writing and research on the impact of technology on our culture and young adults. She particularly tried to understand the character of “digital natives,” those who include emerging adults and traditionally-aged college students who have grown up in the digital world. She observed that technology tends to have a seductive side that draws people into its sphere, often responding to “our human vulnerabilities.” For instance, a young man may be experiencing loneliness, so social media technology creates the perception he has 800 friends or followers; this virtual experience suggests that he is not isolated and lonely because he has so many friends.

Unfortunately, many of those electronic relationships are illusory. While some have genuine and solid relationships, many social media friends do not have the lasting presence or resilience that one might expect in friendship. Turkle observes that many emerging adults are lonely in spite of the vastness of their on-line communities.

Currently, we have encountered another social dynamic. The meaningfulness of relationships and community has been shaken by the pandemic. When I speak with students about their relationships on campus. Many will quickly respond with the number of friends, followers, connections that they have on social media. It is not unusual for these numbers to go into the thousands. When I reframe my question and ask about who knows their story? How many do they trust on campus? If in need, is there someone to turn to? The number plummets, sometimes into single digits.

Virtual communities are challenging and complex. Real time and space communities are also complex. Zoom meetings, social distancing and masks add to the challenge.

The importance of presence and community.

Scripture reminds us that one of Jesus’ many names is *Emmanuel* (Mt 1:23), meaning “*God is with us.*” That name

reflects the importance of *presence* or *being present* to the Father. It suggests the significance of relationships and community to God. The importance of this value was demonstrated when Jesus came to be with us when he was born (Jn 1:14). The fancy theological word is *theophany* – a manifestation to humankind of God. I believe this event was a demonstration of God’s presence and value for relationships and community with his creation.

God went further by clarifying that we would not be alone or forsaken (Mt 28:20). He did not promise that life would always go well, but consistently promised his presence, his faithfulness and steadfast love (Heb 13:5b). We are never abandoned, he is always “*God with us.*”

But others also bring the presence of God. We speak about followers of Jesus being the hands and feet of the Holy Spirit (Gal 6:2). This was demonstrated to us the year our second son was born. When he was eight months old, I became ill. The doctor told us that I would need to take a month off from work to recover. Christmas was three weeks away, and I would not receive any benefits if I stopped working. We resigned ourselves and resolved to have a very simple season and hoped that my body would heal.

Then community gathered around us and kindness was extended. Yes, friends and family were kind. But strangers sent money, groceries, decorations, gifts for our children – all from unexpected and unfamiliar communities. They blessed us as they were able, and it was received as kindness with tremendous gratitude. We experienced presence.

Presence is usually better than what we sometimes receive in the manner of Job’s friends—advice or answers. My father used to suggest that when tragedy, illness, and suffering happened, it was natural to ask, “why me.” Unfortunately, this question does not typically lead to any satisfying answers. Often there are no answers, or ones that are messy and sometimes uncomfortable.

God never promised to give us answers that were satisfying. But he did promise that we would not be alone (Jn 14:16).

Sometimes His presence is manifested by peace, sometimes in other ways. For me, I am often reminded of God's presence through the kindness and grace of the community that surrounds us. COVID19, remote learning, video conferences, and other virtual means for engagement has taken this to a new level. My intent is not to disparage technology. My desire is to acknowledge the challenges and complexities of the context that many of us are experiencing.

However, I want to affirm the almost desperate need we have as humans for social interaction. In March of 2020 in the beginning months of the pandemic, Facebook posted a short film *We are never lost if we can find each other*. It is based on a version of the British rapper Kate Tempest's spoken word *People's Faces*. Facebook sought to encourage a world in the midst of lock down, quarantine, and physical distancing. I must confess, I am a sap, the film brought me to tears. It gives me words I am unable to articulate. Her refrain "*I love people's faces*" is simple but not simplistic. There is something profound about seeing eyes outside of a screen, seeing faces without a mask; about being *present* with others.

Final thoughts:

Erica Reitz bluntly observes: "*Though we live in a culture of the self-made individual and we highly value our independence, we need our relationships. We may try to convince ourselves that we can do this life on our own, but we cannot.*"

So, what do we do? We are trying to keep our communities safe, but we have deep relational and social needs. Our faith history is full of men and women who have withdrawn from society and their communities for multiple reasons. We call the ascetics, hermits, anchorites, recluses, solitaries, etc. These are valid ways to pursue deeper relationships with God. But much of our faith is deeply relational and community based (Mt 18:20; Rom 12:4-5);

for one who loves his solitary time, I know isolation does not always work.

What does scripture and our faith affirm about connections and relationships? How do we do this in our current season? These are questions to ponder and do not have simple answers.

That we are never alone (Heb 13:5) is important to acknowledge to ourselves and affirm to those we love. Our relationships are not transactional. Our faith is full of mercy, grace, forgiveness and reconciliation. We are not asking for something in return in order to be in community. Transaction should not define the core or essence of our relationships or communities.

Scripture is full of descriptions of gatherings and communities (Ps 133:1; Acts 2:46-47; Heb 10:24). We gather to encourage, we gather to support, we gather to remind ourselves about Jesus. What the strategy looks like in the time of COVID19 is determined by our context. The values are constant, but our strategies can change. The constant is *presence*. In pain or celebration, in boredom or routine, being present and creating opportunity for others to be present is a significant strategy for extending grace and kindness. Our students often crave opportunities to be present. Occasionally they forget and withdraw to the perceived safety of on-line communities.

As the pandemic (hopefully) moves to an endemic, *presence* will once again be part of our campus cultures. In some faith traditions, the ministry of presence is powerful and simple. The pandemic experience may become a reminder of how significant *presence* can be for our communities.

My prayer is that we recall the importance of gathering in communities and once again “*love people’s faces.*”