

Community

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“...let us always think about how we can help one another to love and to do good deeds. Do not stay away from the meetings of the community, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another;...” — Hebrews 10:24-25.

I want to share a family story. But I also want to tie that story into American sociological-political history. I know— big concept. The personal family story has to do with the family of one Bonnie Scott Connolly.

Bonnie will tell you she was born in Philadelphia and there is family history connected with that city. But when she was young her parents moved to Westport, Connecticut. Even more family resided there. The year was 1952. (Stop trying to guess her age!)

So she grew up, came to maturity, in Westport— went to Grade School and High School there. Now, in the 1950s and 1960s, in that era, Bonnie describes Westport as a normal town.

Bonnie and I have a running disagreement about that. Me— the kid from Brooklyn— I say in that era the town was at least somewhat privileged. It was a suburb. From where I sat, from my perspective, that was privilege.

However, Bonnie is right. The town was normal. And that is what has to do with sociological-political history. In the mid-1950s the average salary of a CEO was much more in line with that of the average worker.

In the mid-50s a typical CEO made about 20 times the salary of an average worker at the same firm. Last year, CEO pay at a typical Standard and Poor's 500 firm was an average of 361 times *more* than the average rank-and-file worker in the same company.

This is obvious. When that spread was closer, diversity in a community was a reality. I think a diverse community can mean a closer community. At the very least it seems a more likely possibility.

The reason I point this out is Westport, Connecticut is no longer normal in that sense. It has become an enclave for want to be CEOs, real CEOs and celebrities. Today it is a town largely cut off from what most people call normal.

But it is still Bonnie's hometown, her community. And, just like I still keep track of news from the New York City theater scene, theater being my community, also not particularly normal— Bonnie keeps track of news from Westport, Connecticut. She regularly checks a couple web sites and blogs which specialize in Westport news.

One blog is called 06880. That's the ZIP code in Westport. She is actually a contemporary of and personally knows the fellow who runs the site, Dan Woog.

A couple of weeks ago Dan posted some local news. “Trevor Noah, the host of *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central— head-liner at the tomorrow's Anti-Defamation League of Connecticut fund-raiser— had to cancel. But the replacement is another well known name: Whoopi Goldberg.”

Given those names it's pretty safe to say Westport is no longer normal. But that's not the point. The point is the response which happened when Dan put up the post.

Somehow that information got re-posted on a web site that is not particularly friendly to people of color. And

that other web site contained a link back to Dan's post on 06880.

What happened? Hate comments started to flood Dan's 06880 page which, as I indicated, is simply devoted to local Westport news.

Dan said this about the reaction. The comments were nasty, vile, racist. I disabled commenting on the story, took down the most odious ones, left others up. I wanted readers to see what's out there, beyond the Westport bubble. [1] (Slight pause.)

This is clear. The writer of Hebrews refers to community as if it were a place. The reality is community is often located in a place. A place can be a way local communities self-identify.

Groups meet at a clubhouse, a restaurant, a designated room. I once regularly met with a Bible Study group in a room just off the trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange. We were a community.

Needless to say, communities also meet in churches, synagogues, mosques, ashrams— you name it. The bottom line: the community label can be applied to nearly any small group no matter where they meet, especially those groups who meet for guidance, for study, for mutual support.

But is that what this writer is trying to highlight, just the local community? My answer is yes and no. I think we have to pay attention to a number of things in an effort to define community as it is laid out in these words.

To do that let me throw out two fancy, \$24 words— \$64 dollar words? Inflation. The two words: orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Orthodoxy is an adherence to accepted creeds. And Orthodoxy is what this writer is explaining in no uncertain terms in telling us who Jesus is.

Please notice where that explanation starts. (Quote:) "This is the covenant / I will make with them / in those days,...." Covenant— this is the letter to the broad community known as the Hebrews. Jesus is tied to covenant. Now that's orthodox.

The words continue with more orthodoxy. Christ offered for all time one sacrifice, sits at the right hand of God and with one offering Jesus, the great priest, made perfect those who are being sanctified. So let us hold fast a confession of hope which we profess without wavering. That's also orthodox, a creedal proclamation for a broad community.

Where does the writer take us next? We are taken to a community location. (Quote:) "...let us always think about how we can help one another to love and to do good deeds. Do not stay away from the meetings of the community, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another;...."

This is where that other \$64 word— orthopraxy, practice— comes into play. And yes, a community relies on practice, on action, on participation. This is clear: no participation, no action, no practice equals no community, really. Participation, action, practice, is necessary. It is necessary even with a Bible Study group that meets just off the trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange. We met with great regularity.

So, orthodoxy— belief— needs to be worked out in orthopraxy— action. What we say we believe is merely that, what we say. Unless there is some consequential action which fosters and encourages community the words are simply words.

I need to be clear about this. Orthodoxy, what we believe, and orthopraxy, what we do, are and need to be

intertwined, inseparable.

Put another way, if the One who made the promise to us is faithful and we approach the house of God, enter the house of God filled with faith, filled with sincerity in our hearts— to quote the writer of Hebrews— what do we need to do there, in the house of God?

We need to (quote:) “...think about how we can help one another to love and to do good deeds.” Again, orthodoxy, belief, leads to orthopraxy, action. And not just action— action together, action in community. (Slight pause.)

That takes us to a pivotal question. What is community? Is community a group that meets in a church, a synagogue, a mosque, an ashram or just off the floor of the Stock Exchange? Or is community something different? (Slight pause.)

Too often I think, communities act as a protective bubble. That’s what the writer of the 06880 blog was pointing out. I say community *cannot* isolate itself in a bubble and be a real, a valid community. Why? I think this Letter to the Hebrews lets us know why.

If, in our practice, we are called to help one another to love and to do good deeds, if in our belief we are bound in covenant, then the community is *where* we gather for guidance, for study, for support. But that same community, if it is true to loving and doing good, points to other communities, points to never being isolated.

And yes, communities *can* grow isolated over time. Dan Woog pointed that out to the 06880 community.

Dan was saying ‘look!’ Look at the greater picture, the greater community. Look at what’s happening out there. Don’t get isolated. Don’t let yourself become isolated.’ (Slight pause.)

So indeed, community is larger than a small groups, larger than us, here today. That very concept proposes an obvious question: how is community built, the local community, the broad community?

Community is built two ways. A community who helps one another to love, to do good deeds, invites people in, invites people to be a part of that local community. After all, if what that community shares among its own members is helpful, why not spread the word that the community is wonderful?

And a community who helps one another to love and to do good deeds also goes out from the group. The community, recognizes, becomes involved with other communities. Unless I am mistaken the motto of the national United Church of Christ is, “That they all may be One.” (Slight pause.)

The opening hymn today was *Come Let Us Join with Faithful Souls*. These are the words of the first verse. (Quote:) “Come let us join with faithful souls our songs of faith to raise; / One family in heart we are and one the God we praise.”

I cannot say it better than that. What is community? We are all one community. We are all one family, the human family. Amen.

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United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, NY

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and

Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “It is said the Hebrews did not have *a* theology. Rather, the Hebrews did theology. Western Christians are susceptible to thinking having a theology is enough— if you simply think right thoughts I don’t have to worry about anything. Clearly the writer of Hebrews did not think having a theology was enough. Doing theology— building community is vital.”

BENEDICTION: Go forth in faith. Go forth trusting that God will provide. Go forth and reach out to everyone you meet in the name of Christ. And may the face of God shine upon us; may the peace of Christ rule among us; may the fire of the Spirit burn within us this day and forevermore. Amen.

[1] Note: both of Dan’s statements used here are somewhat truncated for use in this context.