

Sermon      Getting to We: From Individual to Community

First Unitarian Church of Baltimore

Rev. Lyn Oglesby, Ph.D.

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When my son was about two or three years old, he had a daily visit from the five year old girl who lived across the street. He adored her. One day, to show his unbridled affection, little Robert picked up a croquet mallet and banged her on the head – three stitches worth. His development was still Erik Erikson’s stage of autonomy, and in Piaget’s stage of egocentricism. He knew how he felt, and liked to show it, but he hadn’t developed a sense of others, or empathy, much less social responsibility.

Years later one of my grandsons, a little over a year old, discovered my glasses, was absolutely intrigued, and refused to relinquish them. We were all doubled over with giggles (probably one of the reasons he wouldn’t hand them over), but he was a strong little fellow, and my glasses weren’t all that durable, so finally in mild desperation, after many failed “Pleases” I asked nicely again, and said they were “mine”. My daughter immediately said, “Don’t teach him that word! He already thinks the entire world revolves around him.” Finally, after we stopped paying attention, the baby got bored with the glasses and put them in the box with his toys.

Have you ever watched a group of two or three-year olds talking? It often goes something like this.

“I have a new doll.”

“I fell down and got an ouchie.”

“I want some juice.”

“My mommy goes to work.”

When we were that age, it was “all about me. Our cognitive development was truly in that stage of egocentricism when we were genuinely self-centered because

our minds hadn't developed enough for us to understand or even care about others' feelings.

It takes a while, fortunately not too long, for cognitive development to take place. But the training and learning we receive at home has to take over and we either learn to live in community with other people, or we become sociopaths. Some people become sociopaths or psychopaths because their cognitive development never incorporates feelings or concerns for others, or remorse for hurting or harming other people.

Most of us, and I dare so just about everybody in this room, have developed into people who do indeed care about other people, and who respond with compassion and empathy when we see someone in pain of any sort.

We call, we take over a casserole, we clean for them or do the laundry or take care of the children or run errands. That's one of the joys of being human and living in community.

It is one of the special joys of people who are not alienated, not totally alone, who have people they interact with on a regular basis.

Anarchy doesn't work. Civility we learn from living in close quarters with others, in our families, in school, and in society. There is a reason for traffic lights, and for simple rules of behavior.

Being in community is different from simply following rules, though. Being in community means that there is a genuine caring for a group of people we have common interests with, and we willingly subvert some of our own self-interest for the greater good. It's kind of an "in-group" if you will. There's a relationship. We're probably nicer to each other inside this church than we are to strangers. We're nicer to our neighbors than to strangers, because we live close to one another and good relationships and cooperation are important.

My apartment building is a cooperative building – it's different from a condo where you own just your apartment, and the common areas are owned by a company, and managed from the outside. In a coop, we own all the common areas, and we govern ourselves with a board and hired professional staff. We have a

common laundry room and nobody every steals anybody's socks or washcloths, and I once left a nice blouse hanging in the drying room for over a month, forgot about it, and found it still hanging there, safe and sound. When I first moved in, I found a loaf of bread and some salt outside my door one evening. A Jewish welcome. Others invited me for supper or a glass. And I do the same. We have a sense of community and those of us who are older make a point of welcoming the younger newcomers to acclimatize them to our neighborly and thoughtful ways of living in our building. It looks like an ordinary apartment building, but it definitely is not ordinary, and we treat all the staff with great respect and no little affection.

We're not talking about rights here, but the privilege of a community that honors privacy, yet is there when we need help.

Individualism is a great American tradition. We treasure our individual and human rights. To free speech, freedom from unreasonable search and seizure, habeas corpus, an attorney if we are arrested, freedom to assemble peaceably, to own property, to raise our children and to practice whatever religion we choose, or do not choose. To live undisturbed in our homes and to own property.

We give up some individual rights to the government in the interest of public safety – speed limits for driving, limits on disturbing the peace of our neighbors, and we are required by law to pay minimum wages and prevented from exploiting children in the workplace.

Two ideas underlie the limits we place on our freedoms: public safety and community welfare, and a moral foundation to live in concert and in peace with our fellow human beings.

There is an ongoing tension between perceived rights, privileges, and responsibilities that is based on a dynamic struggle between the idea of individualism and the dignity of every human being, and the privilege and responsibilities we have toward one another.

Right now, I see this tension working itself out in our public sphere. We have been for a long time in a period where economic capitalism, and freedom of opportunity, and the notion that what's best for the individual will be best for

society, has prevailed. That notion has been challenged several times, by Karl Marx who reacted to the exploitation of laborers and serfs, and foresaw economic equality for everybody, using methods that did not work. By socialists who advocated state ownership of services and some industries. By laws in the United States that regulated wages and hours and employment. By laws that require men and women, and people of all races to be paid at equal rates. By laws that prevent the imposition of any religion on another human being. By laws that require random drug testing in certain environments to prevent drug users from serving in police or the military, or in some industrial environments. We regulate businesses and radio stations and television and movies and even what gets printed, to some extent, all in the name of public safety and responsibility. And the tension is a healthy one. The ACLU has opposed some things I'm in favor of, like drug testing. But organizations like that who defend civil liberties, sometimes to an extreme, serve to prevent government from becoming heavy handed and doing away with certain freedoms. There are constant lawsuits over the right to own guns or where we can carry guns, and whether we have the right to drive cars with open containers of alcoholic beverages. We give up some individual freedom for the sake of the greater good of the community, and the larger community that we call society.

We have an ongoing tension and dynamic relationship between individualism and society, and how much individualism is necessary to promote a safe and healthy society, our larger community.

And at this very moment, that dynamic is sorting itself out in terms of the role of our government and the free market, free enterprise, and government regulation. Our nation is redefining itself and its economic structure in terms of a deeper moral understanding of fairness for the homeowners who got stuck with mortgages they can't afford because of the mortgage terms. We are redefining our financial structures to ensure that bankers and financiers of all sorts will be held accountable for the government money that is being spent to rescue them from their errors and extravagances. Barney Frank introduced a bill on Friday to do that.

Sometimes it takes a crisis for us to redefine ourselves, to see things differently, to reevaluate the way we live, and to reassess our moral foundations as individuals and as communities and as societies. In Chinese the Kanji figure for crisis is the same as it is for opportunity. Well, we are certainly being presented with plenty of opportunities these days!

We are also redefining the way we handle information. That is, organizations and businesses and industries are being required to operate more openly, more transparently. No longer is everything visible only to a privileged few. Organizational communication is horizontal, not just vertical.

We can be thankful, in many ways to the open communications made possibly by computer and internet technologies. Information travels fast and information is virtually impossible to hide. From Watergate's tapes to telltale hard drives, and telephone and text messaging and email. Nothing can be hidden for very long. Gone are the smoke-filled rooms where all the decisions were made in secret. Gone are the smoke-filled rooms, thank goodness.

The governor of Illinois has been impeached and will be tried because of taped telephone conversations by the federal government. We cynically laugh and call it a carnival and laughingstock, but the entire process shows that the American people expect more ethical behavior from public servants and that legal phone tapping can be used for good purpose. Not that it always is, but that's a different discussion. There is furor still over whether some of the outgoing Vice President's conversations are private or are in the public domain. And the reason for the furor is moral indignation about presumed secret deals.

The point is that we prefer ethical and moral behavior, and that we prefer that open processes frame decision-making, whether it is in appointment of a new senator, or hiring of an employee.

In order for our preference for moral behavior to prevail, and to guide our public servants and our children, and in order for a more just society to follow our generation, we have to continuously upgrade our own moral and ethical thinking, and our own behavior, and emphasize responsibility to the larger community at least

or more than our individual rights. Those rights carry responsibilities, and in fact, may be more privileges than rights. We earn our privileges, they are not God-given.

What is wonderful about what is happening now, is that moral and ethical behavior seems to be taken seriously, and there seems to be a movement toward more openness, more transparency and more talk about ethics. Will there still be Bernie Madoff's (a true sociopath if I ever saw one) in the world? Of course, and some people will still lie and cheat and steal. But moral indignation can be powerful.

I used to teach Business Ethics at American University, and I kept files of stories about people who cheated and were corrupt in corporations. The files got so big and heavy I finally threw them out, and became very discouraged. Without a firm moral and ethical education, without good role models, and frankly, without a certain amount of regulation, some people will behave dishonestly. But I see the pendulum turning, and not because of punishment meted out to convicted criminals, but because the mood of the country seems to be welcoming greater cooperation, moral thinking, concern for public as well as individual welfare, and more transparency in the way everything works.

I like to think of the church as the model community. We operate transparently as a congregation and (as a denomination). We have by-laws and rules and systems and processes that ensure that everyone is included who wants to be, and we are guided by principles and purposes that respect the dignity of every individual human being. We are kind and caring with one another. We disagree respectfully. We don't talk ugly to each other or about each other. We resolve our differences thoughtfully. And we forgive each other for our mistakes.

I think of the congregation as a model community, because we are doing a good job of it here. Not that we should let up or get lazy! But thinking seriously about the church as a model community is terribly important. If we don't do it here, if we can't do it here, how in the world can we expect to have world peace? This is where it starts, folks, at home, in RE, in our neighborhoods, in our apartment buildings, in our cities and towns. It will be more difficult and challenging as the

world population increases. Increased population density can lead to aggression and warfare, but it doesn't have to.

We are entering a new period of hope, of expectations of moral and ethical behavior, and building a new sense of community in our nation. Self-restraint is not always fun. Giving way in traffic can make us late. But a community of peace and love starts with us. A world of peace and love starts with us. Just thinking about it can make a difference. I hope and pray that we will broaden our reach, that we will build more community in our neighborhoods, that we will share more casseroles, and that we will do a double-take and give thanks when our children show affection with hugs rather than bangs on the head, when they show an interest in what somebody else offers to the conversation, and that when they learn to share, and comfort others, we can know we are on our way. It's a long road for all of us. But it's a road worth taking.

I have spoken these words in the name of all that is holy and sacred. Amen