

Recovering Our Balance: The Relationship of the Personal Realm, The Public Realm and the Communal Realm In Our Lives.

Romans 12:1-8; Ephesians 4:25

Have you ever lost your balance while walking along, one part of your body out of synch with the other parts? Our lives and our life together can get out of balance too.

Today's sermon is entitled, "Recovering Our Balance: The Relationship of the Personal Realm, the Public Realm and the Communal Realm in Our Lives."

The sermon is only a little longer than the title. One of the things I've learned this pandemic year is that it is possible for me to preach shorter sermons. (No applause please!)

As human persons we live in three realms simultaneously: the personal, the public and the communal. When these realms get out of balance, we lose our balance. I've been thinking a lot about this this past year as we and most of our nation has lived more in virtual community than in in-person community. Things already out of balance have gotten more out of balance as persons, as a community and as a nation, especially as it pertains to the communal realm.

First, let's talk about the personal realm, the realm of the self. God has bestowed upon us each our own sacred personhood. The spiritual quest includes the discovery of the true self and living out of that true self. God wants us to thrive as persons.

The problem comes when we live as if the personal realm were the only realm, or only important realm. God made us to live in communion and community. This is part of the divine image in which we were created. If we live as sufficient unto ourselves and not as persons made to live in community and communion we are out of balance.

We live in an American culture of hyper-individualism. The individual self is all important. "My rights. My freedom" is the rallying cry. And such hyper-individualism has endangered the health and well-being of our nation this pandemic year. "Self-realization" is important, but it has become the new salvation. God's salvation is broader and more encompassing. Martin Luther once described our plight as "the self-curved-in-on-itself. We've been there. When we make the realm of the personal the ultimate realm we get out of balance. God made us to live in community and communion. Such is why God brought Israel into being and the church into being.

The second realm of our lives is the public realm, the *body politic*. It has to do with the welfare of the city and nation in which we have been placed. The word politics comes from the Greek word for city, *polis*, and the Greek philosophers thought deeply about a healthy *body politic*. Politics and politicians have a bad name today, for reasons we can name, but the calling of public service is a noble one.

The problem comes, as above, when the public realm is made the supreme or ultimate realm of our lives. We become *homo politicus*. A political creature. A political animal. We can so easily let ourselves be defined by our political persuasion. I heard of a guy filling out a religious questionnaire. When it came to the box “Denomination”, he put “Democrat”.

Our year apart has thrown things out of balance. We’ve spent far more time in front of a T.V. or computer than before. Politics has dominated our consciousness. The morning news can ruin our day.

Moreover political differences have sharpened and widened because we haven’t had the daily, weekly time together to smooth the sharp edges of our differences.

God calls us to responsible citizenship in the public realm of our lives. We are, to use Jeremiah’s words, pray for the welfare of the city and work for the

welfare of the city because in its welfare we have our own welfare. Paul writes to the church in Philippi, which was a Roman colony: “Let your manner of life, your *politeusthe*, your politics be worthy of the Gospel of Christ.” The public realm is where we work with people of good will for the common good. It is good work.

But it is not the ultimate realm, and when we live so, we begin to lose our balance.

### III

The third realm is the communal realm. It is the connective tissue between the personal realm and the public realm. We are more than individual selves, we are more than political creatures, we are made to live in community. The communal realm has suffered the past year.

Wendell Berry has written much about the importance of the communal realm, about neighborliness, and the world as neighborhood, and about what he calls The Membership, where we are all “members of one another”—using Paul’s phrase in today’s texts.

The Membership is not only about the Body of Christ but about the whole world as the household of God. *Everything is connected*, and *Everything Belongs*. A character in Wendell Berry’s novels is Burley Coulter. He says:

The way we are, we are members of one another. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who ain't , but who knows it and who don't.

We are part of a vast, interdependent web of being.

Such is why Paul spent so much time talking about the church as the Body of Christ, and how we are members of one another. The church is more than a collection of members, it is a community where we are members of one another.

#### IV

In our Romans text today, Paul fleshes out this theology of the church and its flourishing. He begins with a warning. He may have heard about some issues in the Roman church, or he may have just recognized that churches everywhere have the same problems. He wrote:

I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.

We get into trouble in church when we start ranking people and comparing people. Shakespeare made use of an older phrase, "Comparisons are odious" and rephrased it in one of his plays: "Comparisons are odorous". They are both odious and odorous. We waste a lot of energy comparing people and things—and sap the spirit in the process.

## V

So Paul moves directly to the spiritual gifts in the church and how *all* are important and *all* are needed.

He uses the analogy of the human body. A body has many members, head, shoulders, knees and toes! Legs, ears, elbows. All are important. If you arm didn't have an elbow how would you feed yourself? But, Paul says, we are also *one*, and so "members of one another". Not just members, members of one another.

He began a list of some of the graces, or spiritual gifts in the Body of Christ. The list is suggestive but not exclusive. There are many more.

If you can preach, he says, preach. But only in proportion to the faith you have been given. In other words, don't preach more than God has given you to preach. That would shorten a lot of sermons, including this one!

If you can minister to others as a servant to them—the word is *diakonos*, from which we get the words minister, deacon and servant—then minister.

If you are given the gift of teaching, teach, and do so with clarity or simplicity.

If you have the spiritual gift of exhortation and encouragement, give it on!

If you have the grace of giving, that is financial giving, do so with generosity.

If you have the gift of leadership, do so with diligence.

If you have the gift of compassion and acts of mercy, do so *cheerfully!* Who wants somebody's grumpy or obligatory help?

God has many more than these, a different gift for each of us. For example, friendship is a spiritual gift, and hospitality, that is the offering of a safe and welcoming space to another. God's pantry of spiritual gifts is full!

## VI

So in the Body of Christ one of the most important things we do is to encourage the spiritual gifts of one another. In our Covenant we promise to join in "the development of each person's gifts". We help call them out. We cheer them on.

In Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles' book *The Spiritual Life of Children*, he says, "Children are soulful in ways that they themselves reveal." The calling of parents is to be attentive to their children so they can see how their children reveal their soulfulness. The calling of the church is to be attentive to the soulfulness of one another, that we may encourage each other's spiritual gifts.

Yes, we are members of one another, so we, to use Paul's words, "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep". We share in each other's joy and sorrows, victories and defeats. And there are obligations too. In Ephesians Paul says that as members of one another we speak in truthfulness and avoid falsehood. Words are important because we are members of one another.

So, as those who by sheer grace have been given to one another, let us attend to one another, support one another, celebrate every gift, cherish every person. For we are, by the grace of God, members of one another.