

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

January 28, 2018 – Annual Meeting Sunday

A Vision for the Church

Mark 1:14-17, 29-34

This past week, I got to see my favorite musician in concert. Bruce Cockburn combines virtuosity on the guitar, widely varied melodic lines, deep spirituality and penetrating social commentary. One new song he played, titled *Café Society*, falls into the social commentary category. A *Café Society* is a group of people that gather to talk; they talk about everything and anything:

talk about evictions, talk about the dogs
the drunkards in the dog park and once and future fog
the caliphate of perverts and the flight of refugees
the growing ranks of homeless and the disappearing bees

Café Society, sings Cockburn, is “a sip of community,” a form of community, but not a very deep one, not a very satisfying one. Perhaps you are a part of a *café society* like that, where people gather and talk about whatever comes to mind. The conversation can be endless, and pointless; there is nothing wrong about it, and there are many good things about it. It provides companionship, stimulation and even, sometimes, real insight into the issues discussed. *Café Society*, sings Cockburn is “a way to start the day,” “a sip of community” because “misery loves company.”

I’ve been thinking about that song, because it provokes a really important question that I think we need to consider carefully. If the endless talk of *café society* is only a sip of community, what makes for a really satisfying community?

The British government, this week, appointed a Minister of Loneliness, to address one of the gravest health problems in Western culture. Lonely people are sicker, live shorter and die quicker than people who are in deep and fulfilling relationships. But in a society in which people are increasingly isolated from each other, so many of our relationships are only superficial – they are only a sip of the real thing. What would a community composed of deeply satisfying relationships look like?

I would hope that the church would be a community like that, and there are a lot of ways in which churches provide forms of community that are rare in our society. For one thing, churches are one of the few places where people of all ages gather in one place; they are one of the few intergenerational communities in our society. For another, they are the only place that is intentionally focused on spirituality, character development, and moral formation. But for many, many people, we are missing the mark. Younger people in particular are voting with their feet, their absence speaking loudly that they aren't finding a genuine form of community in their church. So we need a new vision, a vision that offers something more than just a sip of community for people who are desperately thirsty for deep and satisfying relationships.

A couple of years ago, I attended a retreat offered by an organization called the Centre for Courage and Renewal, which was founded by a well-known teacher and writer named Parker Palmer. Palmer is the author of one of my favorite books, and so I went expecting good things. Palmer is from the Quaker tradition, a Christian group which worships largely in silence, as each participant tries to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, an inner light, the hidden wholeness that is our soul or spiritual centre. And much of Palmer's work is to help teachers, business and other leaders develop a vision for a community life in which participants can reconnect who they are with what they do.

The retreat sought to shape a community that was both a safe and challenging space for individuals to pay attention to their inner teacher. Individuals need community to do this work because Community and Solitude are essential and mutually reinforcing. As Parker Palmer writes, "Solitude does not necessarily mean living apart from others, but never living apart from one's self, being fully present to ourselves, whether or not we are with others. Community does not necessarily mean living face-to-face with others, but never losing the awareness that we are connected to each other, being fully open to the reality of relationship, whether or not we are alone."

Some of the work was in large plenary sessions. Some of it was through personal reflection on poems that were carefully selected to help us engage with our deepest longings and hopes. Some was in small groups, and some of it was pairs and triads. The process used in this retreat is called "Circle of Trust" and it was intended to teach us how to create circles of people in which deep trust is built.

So we refrained from giving advice, but instead practiced asking open and honest questions in order to help each other get in touch with our deepest wisdom and insight. Most of us found it challenging to refrain from offering advice and limit

ourselves to just asking open and honest questions, and I was no exception. I realized that part of my temptation about wanting to give people advice was that I didn't trust the inner light of each person to offer guidance. I had to learn to let go of the need to control and direct and have faith that others would find their own inner light and follow their own path.

The conviction of the retreat leaders was that when we are part of a safe, judgement-free community, where other people are focused on helping us discover our deepest convictions and call, we are free to risk a level of honesty that is rare and precious. The image used was that the soul is like a deer, that occasionally pokes its head out of the woods, and if it is not safe, disappears again. But if it is safe it will emerge and explore and become available, and make itself vulnerable to growth and change. A Circle of Trust must therefore be a safe space, but if people are to risk growth, it must also be a brave space.

In this safe and supportive community, I discovered that we can experience healing for our souls and our relationships. I came away with a deep appreciation for the Circle of Trust, and a sense that this kind of community would be profoundly meaningful for people, something for which there is a deep hunger, and that it is worth seeking to develop more fully in our congregation. So that is why we are offering the Geography of Grace program in this congregation. My hope is that eventually this kind of community will transform everything we do in our congregation, from Sunday worship to the way we relate to each other in our task groups and committees. I have a hunch that the Circle of Trust approach is one in which people can experience more than just a sip of community, but a long draught, a deeply satisfying drink in which our thirst for real relationship and real community can be satisfied.

I have a hunch that the Circle of Trust might be a response to Jesus' message that the kingdom of God has come near, and his call to participate in that kingdom by joining his community of healing and transformation. A church that takes that call seriously should be a community in which people are invited and guided to risk exposing their souls, like that deer risks coming out of its hiding place, into a clearing where it can experience healing and growth. A community like that holds the possibility not only of transforming the people who belong to it, but also the world. A community like that helps us to participate in the unfolding of God's kingdom of healing and peace and justice. It is that kind of community into which Jesus called the first disciples, and it is that kind of community that I believe he still calls us today. Amen.