

Finding Connection in a Disconnected World

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: I Thessalonians 5:11

In my life time, the Quaker Testimony on Community has become a most important focus of our life together, and one of the most important messages that we can share with the world. In a time of divisiveness and tribalism, the Testimony on Community celebrates diversity and is all inclusive. We are, indeed, *members one of another*, and spiritually connected with everyone. On this “New Member First Day,” I would like for us to think about what it means to be in community with one another.

In a setting such as Cincinnati Meeting, the formation of community is one of those things that rarely *just happens*. It is something that we all must be conscious of nurturing. There are many aspects to the formation and nurturing of community. For our purposes this morning, I would like us to focus on the following:

First, community is formed when we gather together in worship to feel the power of Spirit beyond our finitude...When we experience the Living God with one another. Experience is a very important Quaker word. It was the direct experience with the Living Christ that set George Fox on his mission to the world, sharing his experience that the Christ that the Seventeenth Century

Church proclaimed was sitting with God in a far-away heaven, is actually a living entity in the hearts of all people. Early Friends discovered, and we continue to discover today, that when we worship in silence together, under the guidance of the inner light or inner Christ, we grow together spiritually, and we connect with one another in loving community.

Second, community is formed when we tell and re-tell our stories...Our memories...Life's spiritually meaningful experiences. One of the most important ways that we nurture community at Cincinnati Meeting is during our fellowship time over lunch together, during the Centering Down worship sharing group, and in the various spiritual nurture groups that meet during the week. It is in these times that we can share with one another *who* we are and *what* is important to us. To listen to the life stories of one another is a rare privilege in a world of surface living and disconnected moments, and by so doing, we form community.

Third, community is formed when we help one another process each other's pain...When we cry with one another, and when we feel one another's suffering. In his book, *Out of Solitude*, Henri Nouwen writes about how a true friend in community can be present for those in pain: *"When we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain*

and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.”

In First Corinthians the Apostle Paul writes, “If one member suffers, all suffer together.” And as Albert Schweitzer has written, such experiences of pain can lead to a new place of interconnectedness: “The person who has been delivered from pain must not think that he or she is now free again, at liberty to take life up just as it was before, entirely forgetful of the past. They are now persons ‘whose eyes are open’ regarding pain and anguish, and they must help to bring to others deliverance which they themselves enjoyed.” They now belong to the fellowship of those who bear the mark of pain.

Fourth, community is formed when we encourage one another and build one another up. We live in a hyper-critical world. In our Meeting community we should be able to live with one another without a critical spirit. Putting each other down, being divisive, participating in gossip about one another and using cruel words to describe others, does not build community. The golden text of community building comes from First Thessalonians 5:11...

“Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up.”

Fifth, and finally, community is formed when we live in a spirit of acceptance and forgiveness of one another, and when we become sensitive to not wound the hearts of others. This does not mean that there will not be times when we get on one another's nerves, or when this person or that person does something stupid that we will not have something to say about it. It *does* mean that in our disagreements, we must be very careful never to wound hearts. I have found that in a disagreement with someone in community, I can say, "If what I have shared or said has wounded your heart, I am sorry...that was not my intention." You do not have to back down and accept what is not acceptable to you, but it is important to distinguish between disagreeing with an issue and wounding a heart because you disagree.

Being in community is difficult work because relationships are hard work. *When we come together in worship to feel the power of Spirit beyond our finitude...When we tell and re-tell the stories about the meaningful experiences in our lives...When we help one another process each other's pain...When we encourage one another and build one another up, and when we live in a spirit of acceptance and forgiveness, becoming sensitive never to wound a person's heart,* we can at least begin the task of creating centers of loving fellowship, which, in turn, can consequently, change our world.