

*The Four Pillars of Christian Faith, Part I, “Koinonía: Community”*  
*John 17.20–23 and 1 Corinthians 12.27–31*  
*The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 27 June 2004*

In the Muslim tradition, there are four pillars of Islam. They are the four elements of the faith that hold everything up. The four pillars of Islam are prayer (five times a day), fasting, almsgiving, and pilgrimage. Those are the elements that make a Muslim a Muslim, and it got me wondering about the characteristics of our faith. And so for the next four Sundays, I’ll be preaching about what I consider to be the four things that make a Christian a Christian. As a caveat, I need to say that this is a descriptive, rather than a proscriptive, listing. In other words, these are four things that describe who we are, rather than to say “if you don’t do these four things, you’re not a Christian.”

So, as a brief prelude, my list of the four pillar of Christian faith includes: community, faith, self-sacrificial love, and the kingdom of God (which drives outreach, mission, and social action).



So, as we begin this series and turn to community or *koinonía*, which is the Greek word used in the New Testament, I’d like you to tell you about a visit from a member of my family, who dropped by Plymouth last week. I had actually never met this family member before. He was attending a course on sustainable development at CSU and he made the effort to get in touch with me. I met one of my *brothers* for the first time last week. His name is Danilo Bugtong, and he is a United Church of Christ minister in the Philippines. We met, talked, and had lunch together. It was wonderful to have contact with Christian from across the world.

You may see my description of Danilo being my brother as being facetious or abstract, but one of the things Jesus did was to up-end the family values of his day. In the eighth chapter of Mark’s gospel, the writer records this episode: “Then [Jesus’] mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’”<sup>1</sup>

This is one of those passages that our brothers and sisters at Focus on the Family don’t usually trot out, because Jesus is *negating* the value of the family – the central unit of Jewish society in his day – and replacing it with *koinonía*: the new community of those who follow God and Jesus. This is radically countercultural stuff: then and now.

Think about it this way: you are members of a family with more than a billion members. Our sisters and brothers Barbara Brown Taylor and Marcus Borg and Pat Robertson and William Sloane Coffin are part of our family. (Nobody said you had to *like* all the members of your family.)

Together, we comprise the “visible church” or the people who together constitute the worldwide church. Theologians also talk about the “invisible church,” which is the spiritual reality of the body of Christ present in the world.

Now, that can be a tall order to get your head around: that there is an invisible church and visible church, a spiritual presence and a physical presence. I recently read something that helps unify those two, seemingly contradictory, ways of describing the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 8.31–35

church: “The spiritual community does not exist as an entity *beside* the church, but it is their spiritual essence.”<sup>2</sup>

This “spiritual essence” is one of the aspects that makes our community distinct from the Rotary Club or an AA meeting or the parenting group, though you may certainly find the Spirit there. Our reason for being is as Paul writes, that we “are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” There is nothing more organic than a body, comprised of its component parts: eyes, feet, noses, cells, DNA. And it is our genetic material that keeps the community regenerating and evolving and morphing into new ways of being church.



Let me pose a question for you to ponder: Is it possible to “do” Christianity on your own? Or to think of it in slightly different terms, Is Christianity sustainable as an individual pursuit? I’ve thought about this a lot over the years, debated it with friends and family, and I wonder what you think.

Some of you might be considering monks who might spend much of their time in hermitages, but they do so within the context of community. We all need a balance of togetherness and alone time; I’m pretty well spent by the time I finish two services and a meeting on Sunday, and I need to have time to recharge my batteries in the afternoon by swimming, reading, or napping.

Others of you might be thinking of people you know who don’t belong to any church, but they consider themselves Christians. That may or may not be valid, but I’d question whether it is sustainable. Who would be there to baptize their babies, teach their children the faith, offer them communion, or grieve the loss of a loved one? I led a funeral for a woman last year who didn’t have any links to Plymouth, but felt affinity for the Congregational tradition, and it was amazing to see people here rally to extend hospitality to her family. That was our community opening itself to someone who wasn’t a member.

How is it that **you** feel most connected to this community? Through a fellowship group, serving on a committee, receiving a visit in the hospital, or worshipping together on Sunday morning?

To take it to a more esoteric level, the relationship of the Trinity: Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit is a model of community. They are the three aspects of a united God. There is a dynamic tension between each of the three aspects of the Trinity that hold it together, just as there are dynamics that hold a church together.

When Jesus was offering his final prayer for us, his followers, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he asked “that they may all be one... as you and I are one.” We in the United Church have used the words of Jesus’ prayer as our motto: “That they may all be one,” which echoes the ecumenical movement of the mid-20th century, which stresses the unity of the church universal.

I’ll let you decide as to whether one can or can’t fly solo and be a Christian (but you can probably guess how I’d answer the question).



The *koinonia* of the early church was undoubtedly different than the community of faith we experience here at Plymouth today. It’s not difficult to become a member of this church, and once you are a member, you can say so in public without risking scorn, being ostracized, or worse. If you were a Jewish Christian living in Judea in the first

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<sup>2</sup> Hodgson and King, *Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 263.

century, you might be expelled from the synagogue. If you a gentile Christian living elsewhere in Corinth or Galatia or Rome, the empire might have decided to martyr you.

Persecution and expulsion necessitated close-knit community and sometimes forming new ways of being *koinonía* that didn't include families of origin or religious traditions in which people had been nurtured. (That sense of being “kicked out of the family,” is one of the reasons that John's gospel often refers to “the Jews” in derogatory terms: the new community of John had been thrown out of the Jewish family.)

What has it been like for largely African-American churches in the history of this country? The church community offered an escape from oppression and racism. What was it like to be a *Volgadeutsch* immigrant and find a home at this Congregational church 100 years ago? It was a community that helped a new land feel more like home. What is it like for Chinese Christians in underground churches today? It must feel like a new type of community with a sense of common risk. I wonder if we Christians are at our best when we are under the thumb of oppression or trying circumstances, and when we need to draw together to achieve a common aim.

Some of us take our local church for granted, thinking that it always has been here and it always will be. But, I think that's a dangerously fallacious assumption, given trends in our society. (And I say that even as we are experiencing strong growth in this particular community of faith.)

Those of you in what Tom Brokaw calls “the Greatest Generation” (or the World War II generation) might assume that church community is a given, like many other civic organizations. (It's no coincidence that our largest fellowship group is the Xtra Years of Zest: you all like to *belong!*) In his popular book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*<sup>3</sup>, Robert Putnam describes community organizations like the church as providing “social capital,” the glue that holds our society together, and as you know mainline churches have lost a lot of members, not unlike other civic organizations. According to Putnam, attending club meetings has declined by 58% over the last 25 years, family dinners have declined by a third, and having friends over has decline by 45%. And the diminution of “social capital” isn't good news either for our society or the church.

Most baby boomers probably rejected the church at some point, and those of you who are here, I'm glad to say, made it back. And you may have come back because you think it important to give your children grounding in a community of faith. Generation X folks might have some of the same experience, but might actually have deeper hunger for community, which you found here.

Sociologically, the church embodies what virtually no other group in our culture can offer: *intergenerational community*. Where else do you know that preschoolers are on a first-name basis with non-relatives in their 80s? This is one of the areas of greatest hope for churches like ours: that we're able to provide a sense of community for people in our society. But, more than that, ours is a community that connects us with the body of Christ.



Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the martyred German theologian, put it very forcefully: “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily

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<sup>3</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2000)

fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

When each of our members joins the church, we make this covenant: “Ever mindful of the welfare of my brother and sister members, I promise to walk with them in faithfulness and Christian love.” And the idea of congregational covenant is integral to who we are and have been in our particular tradition. In the Salem Church Covenant of 1629, the members of the community said these words: “We covenant with the Lord and one with another, and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk together in all His ways, according as He is pleased to reveal himself unto us in His blessed word of truth.” It is no accident that Massachusetts was not constituted as a colony or as a state, but rather as a commonwealth.

Covenant binds us together as a community of faith, and God is a party in that contract, which is why I take church membership and its covenantal bonds so seriously. *Koinonía* is integral to our Congregational sense of who we are as the church.

Our contemporary culture holds self-interest and radical individualism as two of its highest aims. so, when we speak of the realities of our *interdependence*, we are going against the tide of our culture, but that is *our* Christian ethos. Does it involve sacrificing some small part of our own self-interest? Often, it does. Does it mean giving of ourselves for the benefit of others? Always.

Ours is a community in a different way than the early church, many ethnic churches, and underground churches in China, but it is countercultural nonetheless. May we continue to seek new ways to be community for ourselves and always invite others to join us on the journey. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. (NY: Harper and Row, 1954), p. 21.