

Sermon on Community Building by Nancy Poole (St. Andrews Episcopal Church, 2019)

Good Morning.

It is a great honor to have been invited to speak to you this morning. It is a great honor to be able to come before you, people of St. Andrews. For after all...this church is filled with wonderful extraordinary people who have compassion and who work so hard for the good of others. John and I are so thankful to have found you, and we thank you for making us feel so welcome in the years we have been here. You have given us a church home. You have given us a place where we can learn and grow.

The leadership of this church in one way after another has mentioned many times the importance of building authentic community. Because this is a subject I am very drawn to, we have talked about it in our Forum Committee and the committee has come up with a plan to do a series on the foundational concepts for building community such as: exploring God's call to us, the importance of inclusiveness in community, learning to make our community a safe place, the art of listening, the art of giving and receiving feedback, and the importance of compassion and forgiveness and respect for differences. Most of these subjects will be covered one by one in the forum series beginning next week. Each subject will stand alone but at the same time will be an important segment upon which to build, and so I encourage you to attend as many as possible of the sessions. The forum takes place in the Parish Hall at 9:00 a.m. and goes to 10:00.

For just a moment I'd like to read to you from Matthew 5:14 – 15, words I'm sure you have heard many times through the years: Jesus said: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

A driving vision that has been a passion for me for years is the picture of Christians, us, who with God's grace, build a city on a hill whose light cannot be hid. In my mind's eye, though the city is surrounded with despairing darkness, it shines steadily and brilliantly. In that city are people, you and me, who set ourselves to learn to love God. We set ourselves to learn to love ourselves and to love one another - the commandments that Jesus laid out for us.

In this vision what happens is that each person in this city comes to know our creator, our redeemer, our sustainer. And through the powerful transforming love of God, we embark on the most exciting journey of our lives.

Through the gift of God's grace to us, through the gift of the scriptures, through the gift of Jesus' teachings, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are a people who slowly come to growth and change – transformation – we become new creatures.

In this vision, we begin the work of study, meditation, prayer, praise and putting aside other gods. We begin to love our God with all our hearts, our souls and our minds.

With God's help, because we are learning to love ourselves, we can then begin the work of loving each other. We learn what it takes to love one another. What we don't know, we search to find out about. If we don't know how to communicate effectively, we find out how. If we don't know how to tell the truth to one another in love, we find out how to give feedback. If we don't know how to be helpful to ourselves or one another, we learn to ask. We discern the difference between easy sentimentality and steadfast commitment. When we fall, we get up. When we fail, we try again. After a time, we become skilled. We begin to "know how" so we are able to build relationships with a spouse, children, friends, our church and within the workplace. We take this knowledge and we begin to apply it....we are setting about building community. And when we place all of this learning and growth in a faith community where we are joined with the same goals, the possibilities of how we can live out our faith are so impactful that it can transform not only our entire lives but the lives of those around us.

Who among us doesn't want to love and be loved, to understand and to be understood! Who doesn't want a place where we feel like we belong!

All of my adult life I've been interested in personal growth in human beings and how to enhance that growth. I've spent years working with people in all kinds of situations from a ghetto population to a very upscale community. What I've seen is that all of us need love and support from those around us to learn and to grow and become healthy. I've seen the great strides that people can make in a secular supportive community, but what I've also seen are absolutely magnificent strides that people can make in a faith community.

When people base their community making on the two great commandments that Jesus gave us: "Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and Love one another as you love yourself", an all important dimension is added. Just imagine the possibilities of the kind of community that could be formed by a people who seek first the kingdom of God...people who are focused on God...people who are open to God, His love, and His ability to transform them...people who begin their day in prayer and praise and thanksgiving...people who look for God's direction and guidance...people who seek to do God's will...people who love to love our God.

As well, imagine the possibilities for people who are seeking to learn to love themselves in healthy ways and, in turn, because they are able to love themselves, they are able to love one another in healthy ways.

Imagine their openness to the lessons of the events of their lives and their love and acceptance of others who are on the same journey. Imagine the potential for the exquisitely rich experience that can come of living out one's faith in community with others who are doing the same. This is a thrilling prospect!!! And I believe with all my heart that this is what God wants of us!!!

Let's look at the early Christian community. This is what Acts 11 says:

"All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Let's take a deeper look at this early Christian community that we are reading about: These were people who so embraced the teachings of Jesus that they gave over their lives to living out these teachings. I love to look at this scripture and picture what this experience was like. Let me read that again:

"Every day they continued to meet in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

These believers were people that had heard the revolutionary message of Jesus. They were so impacted by that message that it changed the very essence of their lives.

When you think about it, God did a miraculous work through this group of people. This was a time of no printing press, no newspapers, no radio or TV, no smart phones, no Facebook. Yet through word of mouth, thousands upon thousands of people eventually heard the message of Jesus and became his followers. This was such a happening that here we are 2000 years later STILL talking about this Jesus, still wanting to be people "of the way". Take a moment and let that sink in. We are still talking about this Jesus over 2000 years later. Imagine how powerful a life Jesus led. Imagine how powerfully Jesus impacted those followers who eventually established the church we are part of today.

In his book, *A Scent of Love*, Keith Miller offers what he sees as some of the reasons that this band of believers in Acts were such successful spreaders of Jesus' message. Miller says part of it was because they had discovered the secret of "true" community. They didn't even have to think about going out evangelizing. He describes it this way: Listen carefully to this description:

"Someone would be walking down a back alley in Corinth or Ephesus and would see a group of people sitting together talking about the strangest things.....something about a man and a tree and an execution and an empty tomb. What they were talking about made no sense to the onlooker. But there was something about the way they spoke to one another, about the way they looked at one another, about the way they cried together, the way they laughed together, the way they touched one another that was strangely appealing."

That community gave off what Miller called, the scent of love. He goes on..."the onlooker would start to drift farther down the alley, only to be pulled back to this little group, like a bee to a flower. He would listen some more, still not understanding and

start to drift away again. But again, he would be pulled back thinking, I don't have the slightest idea what these people are talking about but whatever it is, I want to be part of it."

Had I read this and never experienced this kind of interaction, I may have dismissed this description as an author's idealistic notion...but there were elements of this that I have seen in action in people who purpose to live their lives based on the foundation of those two commandments.

Was it perfect community that I saw? No, not perfect, but then again, we are human beings, how could it be perfect? But what magnificent living I saw and experienced as these modern Christians tried to form true community.

Let's look again at Miller's description of the believers in Acts. I've been thinking about what may have happened in their interactions as they tried to love one another well. I'd like to revisit four phrases in particular.

Let's take the first phrase: "But there was something about the way they spoke to one another". To my way of thinking they didn't just talk. They spoke with great honesty from their hearts. What they said was authentic; it was deeply felt. And very importantly, the speaker trusted that the listener would be trustworthy - - let me say that again...that the listener would be worthy of their trust. Somehow through a gradual process, they had tested one another out. They found that when they spoke their truth, that their truth would be heard by a listener who would put aside judgment and ridicule and hostility....someone who would validate them, their feelings and their experience. Their truth was gathered up and listened to with respect and the tenderest of care, and absolute confidentiality. After all, what was being shared was part of the other person's sacred story. Isn't that how you want to be heard? That's how I want to be heard.

Secondly, Miller says, "there was something about the way they looked at one another"....these people who were purposing to love God, themselves and one another, these were people who didn't stop at the surface...What kind of clothes was the other person wearing?...How successful did they appear?...What school did they attend? How much money did they have?....and they looked past the facial masks.....and the surface composure....past all the layers....to really see the other for who they really were, not with idle curiosity, but with empathy and seeking to understand.

Thirdly, Miller continues, "there was something about the way they cried together." They brought their woundedness, their hurts and disappointments, betrayals and failures, their brokenness, their frailties, their inadequacies to one another. Scott Peck says in his writings, "The greatest gift we can give to each other is our "woundedness".....and we are all wounded.

And when we bring our wounded selves into the midst of a people who love us and see us and listen to us, who accept us as we are, we begin to become healed. We are all in need, however much we try to hide the reality of this brokenness from ourselves and

from each other. The sharing of this brokenness is the way to community. Henri Nouwen says, "It is through our brokenness that we become true healers." Let me say that again - - it is through our brokenness that we become true healers. Love arises among us when we deeply share our woundedness.

Fourth, Miller says, "There was something about the way they laughed together"...True community is joyful!!!! There is DEEP laughter when we witness the happy events in the life of someone whose sorrow we have borne. There is great rejoicing that is heartfelt!

Miller's description says the onlooker was pulled back to the scene like a bee to a flower. Why? It seems to me that all of us want to love and be loved. We all want someone to know and accept the real person that we are....our gifts, our flaws, foibles, successes, our failures. Within us all is a need for growth, and we'd much prefer to struggle WITH the support of others than to struggle AGAINST each other.

Imagine that as we come together as a people in this Sanctuary and come together at the Forum, we build on our skills to truly listen and respond to one another. Imagine that we build with God's help a community where we are accepted and loved just as we are...a place where we feel we truly belong. Imagine that we help to build a safe place for ourselves as well as for others...to share our joys, our hopes, our doubts, our fears...where our fears are loved away....a place where we grow and learn in our love of God and everyone else. A place where we freely use the gifts God has given us. Imagine! This is possible with God! Imagine that it's not only possible with God....but that this is what God WANTS of you and me. Imagine the possibility of true community in Christ. Amen

Nancy and John Poole were members of Damascus United Methodist Church in Maryland prior to their move to New Town, PA. At DUMC, they were leaders in outreach and social justice initiatives within the church and promoters of critical thinking and openness within the church and between faith communities. The following is a lay sermon given earlier in 2019 at St Andrews Episcopal Church, Newtown, PA as part of the community building program she is leading.