

SOMETIMES IT'S HARD TO LIVE TOGETHER!

Hebrews 10: 24-25; Romans 15:1-7

September 17, 2006 – Pentecost 15 [B]

Just out of curiosity – did any of you stop by STARBUCKS on your way to church this morning – or did any of you “visit” there during Sunday School? MANY people NEED a cup of “premium” coffee to start the day or make the morning commute – and meeting that need is what Starbucks DOES. And they do it VERY well: this Seattle-based company is now **one of the 10 most TRUSTED brand names in the WORLD**. Not too shabby for a company that doesn't even advertise on TV!

You would think that for Starbucks – making and selling great coffee is “Job One”. But it's NOT. Of the six “guiding principles” that Starbucks is built on – **making and selling great coffee is NOT first; it's not even SECOND**. It's THIRD – because the TOP PRIORITIES for Starbucks are CREATING A PLACE WHERE PEOPLE [workers AND customers] WANT TO BE and VALUING PEOPLE. In other words – **every Starbucks coffee shop is in the “business” of making people feel “welcome” and making them feel “special”**. Starbucks KNOWS that if you do THOSE things – selling them GOOD COFFEE is EASY!

Starbucks has used this novel approach to become a PHENOMENAL success – they are opening 1300 new stores a year around the world – because **in a world STARVED for relationships – what Starbucks is REALLY offering people is a place to experience “COMMUNITY”**.

I invite you to think with me for a moment this morning about **the importance of “community”**. It's a word that's not easy to define. But at the very least – “community” is a place where people share a “common unity” – and that “common unity” might be geographic, economic, cultural, or religious. But for this morning – let me suggest that **“community” is a place where people experience DEEP AND FULFILLING RELATIONSHIPS with others**.

Now – MOST of us like to think our lives ARE filled with deep and fulfilling relationships; after all, most of us are surrounded by people every day – at school, at work, at the grocery store or the mall. But **while we may be in CONTACT with lots of folks – we CONNECT with few, if ANY**. If we were “honest” this morning – MOST of us would admit that **too many of our relationships are SHALLOW and SUPERFICIAL**.

And one reason is that **we live in a culture that DISCOURAGES “community”**. There was a time when almost every home built in this country had a “front porch”.

In the days before TV, air-conditioning, and electronics, the front porch OUT OF NECESSITY became a place where family gathered in the evenings. It became a place where neighbors “got acquainted” and where relationships were formed.

But over the years, as houses became more “comfortable” – as individual entertainment and relaxation options became more accessible – people didn’t HAVE to “get out” as much. And as MORE people came home from work and closed the door behind them – the trend in home construction shifted AWAY from houses with FRONT porches to houses with BACK PORCHES AND PRIVACY FENCES. Instead of spending time with one’s family and getting to know one’s neighbors – people began to retreat to the “great indoors” to get a little relief from being around others all day long. **Today – we VALUE our “isolation”**.

The PROBLEM is – even behind closed doors and privacy fences – people STILL crave deep, personal contact with others. Without those kinds of significant relationships – life is EMPTY. **We NEED “community” – and one of the BASIC reasons we NEED “community” is because we are MADE for it.** In Genesis 2, God has created everything and pronounced it GOOD. Then God creates Adam – and labels THIS “piece of work” VERY GOOD. But after seeing Adam alone – God decides: THIS IS NOT GOOD – so God creates a companion for Adam: EVE.

Now – whatever this Scripture may suggest about the institution of MARRIAGE – **it suggests even MORE about the need for RELATIONSHIPS in general.** You DON’T have to be married to be a “whole” person; but NO ONE is meant to journey through life ALONE. **We ALL need to experience meaningful relationships that enrich our lives.**

That’s what made Christianity such an attractive “alternative” in the 1st century. In a world divided by ethnic, economic, and cultural differences – people from every conceivable background came together in Jesus Christ – and the “Church” was born. **And one of the characteristics of the early Christians describe in Acts 2 was the rich “community” they experienced.** “Church” was a place/environment where very DIVERSE people experienced REAL and LIFE-GIVING RELATIONSHIPS with others. They experienced “community” in SMALL GROUPS – “house churches” that met in private homes.

And according to the Bible, **the SOURCE of true “community” is found in God.** God exists eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These different “persons” of God’s BEING have existed in harmony and relationship with each other for all time – simultaneously UNIQUE but DEPENDENT on each other. And **WE are made in the image of this TRIUNE God.**

What this means is that as God exists in “community” [Father, Son, Holy Spirit] – **WE are made to be in relationships with one another.**

But – **sometimes it’s not easy living together** – not even in the Church. That’s what the text from Romans is all about this morning. Paul is honest enough to say that **even in the Church there are differences of opinion** that can lead to conflict and hard feelings.

Paul writes these words in Romans 15 because within the church at Rome there were GREAT differences over a VARIETY of issues – things like ethnicity, economics, even DIET. He knows that people OFTEN “rub each other the wrong way” because we ALL have differing interests; there are ALWAYS competing agendas that everyone brings to the table about how to DO things – and they can produce CONFLICT [just ask Frank Melton!].

But Paul also reminds us that **“Church” is not just ANY “community”;** **“Church” is the “community of Christ”.** And Christ is the “head” of this community, which means Christ sets the rules, not us. And to follow Christ involves the forfeiting of OUR agendas for HIS. That’s why Paul calls on the Romans to put aside their differences and work together to carry on Christ’s mission of sharing Good News with the world. **We must WORK HARD at LIVING TOGETHER IN “COMMUNITY”!**

And one of the KEYS of being “community” is that while we need to be “heard” – we must also LISTEN to others. In one of his books, Henri Nouwen wrote: *To create space for God among us requires the constant recognition of the Spirit of God in EACH of us.* We are to listen for the voice of God speaking EVEN in the voices of those with whom we disagree or dislike – because God MAY be speaking through THEM, not US.

To live in “community” isn’t all “peaches and cream” because we are the community of the IMPERFECT; the community of the FORGIVEN. But we are NOT independent; we are NOT self-reliant. **We cannot live in isolation from others – or WE DIE.** Predatory animals never attack a herd; they always single out the stray, the individual that is MOST vulnerable to attack. And **when we try to face life alone – we are CONSUMED.** But we are called to live in “communion” with Christ – we are called to live in “community” with others.

On September 11, 2001 – the day of the World Trade Center attacks – a local TV cameraman was sent to get footage of the burning World Trade Center towers. The cameraman happened to be an American Muslim.

When the first tower collapsed and the huge “dust cloud” began to spread across Manhattan, the cameraman was knocked to the ground by people rushing to get away. He struggled to get up – but with the weight of all his equipment strapped to him, he couldn’t.

But just then a “good Samaritan” came along and stopped – reached down and extended a hand to help him up. In the haze the cameraman couldn’t make out who the stranger was – but with his help, he managed to get to his feet. And **only when he stood up was he able to recognize who this “life-saver” was.** The man whose strong hand helped this American Muslim to stand was wearing a YARMULKE – a Jewish prayer cap. He had curly locks on the sides of his face indicating that the man was an “Orthodox” [religious] Jew.

The 2 men stood there facing each other – until the Orthodox Jew said to the Muslim cameraman – *Come on, brother; let’s get out of here TOGETHER!* On THAT terrible day – they were NOT “Muslim” and “Jew” – they were fellow NEW YORKERS, “brothers”, members of the same community – and together they made it to safety.

Brothers and Sisters, we are made for “community” – for meaningful relationships. But sometimes it’s not easy to live together. Regrettably, not even the Church is immune all the time from conflict and controversy. But God offers us a place where we are WELCOMED and VALUED – a place where we can experience relationships with God and others that are DEEP and FULFILLING. It just takes WORK.

Do YOU long for “community” this morning? How can we make others feel “welcomed” in OUR “community”?

Let us pray....