

## **A One Anothering People**

*Two are better than one because they have a good return for their work. If one falls down his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm but how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken* (Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12).

Ecclesiastes is an ancient book, but its subject is very contemporary. Certainly the passage we just read is. There are still many today who fall down with no one to pick them up. In fact according to many who study such things, there are more lonely people today than ever before. In 1989 the famous pollster George Gallup concluded from his study of American society that we Americans are the loneliest people on earth. Gallup's statement was nothing new. There have been many social observers who, for a variety of reasons, have indicated that we Americans have been for some time becoming an increasingly and alarmingly disconnected and lonely people. Books like David Reisman's "The Lonely Crowd", Robert Nesbit's "Quest for Community", Philip Slater's "Pursuit of Loneliness", Robert Bellah's "Habits of the Heart", Robert Putnam's "Bowling Alone" are just a few of what has become a major genre for books today, loneliness. Putnam's book, "Bowling Alone" documents how the many different associations that once characterized American life (PTAs,

unions, civic clubs, charity groups, political organizations and even bowling leagues) are disappearing from the social landscape. Putnam's title refers to the ironic fact that more people go bowling in America than ever before, yet there have never been fewer bowling leagues. Thus, America is apparently bowling alone, a metaphor for our growing problem. The U.S. census in 2000 revealed that more people are living alone today than ever before in history, fully 25% of households have only one person in them. And that doesn't take into account the explosion of nursing home residents. In their book "The Lonely American: Drifting Apart in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" Olds and Schwarts report the results of a survey that indicated one out of four Americans had talked to no one about something of importance to them during the last six months. And so the Beatles have proven to be prophetic when in the 60s they made their musical enquiry, *All the lonely people, where do they all come from? All the lonely people, where do they all belong?* echoing a general dis-ease of the loss of community.

I suppose there has never been a "golden age" of community. It is easy to romanticize the past. Still, to quote another '60s icon, "The times they are a changin'." Historically people lived in villages, in tribes. More recently, before the proliferation of automobiles, people grew up living, working and playing in the same neighborhoods whether small town or city, often surrounded by extended family, and longtime friendships were plentiful.

But today such communities are almost unknown by the majority of people. Increased mobility lessens the likelihood of living in the same place for long periods of time. Most job interviews include the question, “Are you willing to relocate?” The population shift in the nation from the spacious country to the crowded city has ironically increased alienation. The American writer Thoreau’s definition of a city is even truer today than when he first wrote it in the 1800s. “Cities are millions of people being lonely together.”

People’s life spans are much longer these days. It is not unusual for people to live into their eighties and nineties. This is a mixed blessing. More than ever before in history people experience the loneliness of outliving their oldest and best friends. The poet Lord Byron expressed such loneliness this way. *What is the worst of woes that wait on age? What stamps the wrinkle deeper in the brow; to view each loved one blotted from life’s page; and be alone on earth as I am now.*

Perhaps as much as anything, our technology has eroded community. In the past people gathered together at the city well or the river where they would draw water; now we have it piped directly into our homes. When the summer days got hot, people used to sit out on their porches to enjoy the night breeze; now with our air more humanely conditioned we stay inside. The creation of the sewing machine made the sewing circle obsolete. The garage door opener allows us to drive into our driveways, open the garage door, and disappear into

our homes without having to see or interact with anyone. Communities once gathered together in public parks to be entertained by community bands; now we have TVs in every room and we carry our entertainment with us in our Ipods and smart phones. And none of us watch the same thing. There are over 5000 cable stations, each designed for particular markets. There is no such thing as a “viewing public” anymore, only multiple “viewing privates.” In fact, I’m told “a la carte cable” is just around the corner enabling each of us to be our own individualized cable network. Hundreds of other factors could be listed that have contributed to the erosion of community in our modern world.

But while modern ‘times are a changin’ our ancient need for community is not. In the beginning God declared it was not good for man to be alone and it still isn’t. It was the one part of his creation he didn’t like. From the Garden story we learn nothing can fill the void created by the lack of community. Work doesn’t fill it. Adam had meaningful, challenging work to do in the garden, but apparently work is not enough. Pleasure doesn’t fill the void. Adam lived in paradise surrounded by pleasures it would take multiple lifetimes to discover. But apparently pleasure is not enough. Think of that. Even paradise becomes a curse without others to share it. A friend of mine worked for an airline. Among the perks in his job were free trips to Hawaii whenever he wanted. What a

benefit. I asked him, “How many times have you gone?” “Only once.” he answered. I was shocked but his reason said it all. “Its not much fun alone.”

God has engineered us to need each other. The preacher in Ecclesiastes understood that. Our work is meaningless without other people to appreciate it. Our trials are unbearable without other people to help share them. Our strength is inadequate without other people to reinforce it. If community was needed in paradise, how much more needed is it now that paradise is lost.

So among the many gifts God has showered on us, one of his best is community. The psalmist says God is “a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families” (Ps 68: 5,6). In the psalmist’s day orphans and widows were particularly vulnerable because they belonged to no one. When the husband or father to them died or left, the widow and the orphan were disconnected from others; they were alone. Today it is not just orphans and widows. Whole families are alone and disconnected from greater community. We are a nation of people who are bowling alone.

God is still placing the lonely in families, His family, the Church. Our churches should be communities of faith, spiritual villages. The church is where the fatherless find fathers in the faith. The church is where widows are still defended. The church is a community where young, engaged couples and newlyweds find older couples who have been married for 50 years or more

giving testimony that the marriage journey is worth beginning. The church is a community where young parents, overwhelmed with the growing responsibility of raising children, find older parents who have raised theirs and have lived to tell about it. The church is where young people have not just young friends, but old friends who know them well. In fact, these older saints not only know the young people, some of them also remember the young people's parents when they were young and can tell wonderfully embarrassing stories about them should the parents need to be humbled. The church is where every child gets multiple grandparents to spoil them. You recall Bill Cosby's consternation about his children reporting on their visits to the grandparents who gave them candy, took them to movies and had fun with them. Cosby assured his kids that these people were not his parents. They were old people trying to get into heaven.

The church is where a rebellious teenager finds an older young single who has outgrown his rebellion and can be a bridge between the parents and that child. The church is a community where singles have their birthdays remembered too and get invited over for Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners. The Church is where those same single folk remind the married folk that marriage is a choice, and that there is much work in the kingdom that quite frankly is better accomplished by single saints than by married saints. The church is a community where the single parent finds others eager to help fill the void of that missing spouse by helping care for the

children and the domestic duties that so easily overwhelm two parents let alone one.

The church is where the childless find children. People who can't have children are surrounded by children in church. People whose children have left home, still enjoy the sounds of children at church. People who don't much care for children can't escape the children of the church. The church is a community where the sick have no shortage of visitors, the devastated find abundant compassion and the dying have no anxiety of leaving this world unremembered. God is still placing the lonely in families, His family, the Church.

And that's good because all of us will find ourselves in some pretty lonely places as we make our pilgrimage through this life. There will be times when we fall down, and down is a lonely place. Sometimes we stumble and fall into relationships that deeply wound us. Sometimes we get tripped up on the path of parenting and we watch our children drift away from us. Sometimes we think all is well and we turn a corner and blindly walk into job loss or tumble over the edge of a cliff into a terminal illness. When we find ourselves down in those lonely places, what a blessing it is to be surrounded by the Church, people who surround us and are able to pick us up.

Sometimes we get cold and being in the cold is a lonely place . We get cold because the fire has gone out of our marriage or our work or even life itself. In those cold places, what a blessing it is to have the church gather around us,

embrace us and feel, in that embrace, the warmth of God's love. There are times when our strength simply isn't enough. The hectic lifestyle that curses our day, the incessant, insidious attacks on our values, just the stress of the daily burdens that arrive with each day overwhelm us. And being overwhelmed is a lonely place. What a blessing to know that walking with us is the Church, people committed to the same values as we are, people trying to live up to the same standards, wrestling along side us against the world, the flesh and the devil.

Perhaps you have not yet stumbled into a lonely place in your life. Well, you will and when you do then you will discover the brilliance of God's plan for giving us his Church. The Church blesses us not just because it provides a diversity of programs and ministries, but even more because it provides a diversity of people and experiences: seasoned pilgrims who have already traveled far down the road younger pilgrims are only starting; enthusiastic young travelers who keep the older ones from moving too slow; wounded travelers who share priceless insights gained from their own sins so that other travelers might receive their wisdom without repeating their mistakes. God gives us community because when we live in community we thrive. When we don't we barely survive; many do not.

But not just any kind of community. God has not left us without instructions about what kind of community His Church is supposed to be. Sprinkled generously throughout Jesus and the apostles' teaching is a "*one another*" ethic that governs the

community of God's people. The scriptures teach us we must love one another, be devoted to one another, honor one another, accept one another, instruct one another, greet one another, encourage one another, serve one another, bear with one another, build one another up, be kind and compassionate to one another, submit to one another, confess to one another, admonish one another, forgive one another. This is the kind of community the Father intends our churches to be.

More than anything else, the church is a community of grace. People who have made mistakes find in the church a second chance and a third and a fourth. People who've lost their way meet fellow travelers eager to help them find it again. People who are recovering from the devastating consequences of sin, sometimes theirs, sometimes others, discover that the church, as it is often said, is not a country club for saints but a hospital for sinners.

Of course we are sometimes tempted to be different kinds of community. Sometimes we are tempted to be a community of merit or success or correctness; but if we do that where will those who have failed to measure up, to succeed, who are incorrect, where will they go? Jesus' own community attracted people with real problems, people like Zaccheus and Mary Magdelene and Matthew and Martha and Peter, desperate people possessed by demons looking for deliverance, proper people obsessed by appearances looking for rest, condemned people nailed to a cross next to Jesus looking for paradise. These folks still exist. They are all around us. They are

us: the wife and husband whose marriage is in trouble; the parent who panics over the sobering responsibility of children; the young man who hides a secret addiction he dare not admit; the young woman whose careless passion creates an unintended child; the divorced mother of three who is exhausted going it alone; the elderly man whose retirement brings a loss of purpose and feels no longer needed; the elderly woman whose companion for half a century has gone before her; the man or woman who wrestles anonymously with homosexual impulses; the parent whose children have rejected them and their faith; the children whose parents neglected and abused rather than loved. The list goes on and on and on and we are all on it.

I've heard shepherds know each sheep by it's wounds. It is the same for shepherds of God's flock today; we are called to know the flock and we know them best, we know each other best, when we know each other by our wounds. To do that we must live together in community; we must remember that two is better than one.

People need today, as they have needed always, community, the community of faith, a community of grace where they find not only a pardon from a ruined past but promise for a renewed future; a community where if one falls down, there is no shortage of brothers and sisters to help him up. If one grows cold, there is always a warm embrace available, if one is overwhelmed there are more than a few who stand ready to run to his aid. By God's grace may the community here at Quaker be that kind of place, God's place, the Church.