

In my first semester at seminary, I took a class where we were sent out to visit different Episcopal churches all over Maryland, DC and Virginia. We visited churches that were very large and churches that were small. We visited urban churches and country churches and churches that had diverse congregations and churches that had beautiful architecture. Most of this visiting took place during the month of October and it seemed to me that no matter whether the church was big or small in the country or in the city, all the sermons I heard that month were about stewardship. You see for many churches, as it is at Epiphany, October is stewardship month. So this morning like many other preachers, I am preaching about stewardship - specifically about communal stewardship, stewardship of our community - the looking after our relationships in our community.

Communal stewardship has to do with the tending of our relationships in this faith community. It is something we may not give as much thought to as we do our financial stewardship. For some of us communal stewardship may seem to come more naturally than making a pledge to the church. We go to church. We greet those around us and we work with them to bring about good in the world. We travel with them through life's ups and downs. It is easy to think, "Well of course our relationships are important, but as long as we are fairly nice to each other those relationships will take care of themselves. What we really need to spend time on is thinking about finances because that is what keeps this community going." Now there is a lot of truth to the last part of that statement because without any money, what we have here at The Church of the Epiphany might not exist. However, even if we had all the money in the world, without our relationships with each other what we have here at The Church of the Epiphany would also probably not exist. Our stewardship of our relationships with each other is essential to our community and our life with God.

In the gospel this morning, Jesus is asked, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus replies, "You shall love³ the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."⁸ This is the greatest and first³⁹ commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." One commentary I read described an ongoing discussion that the author was having with a friend about this scripture. They were trying to decide which of these two commandments one should begin with. Should one love God first and in loving God, the love of others follows? Or does one love our neighbor and then in the love of our neighbor discovers the love of God? The author admitted that although he and his friend had carried on this argument for years, it was an argument that could never be won. He said that this it is like trying to separate the heart from the mind. How do we love God except by loving our neighbors? How could we love our neighbors and not love God. Love of God and love of our neighbors are completely bound up with each other. This means that looking after our relationships in community is also looking after our relationship with God. We need our community to find God.

As Parker Palmer, a favorite author of mine says, the journey toward inner truth is too taxing to be made solo: The path is too deeply hidden to be traveled without company. The destination is too daunting to be achieved alone. It is only with the help of others that we can discern how God is working in our lives. It is only by being part of a community and tending our relationships in it that we can truly embark on our journey of faith. Our relationships with others help us know God.

Many of us first learn about our care of relationships in our families. We learn not to take the last of the ice cream or not to take forever in the bathroom. We learn that relationships require listening and being present with the other especially in the hard times. And while that looking after of relationships in our community in many ways is very similar to the looking after of

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relationships in our family, there are differences because in our community, we have many different ways of being in relationship with each other. Think about it. Think about all the different ways we are together with each other. We pray together. We work at the Welcome Table breakfast together. We study the bible together. We ask questions about who God is and about our faith with each other. We listen to each other and hold each other up in the hard times. We pray for each other and experience each other's life events. Just by worshiping with each other, and coming to a common table to receive the bread and wine puts us in relationship with each other without us ever saying a word to each other. How do we tend relationships when sometimes they exist without words?

Parker Palmer, who I quoted earlier, tells a story about being in relationship with another without words. The story is from his experience of community at Pendle Hill, a Quaker community in which he lived for 11 years. He said that the lives of people in the community were so intertwined with each other that people could quickly become attached to each other and just as quickly become alienated from each other. He describes his relation to a woman who also lived in the community as being closer to the latter. In fact, he says, alienated was mild word to describe their relationship. Here is a quote of how he saw this woman, "She was, in my mind, the devil's spawn, sent here directly from the pits of hell to destroy all that is green and good about life on earth". Palmer goes on to say that one morning when the community gathered for worship, which was 45 min of silence, he came in late and realized that the only seat left was one next to this woman. He almost left, but managed to sit down and begin meditating. After about a ½ hour he opened his eyes and found himself staring at the woman's hand which was upturned in prayer. There spotlighted by a shaft of sunlight, he saw the faint but steady throb of an artery in her wrist, the elemental beat of her very human heart. In that moment, Palmer knew that here was a person just like himself, with strengths and weaknesses, hopes and disappointments, joys and despairs. He never became close to the woman and actually continued to be wary of her but a transformation had occurred and he could no longer demonize her. In that silent sunlit moment, the relationship between them had been reframed in a way that might not have been possible if they had tried to talk things out. Although he does not say this, it sounded as if in that moment, Palmer recognized the Christ in this woman and that opened the way for relationship between them, for love between neighbors.

The most basic way we tend our relationships is by loving each other, by recognizing the Christ that is present in every one of us. We love God by loving each other. Sometimes there are no words between us and the other person, and none of the usual social graces. There is only the love of that person which is the basis for real relationship with each other and real relationship with God. When we recognize the God we love in each other, we are brought into relationship with each other and with God. We are all in relationship with each other just by being here. We are part of this faith community at The Church of the Epiphany, whether we are just here for today or for many years to come. In this community we are a fellowship, a gathering of who are on a faith journey or maybe I should say faith adventure. On this adventure, we are a community who are in the process of being changed. We are a community of those who are being saved and made new, and who invite others to join them in this adventure. Our relationships with each other are an essential part of this process of being changed, of living our life with God. We are charged with tending these relationships, caring for each other, loving each other and seeing the Christ that dwells within each of us. So look for God in each other - in the eyes of the person you share the peace with, in the form of the homeless person asleep in the pew and in the person who drives you crazy. God is in all of us. Our relationship with God happens in our relationship with others. Care for those relationships - the relationships we have with all of the others who are around us walking with us in this adventure in faith