

“It Takes A Community”
Texts: Psalm 133 and Matthew 9:35-10:8
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“These are the names of the twelve apostles...” Matthew 10:2a

It has been nearly a decade since the publication of Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam’s landmark and controversial book, “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.”ⁱ The book is jam-packed with statistics that underscore the increasing individualization and isolation of our culture. Ten years later, the book’s statistics are not nearly as memorable as its conclusions, or as that wonderful title, ***Bowling Alone***. It comes from research on the continuing decline of bowling leagues in America and the seemingly paradoxical rise of bowling as a recreational activity. That is, fewer and fewer leagues and more and more bowling. Thus, Putnam suggests, Americans do still bowl. But we bowl alone.

The collapse of American community can be found in places other than bowling alleys. In fact, Putnam finds alarming numbers for communitarians all across the cultural landscape. In the 21st century, we Americans sign fewer petitions, belong to fewer organizations that actually meet, know our neighbors less well, meet with friends less frequently, and socialize with our families less often. Not only are sports leagues and labor unions losing members, so are churches. And the numbers of people who attend worship virtually, that is by television or over the Internet, is growing. More and more Americans are worshipping the same way they are shopping, in front of a television or computer screen. Alone.

The assumption behind Putnam’s research is that the loss of community has a negative effect on individuals; that isolation and detachment do not constitute a fulfilling way to live our lives. He comes just short of saying what Christian theology has always taught, that we are created for community.

Each week, I receive an email newsletter from the Regional Council of Churches, a group of which Morningside is a proud member. The email is full of announcements of events taking place all over the metro area. There are lectures and classes, advocacy meetings and petitions, community service and mission opportunities. Each project hosted by some congregation in the city, which has invited all of us to take part. It is an impressive, and sometimes overwhelming list. And at the top of each week’s email is this wise and enduring truth: God calls us to some things we cannot do alone.

This seems to have also been true for our Lord himself. The gospel writer Matthew begins this morning’s passage with an exhaustive list of the ministries of Jesus. He has been traveling, teaching, preaching, and healing. He is surrounded by hungry, hurting crowds of people at every turn. The picture of the scene, as Matthew paints it, is

overwhelming. Everywhere Jesus goes, there is important work to be done. His tasks are endless.

In a moment of clarity and reflection, Jesus steps back from the onslaught of need all around him and Matthew says, he looked upon the crowd with compassion. They looked like sheep without a shepherd.

Matthew says that the eyes of Jesus held compassion for the crowds. That's all he says, but I have to believe that those eyes also held weariness. When he cries out to those gathered around him, proclaiming that the harvest is great but the laborers are few, I believe there may have been some desperation in the voice of Jesus. Like anyone deeply affected by the amount of suffering and sadness in the world and the seeming inability of one person to make a dent in the mess humanity is in, Jesus might have given in to the futility of his efforts.

But these words of resignation turn immediately to admonition: "therefore ask the Lord of the Harvest to send out laborers." At this moment, the disciples are commissioned and called to be the answers to the prayer of Jesus. To be co-workers with him in the gospel ministry. These are the names of the twelve apostles...

The second book of the Bible, which we know as Exodus, actually has two names. Exodus is a Greek title, given by those who translated the Old Testament from Hebrew. In Greek, the word Exodus means "a way out", and so is extremely appropriate the story of the people's liberation from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan. A way out. But there is another name for the book, a Hebrew name, *Shemot*, which comes from the opening verse of the book, The verse reads, "These are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt. *Shemot*. These are the names. Exodus. A way out. Liberation happens in the midst of community."ⁱⁱ

When Jesus called together this group of twelve ordinary people from different walks of life, he renamed them. Matthew writes, "these are the names of the twelve **apostles**. In the space of a few short verses, these disciples have become apostles. The word means "those who are sent out." Sent to preach. Sent to teach. Sent to heal. Sent to embody the gospel ministry as a community. Jesus knew that a day would come when they would have to depend on one another. When these sheep would be without their shepherd and when the gospel truth itself would rest in their hands. He trusted them. He empowered them. And with these twelve ordinary followers, the church was born. We are their descendants, their heirs, and our mission is the same; as is this truth: it takes a community to be the church. These are the names...

If we are to take seriously the example of Jesus in calling disciples to be his fellow laborers in the midst of the harvest, we must reconsider the value of community. Because Putnam is right. American community is in the midst of collapse. The priority of the individual, driven on by a relentlessly consumerist mentality, has all but erased our sense of shared responsibility. Other people represent the existence of competition and not the opportunity for cooperation. Too often, we hear: "That is their problem, if they are homeless or hungry or without healthcare. This all-consuming worldview has even made its way into our churches. I was struck by a report of the Presbyterian New

Church Development Commission last Saturday. In 2008, our denomination began 308 new churches across the country. That's the good news. In that same year, we closed down over 700 churches. That's the bad news. The worst news is this: many pastors across our denomination continue to resist the idea of developing and supporting new congregations. Why? Competition.ⁱⁱⁱ If the church is to be demonstration to the world of the importance of community, we must begin right here.

In all of his letters, in a variety of contexts, the one constant in the message of the Apostle Paul is unity. Be of one mind. Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you. You are one body. Let there be no divisions among you. Bear one another's burdens. Weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. Anyone who has been the recipient of the love of a grace-filled community knows the power of those words.

When I was a first year student at seminary, I started meeting weekly with a group of men for prayer and conversation. The Order of the Red Sash, as we could come to call ourselves, was my primary community throughout seminary and to this day. It was a place for honesty and openness, and for real support. That fall, I received the difficult news that a friend in North Carolina had died, and the overwhelming news that I had been asked to give the eulogy, the day after tomorrow. I called a member of our group and described the situation. I will never forget Rob's reply: "Chris, that old car you drive will never make it to North Carolina. My keys will be outside my door. Be careful." The power of true community. You have felt it. I hope you have felt it here at Morningside.

It takes a community to be the church. The church is not a special interest group, it is not a political party or a club for those who agree on every important issue, it is not a networking opportunity or a place to come on Sunday mornings and be entertained or feel good about ourselves.

The church exists by the grace of God as a community of people who belong to one another and who are sent. Apostles. Sent into the world to share the gospel in word and deed. We have been sent to worship, to point beyond ourselves to the sovereign God who creates and redeems us. The church does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of the world. And I have said before that the world today is crying out for us to be the church. To give witness to a deeper truth than bank statements or bottom-lines. To show the power of living for a greater purpose than fleeting happiness or personal gain. To demonstrate the true satisfaction of a life lived for others and not for self.

This morning I am still grieving the loss of one of the most devout and virtuous people I have ever known. On our way back from Colorado last week, Sara and I got the word that our friend Jan had been tragically killed in a tractor accident on the cattle farm in North Carolina that she and Peggy had worked together since retiring from teaching careers. Jan was an elder and commissioned lay pastor in the Presbyterian Church and a witness to the undeniable magnetism of a life lived with purpose. Though not a wealthy woman, she never failed to give regardless of the need. She and Peggy paid the power bills of several of their neighbors when times were tough and jobs were rare. They welcomed and showed equal affection to every stray dog, horse, and person who found them. Jan had a faith in Jesus Christ that would not let her stay at home and

comfortable when others were in need. She had a love for God that would not let her be silent when there was an opportunity to speak out for justice or compassion. She remade the community in which she lived by throwing herself fully into it. Jan believed with all her heart that she had been sent, commissioned, and called to serve in community. Many will miss her. I am among them, because she taught me that the true power of the church lies in shared leadership and cooperation. She taught me that the church is exemplified in the great tradition of the potluck dinner. We all bring what we have to be shared with others. And there is always more than enough at the table, enough to open the doors wider and invite more to join the feast.

Perhaps the greatest enduring contribution of our Reformation ancestors in the 16th Century was their radical and dangerous conviction in the priesthood of all believers. That each of us acts as priest to another. That all of us are holy ambassadors of Christ's love and mercy. The priesthood of all believers. In other words, it takes a community to be the church. It takes all of us working together, contributing our unique gifts, to be the body of Christ for this time and place.

I have seen it here. These are the names that make up my community. Yours are the names...

This spring, we held the memorial service for a member of congregation in this sanctuary. After the service, one of you explained why you decided to come and celebrate the life of this good woman. "I didn't know her well at all, I'm not sure if I ever had a conversation with her. But I could come to this service. There are lots of things I used to do for the church that I can't do anymore. But I can come to funerals. And I try to come to each one whether I knew the person or not." A testament to the reality of community.

When we join together in ministries of compassion and love. When we bake casseroles and send cards and fold bulletins and teach children and paint walls and clean closets. When we pick pans and serve meals and give rides and spend nights in shelters and express concern for those without. When we raise our voices together in song and recite the ancient words of the Apostle's Creed in unison. When we share resources and welcome strangers and extend hospitality. When we take the commands of our Lord to heart and live them out because what we do and what we say matter. When we gather together to proclaim the generous grace of God.

Shemot. These are the names... None of us can do it alone. And none of us have to. Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon and Schuster, 2001. See also Putnam's *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*.

ⁱⁱ This wonderful insight comes to me from Columbia Seminary Professor Anna Carter Florence. It appears in her book, *Preaching as Testimony*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, stated meeting, September 19, 2009.