

The Rev. Joanne Sanders  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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## COMMUNITY RESTORES LIFE

“The soul, however, does not proceed  
by contraction, but by expansion.” R. Rohr

We’ve considered through the last two and now final Sunday some of what matters most when it comes to what I have called spiritual convictions. That is, a conviction meaning a strongly held belief or opinion. I certainly do not expect yours to be the same as mine, but the ones I have chosen to name have been *grace, hope and finally for today, community*. Underlying my own reflections and preparations for this sermon series have been some questions: what sustains us, what do we notice and what do we mean by community, especially in these currently challenging times here and around the world?

For perhaps a number of us, myself included, the idea of community has a certain appeal even more profoundly today. Some would argue there is little genuine community in today’s intensely individualistic society. A solitary individual, as many of us have come to understand, is reflected in the phenomena of the iPad, iPhone, iPod, and numerous other aspects of what has come to be defined as the digital community. These and other blinking, bright screens have become the gateway to social networking which some may argue has become obsessive with a promise to fill the lonely cracks with cyber acquaintances and status games. And yet, we are already sensing, on the one hand, there is simply no substitute for community that inhabits our lives in human, tangible forms by way of friends, family and other common interest social groups we may identify with and come to rely on.

On the other hand, I’m also not interested today in making this sermon a critique about technology or the digital community in its various forms, because for one, I am a willing participant and two, I’ve come to realize that it is a both/and, rather than an either/or kind of paradox. Let’s face it; we are only moving forward in the speed by which technology avails itself to us, rather than retreating backward. It does have its benefits and merits. The choice is how we control or moderate our use of it, and whether that use is enhancing our lives as opposed to exonerating some of our deeply held convictions of what matters most to us, and I would argue, what we still need essentially to not only survive, but thrive in this world. Yes, that is one another. During the month of July as I traveled to Seattle, WA and back I can attest to this need through the example of my gracious hosts opening their comfortable home and themselves to me for 3 weeks, an engaging and affirming learning community as I continue doctoral studies at Seattle University, and finally, the alert action of strangers in Eureka, CA that aborted more collateral loss during a break-in of my vehicle in broad daylight. The thieves, as they would soon discover, acquired not a laptop computer, but a bag of religious books. I suspect they were pretty disappointed about that. They will have to deal with potential karma about stealing from a member of the clergy.

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Needless to say, there is also an ideal at work here that we might understand as a creative tension between community and self. For example, this creative tension appears in the contrast between the terms spirituality and religion. A common refrain today is “I’m spiritual, not religious.” The former focuses on individual practices, the latter on corporate ones. Spirituality is a code word for what one does with one’s solitariness, at a private internal depth, separate perhaps from the arenas of social interaction and engagement. Religion involves gathered communal interaction, founded upon a commonality of content transcending the parameters of individual opinions, feelings and preferences. And thus this is the paradox. This clashing of community and self encourages us to seek deeper insight. Community is essential if the self is to be free as one writer put it. The isolated individual is the most unfree of all. And yet, any grouping that does not birth unique persons fails as community. Here again, I would appeal to a both/and resolution. Which is why I choose to admit that I’m spiritual **and** religious. In other words, that the fruits of our spiritual and religious convictions means, as one writer suggests, “that we ask new questions, not in reaction, rebellion or opposition to religion.” After all, I’ve chosen a religious vocation as an Episcopal priest advocating for religious and spiritual life in this fine university. And I stand before you today also as an official representative of a particular tradition and organized religion. It would be a waste of my life and vocation then to be consumed by a kind of oppositional or negative energy. That soon simply becomes another form of righteousness. Time is of the essence and therefore I agree as Richard Rohr, Founder of the Center for Contemplation and Action has said: *the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.*

We have, within the Christian narratives, the timeless story some of you may know of Jesus cleansing of the temple - his last dramatic act before he was killed. This story is illustrating, according to Richard Rohr that the very mentality of buying and selling God, or love, or mercy, or grace has to go. The risk is that religion will always remain corrupt and immature and that the urgent task, as today’s reading from the letter to the Romans that Will read for us, has more to do with how the human reflection of God, or religion for that matter, takes it’s best practices, and its best selves to authentically become a community that restores life rather than repudiates it. “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think....do not be conformed but be transformed....so that you may discern what is good and acceptable and perfect...This text is a reminder of our common need for one another and of the way our individual selves and competencies can be used for the health of the whole community, where we might work together harmoniously and productively. It also asks us presents ourselves as living sacrifices. While sacrifice can connote negative images and reactions, the translation here may mean that we need actually to do things outside the norms of behavior for our society, wrapping our minds around what we do day to day and in our lives that expresses God’s desires for what is needed in our communities and in the world around us.

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I suspect for you, as it is for me, that it is very hard to escape the images and coverage coming from our own nation in the example of Ferguson, MO. It is its own paradox, as a preacher colleague of mine noted, that the African American community in Ferguson, joined by many others in their community, nation, and around the world are desperately thirsty for justice. “What happened to a young and black Michael Brown, shot and killed by a white police officer, has touched a deep nerve within that community that goes far beyond,” my colleague writes. He pointed out that the number of poor people in Ferguson has doubled in the last decade. With that increased poverty comes increased frustration and anger over lack of opportunity, lack of power, lack of human dignity. “Right now,” he continues, “it is hard for many in Ferguson, MO to seek that justice while preserving the peace. Because peace, as so many of them have known it, has not come with justice or dignity. For them peace is the maintenance of a status quo that leaves them disadvantaged.”

Images and the reality of what has occurred in Ferguson should remind all of us that while the civil rights movement may have freed us from legal forms of discrimination, my preacher colleague also notes that it did not root out prejudice from the human heart.

And this is precisely the paradox too; that the anger and frustration of a community in Ferguson is seeking to rely on each other to find its way to back to a peace that embodies justice for all and one that simply does not maintain the status quo. Which is why it is worth mentioning again: *the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better*. Will community restore life or repudiate it? This remains a critical question and lies beneath the surface of so much of our society at large. My preaching colleague said it well: “like the dry landscape of California and the West, it won’t take much to set this country on fire.”

And so, as we at least bring this conversation over these weeks to a close, I would rather we consider it a pause. Let’s recall that the question at the heart of the gospel text in Matthew today had to do with identity when Jesus asked his followers, “who do you say that I am?” The temptation of religion has always been to shore up its authority through external means. It has been said that Jesus was a mercurial figure in his day, and clearly could not be boxed and used in the same way. Neither should we. Who do we say that we are? This gospel narrative also calls us to move beyond our particular political, economic and religious factions, our respective ethnic loyalties, our prejudices and biases by speaking to one another truthfully and appealing to one another by our own authority. We become not only individual testifier within a community, but a community that testifies outwardly to that which restores life. We ought to consider that may require an urgent willingness to be both spiritual and religious. It is centered in the conviction that to become a fulfilled self requires the unconditional, unmerited love and grace of God that is incarnated or seen in us, as beloved community. For some, freedom means the ability to love as one is being loved

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through participation in the human form of Christ, which is the community of Christ. This is counter cultural, leaven in a secular society whose conditional understanding of love forges a meritocracy of worthiness, not unmerited grace. In other words, this creative paradox of community and self means there can be no communal change without changed individuals; and there can be no individual change without changed community. We are left with a both/and, not an either or.

So I ask you, and me, how will we act and change to exemplify practices that are better? *The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.* What are our spiritual and religious convictions? What matters most to us and does it make a difference? From whom and what do we derive authority, and more importantly, human agency and compassion for this suffering world? Perhaps another question is not where do we begin, but when do we begin? How about now?