

August 21, 2011 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

More About Community

Romans 12:1-8

...so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another.

At all times and in all places, individual organisms build creative, living relationships in order to serve one another. Life is community. There is no other life!

--Eberhard Arnold

Last Sunday I invited us to consider some of the dimensions of community, and that when we make a membership commitment, it is a desire and commitment to be in community.

Paul's words in Romans 12 continue to direct our attention to community. Paul sees the church as a community, not as an institution, as we have come to think of it. For Jesus, "church" was *ecclesia*, the word used in the gospels for those called together to follow him, to live in love toward one another and the world. Paul saw this *ecclesia* as manifesting Jesus himself. He called the community Jesus' body. The church is a real community of real people, learning and striving to live together in the love of God, and expressing that love outwardly in the world through ministries to which they feel called. That is pretty much the vision of our community. It is simple, yet it is very challenging to live out, otherwise Paul would not have had to write all those letters to urge the various communities to live up to their calling!

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Paul uses two words that have to do with our physical life. One is *sarx*, which he uses when he talks about FLESHLY EXISTENCE or THE DESIRES OF THE FLESH. That means letting ourselves be dominated by physical and material desires. The other word, which he uses here, is *soma*, as in psychosomatic. Somatic life recognizes the spiritual source and dimension of our material lives. We live this way by honoring, taking care of, and celebrating the totality of our lives as gifts from God. There is no separation of SOUL and BODY. Our *soma* is everything about our life in this world—our bodies,

relationships, work, leisure, creativity, and so forth. We are created and called to live in ways that enrich, up-build, and otherwise honor the sacredness of life.

For us today, I think making our bodies, or lives, our “spiritual worship” means living a unified life. Not separating sacred and secular, worship and work, prayer and action. Brother Lawrence and all the mystics knew it as practicing the presence of God in everything we do. Buddhism calls it being fully present and aware in each moment, each activity. It is all one life lived out of our love for God. All of life is our worship. Our inward journey is the way we enhance, nourish, and deepen our living as an offering to God.

Paul is not addressing individuals as individuals. Whenever he says "you", it is the plural, like we would say "you all". He is speaking to a community of Jesus, a group of people who are trying to follow Jesus and live together by his teachings and in his spirit. So Paul also means make your life together a living sacrifice. We need to be mindful of these words as a community, that we are always mindful of our lives and our life together a living sacrifice, an offering of love and service to God.

Do not be conformed to this world [or present age], but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. Our central calling as a community is to make our lives and our life together offerings to God, a “living sacrifice”. This core intention keeps us from being taken in by the confused and damaging values and agendas of the world. By “world,” Paul does not mean the good creation of God, but the “world” or “age” created by human beings out of touch with their spiritual origin and purpose. Conforming to this world, or age, does not just mean all those other folks and institutions that are dominated by greed or bent on violence and injustice, or just plain self-serving. It also means us, Jesus’ community, when we drift into acting no different from others—hurtful, vengeful, divisive, and generally forgetting to always examine ourselves in light of our commitment to following Jesus. It also means, as we see today in the political arena, those who call themselves Christians but act in ways contrary to the precise teachings of Jesus about wealth, violence, hate, and caring for those most in need. Conforming to this world means forgetting who we are as the *ecclesia*, the community that is called by God to manifest the “new age”—the reign of God, the way God created the world to be.

Our lives and life together are to be transformed through the renewing of our minds. What Paul is saying here is the same as what Jesus, and John the Baptist, meant by repentance (*metanoio*). When we make that commitment to Jesus, we cannot

keep our old minds, our old ways of thinking. We change our way of seeing ourselves, others, and the world. Our old ways of thinking get in the way of perceiving the movement of God's spirit in the present moments and circumstances. We cling to old ideas and mental habits. We hold onto the past or want to escape into the future. We look at ourselves and others through a grid of categories and judgments we have made and cling to. We impose our ideas of how people should be and what our community should be. When other people or the community do not measure up to our expectations, we become angry or disillusioned or whatever.

Being transformed by the renewing of our minds calls for openness and awareness of God's will in the present moment. We let go of the old, rigid mind so that God's spirit can bring about a new mind in us, the mind of Jesus Christ--a mind of love, wisdom, servanthood, a mind sensitive to the present movements of God's spirit.

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, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. Having this "new mind"(see Phil. 2:5-11) means that we do not elevate ourselves above others. It is my experience that most of us who assert ourselves in this way do so out of feelings of inferiority, not superiority. When we feel secure in ourselves, we don't need to call attention to ourselves, or exert control over others, or otherwise assert our egos. If we feel we have to "think highly of ourselves" it is because in truth we "think lowly of ourselves," and we are trying to get attention! This is not to say that there aren't people who are simply insensitive or arrogant or just want to control things.

Whatever the source of it, Paul is saying that to be part of this new community called together in Jesus, we need to have a sober and realistic assessment of ourselves. There is no need to exert ourselves or seek from others the attention that we feel we need. Our deepest "self image," as it were, is already given us by God who created us good and loves us unconditionally. It is in the community that we come to understand that and to feel that way about ourselves. We begin to realize that we do not need to be at odds or in competition with others, feeling we have to prove or assert ourselves. We can know ourselves so deeply loved by God that we are content and at peace being part of the whole, a member of the community. And that is where Paul now goes.

He loves the image of the community of Christ as a body. The body is diversity AND unity. Each member, each part is essential to the whole. No one part can claim to be superior or more important in any way. It is the same with the *ecclesia*, Jesus'

community. Each person is here because she has been called here by God in Christ. Each person is seeking to respond by making his life an offering to God. Each person brings at least one gift to be shared for the life and work of the whole community. If we are each discerning what our gifts are and perceiving what others' gifts are, and then living out of those gifts in the spirit of God's call to serve life, then we are living as the community God has called together. Not an institution, but an organism whose lifeblood is the love, spirit, and power of God.

Paul has condensed in these few verses what he writes more fully about in 1 Corinthians 12. Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 are golden texts for our community. And I think they are even more radical than perhaps we realize. We live in a culture that often uses the word "community", but is completely governed by individualism and ego-centered living. We can see the destructive effects of lives lived on the basis of ego-satisfaction, or what is called sometimes "self-fulfillment". We see it in the greed of Wall Street and corporate domination. We see it in the arena of politics, with persons and groups grasping power over others, including those who call themselves Christians. But we also see it in personal lives. It is the view that we are here on this earth to get our needs met, to achieve our own goals, to compete with others and be better than they are. We see it in the emphasis on personal achievement, and we see it in religious circles as what I call spiritual heroism, that we as persons are supposed to go out there and change the world, or otherwise be spiritual achievers. What is wrong with that? There are persons who have done great and wonderful things. However, this individualistic view also results in damage done interpersonally and to our psyches. We see many young people suffering because they are not viewed as achievers, because they are not succeeding along the tracks laid down by our culture and society. I think that, when you look deeply at it, the suffering we call low self-esteem or lack of motivation or however it manifests itself, is related to this individualist way of valuing our lives. It is unhealthiness and it breeds unhealthiness, whereas understanding and awakening to community breeds health.

Our world cannot much longer endure all of those people trying to get their egos fulfilled! Too much damage is inflicted on the world and ourselves by our ego-centered living. What Paul sees is that true life is found as we find our place within community. That is the key to true selfhood and the escape from ego-centered living that destroys us and the world. Eberhard Arnold, founder of the Bruderhof community, now called Church Communities International, wrote nearly a century ago: *Healthy persons see and act in*

love. They have been redeemed from isolation and are turned to God. Their love goes out to all. They are no longer preoccupied with themselves, but look at themselves in the context of the whole...they feel themselves to be part of a greater whole. He also said correctly that young children are this way, see the world this way. We are born with a sense of wholeness, of being part of the whole. It is our acculturation, and often our religious training, that instills in us a sense of separateness, of ego, of competition, of seeing ourselves over against others and the world. The deeper genius of Paul's vision of community, which springs from Jesus' life and teachings and spirit, is that in this kind of community we find our true selves. We are given the opportunity of discovering ourselves and the value and beauty and meaning of our lives WITHIN the greater whole. And I think these days we need to say, within the greater whole not only of other persons, but also of the whole earth, even the cosmos.

What a blessing it is to be part of a community in which we are all discovering and working with what it means to make our lives offerings to God and to live life as an act of worship. Being in community means we are shedding the painfulness and unhappiness of ego-centered life and discovering the joy of our true self.