

*Based on Genesis 2:18. God sees the need for human community.*

It was just another day at the ballpark in Hagerstown when peals of joy leapt from the throat of young Abigail Barnett, beloved child of SPC.

*Look Mom!* she said. *All my church friends are here!*

And we were.

Forty something of us gathered across five rows along first base for what we all agreed must be our First *Annual* Back-to-School Baseball Game. Abigail, and her baby brother, Atlas, made their way across the laps of half the crowd, including more than a couple of teenagers enjoying their special “youth group spot” in the stands. Chris Madeo passed out Cracker Jack box after Cracker Jack box from what appeared to be a never-ending supply in her quite large backpack. Mary Ellen Lloyd cheered loudly ... *for the other team!* And Ray Morgan educated me about the difference between an ichthyologist and a zoologist who studies fish, which is also different than a fish ecologist, not to be confused with a fish economist!

(All I know is the Greeks called Jesus *Ichthus* because he fed the people with fish.)

Halfway through the game, as we groaned through yet another run scored by the opposing team - except for Mary Ellen - I looked around at our community and thought to myself, *THIS is what it means to be the church!*

*We are*, we say in our SPC Identity Statement, *an inclusive, spiritual COMMUNITY, welcoming all who long for meaning, hope, and belonging.* Including and most especially, Abigail. *Our faith & practice are rooted in the way of Jesus and enriched by wisdom from all sources, including baseball and fish ecology. We are committed to being and becoming people of radical compassion, working for justice and wholeness in ourselves and in the world.* And the galaxy and the universe, to put a finer point on it.

Written many years ago to describe who we *already are* on the one hand, and who we *aspire to be* on the other, this Identity Statement says it all. For us, we say, the whole point is COMMUNITY.

Our Lesson from Genesis tells us the same. *It is not good for the human to be alone*, God says in this early chapter of our Scriptures. Or, more bluntly, as the Hebrew syntax puts it: *not good human only it.*

There is something inherent in us, it seems, that craves companionship. That needs *mirroring*, as the psychologists put it. That wants to be seen and heard and known, taking the time to talk to our friends, as the poet puts it. And yes, the birds and the beasts and the trees and the air itself are an essential part of that companionship, right here in Genesis 2, as it is here in the SPC sanctuary. Many of us know in our souls *the community of all creation* as we walk in the woods with the deer, or stroll on the towpath with the owl, or wade in the water with the minnow.

At SPC we insist our community includes our more-than-human family: the puffin and the chickadee, the bluebird and the hummingbird, black bear and her babies, tree frog and her mate, rainbow trout swimming about; striped skunk protecting us from yellow jackets; and axolotl, the Patron Saint of Sunday Studio.

Community, for us, must include *all that is*.

And yet there is also something in us that emphatically needs *other humans*. Which is why, as Genesis 2 continues, God gives up on trying to find sufficient community for the human from among the birds and the beasts.

At the end of the day, God determines community for the human requires the re-fashioning of the human *itself*. And so, in a deep sleep, as if a dream is coming true, God creates human community from humanity itself, in all of our diversity: Out of one, many; so that out of many, we may be one.

It turns out, the creation of human community in Genesis 2 *is itself* inclusive and welcoming and spiritual, as we say we want to be. The creation of human community in Genesis 2 *is itself* compassion and wholeness and wisdom and belonging, as we say we want to be. The whole point of being human, according to Genesis 2, is that we cannot exist without community.

*Not good human only it.*

And yet ... as soon as that need for community is met, we blow it, don't we?

Genesis 3 follows Genesis 2, and our human community, created for our own benefit, falls apart. In Genesis 3 we blame one another for our own faults and point out the naked truths in others while utterly ignoring our own.

In Genesis 3 we hurt one another in community, we abuse one another in community, and in Genesis 4 we even go so far as to kill one another in community. (It only gets worse from there.)

Not only that, but in Genesis 3 we band human community together in opposition to the more-than-human community created alongside us, grabbing far more than we need from this garden of grace. In Genesis 3 human community insists we should be able to pursue whatever fruits we want, no sustainable limits, no matter the cost to the rest of creation.

In Genesis 3 *Not good human only it* becomes *Only human, not good* every other part of creation that stands in the way of what we want for ourselves. Hence the climate crisis and the mass extinction of over half of our more-than-human community.

Which brings us back to our particular human and more-than-human community at SPC, in all of our beauty and all of our challenge and all of the grace that keeps us going.

It is not hyperbole to say the world has shifted on its axis since the SPC Identity Statement about community was adopted. Long-term pillars of our community have offered heartfelt and heartbreaking goodbyes. A slew of new people have joined the church and stepped into leadership. An entire generational shift has taken place among our staff.

And yeah, that COVID thing has been a cherry on top. On-line/hybrid community has become a thing, worship attendance patterns have changed literally overnight, and our practices of community are having to adjust in ways we are still figuring out how to absorb.

And yet, as we begin to take the view from the other side, I am heartened that we can proclaim with assurance that the SPC community is still strong. That our need for one another has outweighed our frustration with our circumstances. That our commitment to the best we can be together has smoothed over the rough edges when the worst of who we are threatens to rear its ugly head.

From where I sit, what makes the SPC community so strong is that participating in this community is less about adopting an official belief system and whatever religious tenets go along with it and more about simply celebrating our primal need for companionship - a recognition that we cannot be whole without each other.

From where I sit, what makes the SPC community so strong is that participating in this community means confessing the ways we fail to live faithfully in community, forgiving one another with grace and love and dignity for the sake of community, and putting one foot back in front of another to keep on trying to live in community.

This is why, for the sake of our community, my goal as your Pastor in this next year is to do my part to strengthen the bonds of who we say we want to be in community here at SPC. We have been in survival mode for much of these past several years. It's time to step back and move instead toward simply getting to know one another better.

I invite you to do the same.

If you miss someone you haven't seen for a while, call them up and encourage them back. If you see someone you would like to know better, call them up and invite them to lunch. If you need a name or a number, call the church office and see if Lynn can help you out. Come to the church picnic and just hang out with each other. Join the choir, even if you think you cannot sing. Volunteer with our Sunday Studio or Youth Group and get to know this fabulous emerging generation. Come out to the Bar on the first Thursday of the month for a beer and a Bible story. Just enjoy one another's company, in the human and more-than-human community we say we want to be.

At our best - and maybe even at our worst - participating in the SPC human and more-than-human community gives us a taste, a glimpse, a momentary awareness of the community of creation God has intended all along.

At our best - and maybe even at our worst - participating in the SPC human and more-than-human community becomes a way to practice participating in a global community that is desperate to remember who we were created to be in the first place.

At our best - and maybe even at our worst - participating in the SPC human and more-than human community invites the God who is itself a community - that's what the Trinity is all about - to work with us and through us and beyond us to re-create, in the fullness of time, all that community has been meant to be.

And at our best - and maybe even at our worst - participating in the SPC human and more-than human can instill within us such joy and awe and wonder at the gift of companionship that we, too, can go out to any park, in any place, on any day screaming with peals of delight:

*Look, Mom, all my church friends are here!*