

“The Power of Community”

2 Kings 2: 1-12 & Mark 9:2-9

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Sometimes sermons practically write themselves and sometimes they struggle to be born. This sermon was a bit of a difficult labor and delivery. The UCC puts out a calendar that has the lectionary readings and a theme for each Sunday and the theme for today was community. So why did they give us these passages? Why not the feeding of the five thousand? Now there's a scripture from which I could have easily expounded on the power of community: a little boy offers to share his loaves and fishes, and suddenly everyone is sharing a meal, chatting with their neighbors, connecting with one another, finding common ground.

Well, one reason we have this scripture is that we are at the last Sunday before Lent. If you are familiar with the church calendar, you know the season of Advent is followed by Epiphany. The weeks between the beginning of Epiphany and the beginning of the season of Lent are bookended with Jesus' baptism on the one end and Jesus' transfiguration on the other. So this story of the three disciples and Jesus on a very high mountain, having a mysterious experience, is a story that is studied every year the last Sunday before Lent.

The story plays an important role in conveying Mark's message of proclaiming Jesus' identity as the Messiah. So we have these indicators of that: A high mountain is a place of divine disclosure in the tradition of the Old Testament. Transfiguration is rooted in Jewish apocalypticism, associated with prophetic revelation, or the end times. White clothing symbolizes purity and often divine status. Moses and Elijah are linked as heralds of the coming of the Messiah.

Some Jews believed Moses and Elijah had never died, they had just been “taken up” and Elijah's return would be evidence of the coming of the Messiah. You likely recognize the cloud as another symbol in the scripture of divine presence. Something of dramatic proportion is going on here and we, as are the disciples, are directed to pay attention.

But that does not explain the theme of community: three disciples and Jesus isolated up on a mountaintop? What has that to do with community?

For starters, community typically begins with a small group. In Matthew 18:20 the scripture assures us “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I with them.” At the time Dave first came as pastor there was a lot of attention being paid to building small groups as the way to grow churches. So when Dave came he instituted a monthly Bible study and a book study/movie night in an attempt to offer more opportunity for smaller groups of folks to get

connected. Our newest group, Mindful Connections, is another attempt to provide an opportunity to develop closer, more meaningful relationships.

And this matter of connection begins to get to the heart of our story as I hear it. Although terrified and baffled in the midst of this frightening and inexplicable experience, Peter hastily suggests that this is so wonderful that they should build three shrines, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.

So Jesus could have said “Sure, let’s stay here. We are having a fine time together. This is so meaningful and fulfilling just to be here. Let’s just revel in this moment always, enshrine it even. Nothing else matters so much as this does.”

But instead Jesus leads them back down the mountain, back to the world below, back to the challenges that await, back to lives where this mountaintop experience can be integrated and lived out **in the community**.

So several things are worth considering about community. One point is so simple it should be unnecessary to point it out: that is that we ARE in shared community. But we don’t always recognize that.

When I was a young therapist in my first job out of graduate school, I was just totally immersed in my roles as therapist and colleague to other therapists. But in the community mental health center where I was working, I began to notice that the other therapists had conversations with the janitor and with the community service workers, who provided transportation as needed and home visits when necessary. I never thought I was superior to these folks. Somehow though, and I am embarrassed to admit this, I just didn’t grasp that we were in community together. In the larger picture, even the clients were part of the community.....most assuredly they were! We existed because of them!

1Corinthians 12 very clearly affirms this sense of all being important members of an entire family: beginning with verse 20, “But as it is, there are many parts but one body. So the eye can’t say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you,’ or, in turn, the head can’t say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you.’ Instead, the parts of the body that people think are the weakest are the most necessary.”

Another point about community is equally important and perhaps equally neglected, which is that community provides healing.

Recently Terry and I watched a movie called The Station Agent. The characters included an adult dwarf who is bitter after years of humiliation and torment. He is employed at a store that sells and repairs model trains. When his employer dies, the main character discovers he has inherited a piece of property from him that has an old abandoned train station on it. The station is in an isolated place, but with no other obvious plan, he moves there, in large part because the anticipated solitude appeals to him.

Immediately his solitude is disrupted, first by a distracted woman who accidentally bumps him off the road with her car, and then by a young man who parks his mobile hot dog stand near the abandoned train station, which the dwarf now inhabits. The woman, it turns out, is in deep

grief, separated from her husband since the accidental death of their school age son. The young man with the mobile hot dog stand is operating the stand for his father who has fallen into ill health. Each of them is struggling with personal pain of one sort or another. But over the course of the movie, the relationships they build with one another and the community they develop among themselves become the instruments of their healing.

It seems no coincidence to me that when Jesus and Peter and James and John come down from that high mountain, that the next story we have in the verses following today's passage, is one of healing. Mountain top experiences are great. But we live in the real world where we are designed to be and intended to be agents of healing in this world.

George Bernard Shaw is quoted as saying: "I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live."

Indeed it is our privilege to be part of the community and to work on behalf of all. Right on, George Bernard Shaw: Jesus would heartily approve! Amen!
