***“Beyond Bowling Alone” October 14, 2018***

***1 Peter 2:4-10                   By Rev. Robert B. Culp***

Robert Putnam once wrote an unsettling book entitled ***Bowling Alone*** in which he sounds an alarm about the erosion of what he calls ***“social capital”*** in the United States.  He was talking about the sense of community, connectedness, and family that many of us “Baby Boomers” experienced when we were growing up.  Putnam notes that around 1965 the membership of long-established groups (civic and fraternal groups, labor unions, the Boy Scouts, the Red Cross, PTA’s and religious groups) began to fall and have not stopped falling.  The whimsical title of his book came from his discovery that, while people still were bowling, fewer were joining bowling leagues, with such leagues struggling to get enough members for the teams.

Now, Putnam has had his fair share of both supporters and detractors since the book’s publication in 2001, but there is little doubt that we are witnessing in our country a decline in civic engagement.  And Putnam shows convincingly that as we become increasingly disconnected from family and social structures/groups, there is a serious threat to both civic and personal health.  Statistics show that fractured communities with less social interaction have lower educational performance, more teen pregnancy, and lower life expectancies, as well as a profound, confusing sense of loneliness.

How and why has this happened?  It is hard to say, really.  Putnam suggests that television and the personal computer are major culprits, along with the explosion of the internet, hand-held devices, and the pervasive usage of the automobile ... that symbol of individual mobility and control.

But also, I would point to the kinds of obligations and discomforts that are always present within our interpersonal relationships.  Somehow we seem to prefer our privacy and well-defined personal boundaries.  ***“Life together”*** in covenant and community has never been easy.  No less than Dostoevsky back in the 1800's observed, ***“Somehow, whenever someone is close to me, I feel my freedom infringed upon ... If I must love my fellow man, he had better hide himself, for no sooner do I see his face, than there’s an end to my love for him.”***  (As Peanuts’ Linus puts it, ***“I love mankind .. it’s people I can’t stand!”***)

In past generations, though, such community relationships were essential to our very survival.  We depended upon those within our family and community to provide the resources and assistance we needed – for food and clothing, shelter and jobs, security and protection.  People needed one another, and yearned for the helpful touch of another whose presence would sooth our hunger and fears.  We learned to get along with one another, to live through the rough spots and uncomfortable encounters, to be together in life.

But today, we somehow seek to survive, get our work done, be continually entertained – all without having to face or deal with one another.  Indeed, the preference of so many of us is to “bowl alone.”  Increasing numbers seem to be retreating into a kind of autonomous individual existence that is free of any binding ties and obligations and loyalty to any groups over the course of time. However, as I watched the heart-wrenching scenes of Mexico Beach, utterly devastated by Hurricane Michael this past week, what got to me in a profound way were the poignant interviews with those whose homes and lives were turned literally upside-down.  They were in shock, stunned by the devastation all around. And they needed to be touched, and hugged, listened to and be told by those holding their hands that they were not all alone ... that others were with them. ***“Bowling alone”*** was/is not going to ***“cut it”*** for them!

Now, to be sure, many churches have been affected by the damaging trend of self-sufficiency – reflected in shrinking rolls, cut-backs in staff and programs, and many church closings.  Interestingly, though, in small, but stable church families *(such as Springfield, Granite and Mt. Hebron Presbyterian churches)*, there has been a kind of revival of sorts of life-giving and diverse experiences of fellowship.

For somehow members in such communities, and those being drawn to them, realize and embrace the importance of the gift of one another within the community of faith and humankind.  You see, there is a counter-veiling force to this societal preference to bowling alone. And it is the existence – in many forms and faces, many denominational names and architectures – of communities of the faithful across this land who come together week after week, renewing their commitment to the mysterious love who is God and to the importance of one another in faith and hope and love.

Indeed, this community experience that is yours is a gift.  You did not invent it, nor really chose it.  If your story is anything like mine, it chose me/you.  Through my parents and special influences, the church community embraced me, and drew me in, and made me a child of God’s family.  Church was a part of my life before I really knew what I was doing. As you were too!

That’s what Peter is saying to his readers almost 2,000 years ago: ***“You are priests of the King, holy and pure, God’s very own – all this so that you may show to others how God called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.”***

The church is a community which we can only recognize, and for which we can only be grateful.  And you who gather here in many different ways week after week are perhaps the real answer to a world that is fragmenting and pulling apart.  For you and others like you throughout the world, really ... \* in your life of centering worship, inspiring music, loving fellowship, and in your commitment to life-long learning; \* in your generous and sacramental gifts of time and talent and treasure in these uncertain days; \* in your unselfish deeds of kindness and generosity to those who are in need ... you truly are keeping the world together.

Countless studies have shown that active participation in healthy religious communities is decisive both for personal well-being and happiness, and the health and harmony of our larger society in the long run.  Of course, one little guy took issue with this.  He asked his father one day, ***“Daddy, did you have to go to Church School when you were little?”  “Sure did, son – never missed a Sunday!”***  Then the little boy says, ***“See, mommy, it won’t do me any good either!”***

But not so, little one!  It is the going that does it, the sharing and participating that does it.  Not statements of belief, or professions of faith, or promises of spiritual growth – important as these may be.  But sharing and participating in the life of a real, healthy community of faith ... not just being ***“spiritual,”*** but also religious!

What we experience as a gift, though, is also a responsibility. Listen to how one businessman describes the sense of responsibility and accountability he feels toward the church:

***“Before I was born, my church gave my parents ideals of life and love that made my home a place of strength and beauty.  In helpless infancy, my church joined my parents in accepting me, in telling me that I belonged ....  My church enriched my childhood with the romance and narratives of Scripture and the lessons of life that have been woven into the fabric of who I am. In the stress and storm of adolescence, my church heard the surge of my soul, and she guided my footsteps by lifting my eyes to the stars, as well as toward the places of human hurts and hungers. When first my heart knew the strange awakenings of my identity, my church taught me to affirm and respect the mystery and dignity of who I was, as well as the mystery and dignity of others. When my heart was broken with sorrow, my church drew me to the Friend of the weary and whispered to me the hope of another morning....  When my steps have slipped and I have known the bitterness of sin and estrangement, my church believed in me and called me back to live within the heights of myself as a follower of the Carpenter.  My church calls me to her heart. She asks my service, my presence, my gifts ...   (And) I will help her do for others what she has done for me.  In this place and with this people, I will help her keep aflame and aloft the torch of a living faith in Jesus and his love.”***

Only in such a fashion, my friends, will we together be empowered to move “beyond bowling alone” within these partisan, fracturing, and challenging days, and become all we are called to be.

Let us pray: Gracious Lord, you have called us into a community where we are known by name, where we are embraced and accepted for the gifts that we have and are, and where we are encouraged to minister unto a fractured world to heal its wounds and keep it together.  Help us to always remember our oneness in the Body of Christ in the world today.  In His name we pray.  Amen.