

## A Community of Consumers or Consumers of Community?

Proper 18A - September 4, 2011

The heart of today's Gospel lesson is the challenge to create and maintain a healthy Christian community. The same skills that lead to a healthy marriage are necessary for a healthy parish community....A man and a woman who have never met before find themselves in the same sleeping carriage of a train. After the initial embarrassment they both manage to get to sleep; the woman on the top bunk, the man on the lower. In the middle of the night the woman leans over and says, "I'm sorry to bother you but I'm awfully cold and I was wondering if you could possibly pass me another blanket." The man leans out and with a glint in his eye says, "I've got a better idea...let's pretend we're married." "Why not!" giggles the woman. "Fine," he replies. "Get your own darn blanket."

John Gottman in The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: "None of the footage taped in our Love Lab would win anybody an Oscar. Our archives are filled with scenes in which the husband looks out the picture window and says, 'Wow, look at that boat,' and the wife peers over her magazine and says, 'Yeah, it looks like that big schooner we saw last summer, remember?' and the husband grunts. When couples engage in lots of chitchat like this, I can be pretty sure that they will stay happily married. What's really happening in these brief exchanges is that the husband and wife are connecting - they are turning toward each other. In couples who go on to divorce or live together unhappily, such small moments of connection are rare. More often the wife doesn't even look up from her magazine - and if she does, her husband doesn't acknowledge what she says.

"Hollywood has dramatically distorted our notions of romance and what makes passion burn. Watching Humphrey Bogart gather teary-eyed Ingrid Bergman into his arms may make your heart pound, but real-life romance is fueled by a far more humdrum approach to staying connected. It is kept alive each time you let your spouse know he or she is valued during the grind of everyday life. Comical as it may sound, romance actually grows when a couple are in the supermarket and the wife says, 'Are we out of bleach?' and the husband says, 'I don't know. Let me go get some just in case,' instead of shrugging apathetically. It grows when you know your spouse is having a bad day at work and you take sixty seconds out of your own workday to leave words of encouragement on his voice mail. It grows when your wife tells you one morning, 'I had the worst nightmare last night,' and you say, 'I'm in a big hurry; but tell me about it now so we can talk about it tonight,' instead of 'I don't have time.'

"In all of these instances husband and wife are making a choice to turn toward each other rather than away. In marriage, people periodically make what I call 'bids' for their partner's attention, affection, humor, or support. People either turn toward; one another after these bids or they turn away. Turning toward is the basis of emotional connection. So in observing couples my favorite scenes are the very ones that any Hollywood film editor would relegate to the cutting room floor."

Turning toward each other rather than away from each other, engaging rather than avoiding, attending rather than ignoring feeds the health of all human relationships and it is the basis of today's Gospel. It is the discipline we must practice if we are going to have a healthy, supportive faith community. The same skills that lead to a healthy marriage are necessary for a healthy parish community. There are two things that I think are true about community: 1) we

all say that we want it and 2) we usually have no idea how difficult it is to come by. The Rev. David Lose: "Community, after all, is one of those feel-good words that draw us into places of fantasy. We imagine something out of 'Cheers,' a place where we are accepted completely for who we are, where we are never lonely, and where, of course, everyone knows our name." To some extent, this fantasy is possible. In spite of the fact that a parish church is made up of people, fallible, anxious, insecure people, some parish communities manage to develop the skills and habits necessary to form a truly supportive, safe and affirming community.

There are three questions I would like to pose to us all today: 1. What kind of community do we want? + 2. How much effort are we willing to invest to get there? + 3. What role can our St. Luke's Principles of Community play? These are all good questions for us to think about as we head into Wine, Wishes & Wisdom II.

#1: What kind of community do we want? Imagine a line, a continuum. At one end is a church community that is mostly superficially social, shallow, and safe - Social in that people do little more than sit beside one another in a pew once or twice a month and then briefly have a cup of coffee before darting off to the next thing. - Shallow in that there is not enough investment of time, face-to-face time to ever really get to know one another, to ever really know about and participate in one another's hurts and hopes, dreams & disappointments. - Safe because anything meaningful is avoided, any issues that may require working things out together are kept safely out in the parking lot. These congregations tend to be community of consumers, that is, people who show up in a worship service occasionally, not be give their hearts to God and each other, but to get, to receive, to consume religious goods and services.

At the other end of the continuum are parishes that are made up of consumers of community. This kind of church community is composed mostly of people who have arrived at a place in their spiritual journey where they are willing to make a commitment, a strong commitment to God and to one another. They are social in a different way from the first group because they make themselves available to spend time in study, prayer, ministry and play with one another. They work at becoming, not only fellow followers of Jesus, but also good friends. Because they spend time consistently with one another in study, prayer, ministry and play, they come to know one another's names; they share the good and joyful things that are happening and the painful and difficult things. And because they are committed to being there for one another, there is a sense of closeness to and trust in each other. When something difficult or shameful happens, it can be shared and discussed without fear of rejection, judgement or condemnation. When there is conflict, hurt feelings, misunderstandings, anger and fear, those involved sit down with one another and talk about it. Confession and forgiveness are practiced regularly. And all of this is done because these folks want community, real, deep, caring, authentic community....they are consumers of community rather than a community of consumers. Where would you place St. Luke's on that continuum now? Where do we want to be two years from now? And if you want more, what are you willing to do to have it?

I close by pointing to our Principles of Community. They urge us all to never gossip about another member of our community; to always communicate directly and honestly about the troubles facing us; to be ready to either confess or forgive at all times; and to get comfortable with change as it is the one constant in life. Let each of us renew our commitment to practice these Principles as we seek to build & protect the community God has given us here at St. L's. AMEN.