

“Bowling Alone No More”

June 15, 2014

Trinity Sunday

Genesis 1 and Matthew 28

This sermon was preached by Pastor Kurt Jacobson at Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, grace and peace be with you all.

Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, is a book by Harvard professor, Robert Putnam. It's a fascinating account of the largest study ever conducted on the way Americans have walked away from organizations and other forms of community since the 1950's. Drawing evidence from nearly a half-a-million interviews over 25 years, Putnam's research shows that Americans are increasingly disconnected from each other.

“Bowling Alone” traces membership decline in voluntary groups like civic and service clubs (Rotary and Kiwanis and the like), PTA, professional associations, even decline in churches and synagogues. From his study, Putnam says Americans started walking away from organization a few decades ago and today we're bowling alone like never before. Watch this YouTube video. “Bowling Alone: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ckm88h0d_U

“Bowling Alone” doesn't just apply to organizations. Putnam's research shows that the privatization of leisure means we meet with friends less frequently, we know fewer of our neighbors, and socialize with our families less often.

Putnam concludes that the level of community in America is at its lowest point. *“For the past 25 years American society has experienced a steady decline of what sociologists call ‘social capital’, a sense of connectedness and community. The danger in declining is that the very fabric of our connections with each other, has plummeted, impoverishing our lives and communities”*, including churches.

Has anyone said to you “It's all about relationships.” I had a friend say that recently – though it wasn't the first time I've heard it said. Relationships are helpful in all aspects of life.

While the level of connectedness between people in our society has dropped, our need for relationships and the connections they provide has not. It's healthy for us to have relationships which connect us to community life. In fact, it is the way God designed us and its part of being an image bearer of God. Relationships and community originates right from the heart of God.

Today is Trinity Sunday – a day the Christian church lifts up the truth of about God – who is in relationship with God's self. In the concept of the Trinity – we embrace God as three expressions: Father/Creator, Jesus/Savior, and Holy Spirit = Trinity. In understanding God as all three, what do you see? I see relationship connectedness community. God is God's own community. God enjoys relationship.

Today's Bible reading from Genesis tells a story of God creating and shows us how much God is interested in relationship with us. In the passage Tom/Ken read you heard God say: “Let us make humankind in our image.” Take a good look at that statement. Do you wonder who the “us” and the “our” is here? Right at the start, it seems that God was already relational with God's self. Then later when God is concerned about the first man being alone God says: “It's not good for the man to be

alone" (Genesis 2:18). Looking at that statement do you wonder who God is talking to? At the very beginning of creation, the Bible gives us a glimpse of God concerned about being in relationship with us.

When we turn to the stories of Jesus, we see him as a God who was always connecting with people. He loved to eat with others. He developed close friendships. Jesus showed that no one was excluded from relationship with him – and he intentionally sought out people who were overlooked by others, prostitutes, beggars, handicapped people and thieves. Jesus resisted every social norm of his day that belittled or excluded or sidelined people. In Jesus, we see a relational God who knew “it’s all about relationships.”

Well, so what? What difference does it make to you and me that God is relational? I hope it makes it a bit easier to believe in a God who cares about our lives and what we go through – when we understand God’s own desire for relationships. It helps me to know that God isn’t some detached, powerful being uninterested in me personally, and you as well. When I think about God’s heart for relationships, then I get excited about what we as a Christian congregation have to offer. We are an organization important to American life and we can provide relationships and healthy community so that fewer people are bowling alone anymore.

In the book "Open Secrets – A Spiritual journey through a Country Church," Rick Lischer tells of relationships that come out of a community people who choose to be part of a church. He includes a story of a little girl blessed greatly by relationship with a church.

Amy was a kid with a smile that never seemed to be absent from her face. When she was four Amy’s parents learned she had cerebral palsy; and along with the diagnosis, they received a prescription for intense physical therapy. Every day for eight hours, seven days a week, a team of four volunteers was needed to stretch and manipulate Amy's neck and arms, hands and legs in an attempt to train her muscles to work together.

This regimen of physical therapy was more than Amy’s parents could afford – and more than they could do themselves. Even with grandparents, aunts and uncles, they couldn’t provide Amy the 56 hours a week. Because Amy’s family had investing in being part of a community of faith, the people of their church pitched in. At first it was mainly other moms who showed up to treat Amy. But soon dads came to help and before long there were farmers, mechanics, retirees, and teenagers who showed up having learned about Amy in their church bulletin. Whenever they came, they did the therapy, and they loved her. "That's where she gets her smile," her father said.

The physical therapy itself lasted less than a year, but the congregation saw it as a miracle, not so much a miracle of a cure but the miracle of community – marked by cooperation and compassion made real. People coming to help eight hours a day seven days a week formed a community of love and concern that wouldn’t have been possible without the community of the church.

It's all about relationships and community and stories like Amy warm our hearts. But back to “Bowling Alone.” The decline in participation with voluntary groups and organizations and the increasing reality of our disconnectedness from others, affects churches, too.

I’m guessing you all know someone – maybe even a family member who sees little or no value in being part of a faith community like this. Perhaps they say “I’m spiritual but not religious” and they have reasons they stay away from religious organizations – even though they admit to a belief in God. Yet they’ve chosen to go it alone – disconnected by choice from meaningful communities of faith.

I'm concerned about this issue and what it means for churches and people like you who already know there is meaningful benefit from choosing to be part of a faith community.

I'm dismayed that there are people who have been hurt and have good reason to bowl alone spiritually because of clergy misconduct or judgmental attitudes and actions toward them. How crucial it is then for us to actively extend to others welcoming hospitality; to open ourselves to honest, open conversation where we first listen intently to people who choose to stand apart from faith communities.

Then I think about God – our wonderfully relational God and I imagine how God's heart must hurt over all of this division and decline. And I wonder – what does God want us to do? I think I know an answer – but how you answer that is truly more important for the people in your life who are bowling alone.

My friends, if you know the God who loves and demonstrates relationship and community – then go and tell those people in your life. Find the spiritual person who stays away from “religion” person and love them into relationship with this church – a community of faith that isn't perfect. But one that strives to represent the heart of a relational God and offer to everyone a community of helpful hope and forgiving love. May it be, that we, as representatives of God – the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit see to it that no one ever has reason or feels the needs to bowl alone. Amen.