



THIS IS CHURCH: PART TWO

Galatians 3:28

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I think on my sabbatical project, especially the time with the focus groups, and one thing is profoundly clear – and it is good news! Despite the challenges many congregations have, I left each one of these sessions in awe and gratitude. The God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob and....is a God powerfully and wonderfully at work in the lives of those in our pews.

I found that people experience God:

through others,
through nature,
through the arts,
through study,
through “prayer”,
through acts of service,
through acts of love/kindness,
through anything, any anytime, anywhere...

As I surveyed these experiences, they grouped into at least 7 different categories. This set of seven can help us all better know the various places in which we might help people connect more powerfully and regularly to the presence of God.

Holy Presence, Holy Communion, Holy Revelation, Holy Purpose, Holy Power and Providence, Holy Grace, and Holy Love.

We will spend the next several weeks exploring these types of God experience and this week we begin with Holy Communion:

Holy Communion: An experience of sacred, deep connection and a sense of profound unity with others on a level beyond kinship or friendship or the same experience in nature.

Our text which illuminates this experience is drawn from Paul’s letter to the Galatians:

All are one in Christ.

In one sense this is all of the verse we need, because it says it all with no qualifications, provisos, or exceptions.

The oneness is absolute.

Through the power of Christ’s love we are powerfully, wonderfully, joyfully, and unequivocally fused to *everyone*. That is what Paul tells us. And it is the most powerful resource we humans have on this earth.

I discovered the depth of this *Holy Communion*, of this oneness with nature, God, and others during my trip out west.

Last week we talked about this same oneness but, instead of with each other, it was with nature. In that analysis we saw that our deep desire to be in nature is a desire to return to unity with God’s creation. In the fall of Adam and Eve that harmony was broken, but it was not only our connection to nature but to each other and most of all to God that was severed. This in turn means that if we combine deep community with others, nature, and God we can level-up our experience of the divine in dramatic ways!

This was the second part of my hiking excursions this past month. The first took me in solitude to the Grand Canyon, the next to Zion with my daughter, Liz.

We decided on the “Top Down Narrows hike”, a 16-mile trek through the Virgin River. Some who have been on it described it as their favorite hike in the world! And I must agree.

The preparation for the trip was complex since we were doing a through hike. It took us at least 10 hours of research simply to decide on footwear! Even so, by the end, our ankles, toes, and shins were shredded and bruised from thousands of awkward steps on endless boulders. Despite its complexity, it was a much smoother hike than the

Grand Canyon because, instead of relying on my own ineptitude, daughter Liz coordinated the details. Even my backpack was lighter since I had less food to carry and I was able to leave excess clothing in our rental car.

We took a van with six others to our drop-off point. The hike began in a wide meadow with mountains in the distance. The river started off more like a creek – about six feet wide. We hoisted our packs and pulled out our trekking poles. These were invaluable in finding footholds on the rocks, while preventing the river from sweeping you away. At the start, it was thigh deep, but the depth of the river varied from as low as our ankles to over our heads. Perhaps the most fun we had were the few times we had to swim in the icy river with our packs on our backs.

As the minutes turned to hours, the green fields and low-river bank transformed into variegated rock walls hundreds of feet high. In some ways it was the opposite of the Grand Canyon, trading off the incredible expanse of the Grand Canyon with the enclosed narrow 30-foot shoot of the Virgin River and trading off my time of solitude to be with Liz. This truly was a once-in-a-lifetime event.

On one level, there was simply spending time together away from the distractions of civilization, but I also believe God was doing something more profound. As I looked on those sheer rock walls, I felt that same harmony and glory of creation that I did in the Canyon. Liz was having the same awe-filled experience. But a third thing was happening as well. There was something electric about sharing this surreal and beautiful setting with her.

The bonds of love and harmony with Liz were magnified by this profound moment of Holy Community, in the midst of God's creation! And it showed me Liz in another way. Not only as my daughter, but as God's child, driven, and able to teach me so much. I saw her as her own person, a strong young woman, capable and able to conquer any quest she set her mind to. Even one that Dad would never want her to do!

And, at least in part, her power was driven by the strength of Holy Community with other people found in the parks. For Holy Community not only enhances our sense of kinship with others, but it can give us strength to conquer great challenges in life.

For me, the Narrows hike was all the challenge I needed in Zion and it met all my expectations. But there is another world-class hike there, called Angel's Landing, and even thinking about it terrifies me. It is called that because only Angels would dare go to the top. The first two miles are a rather straightforward hike up a beautiful mountain. It is a well paved trail, safe inviting and pleasant.

The last half mile is all done on a narrow cliff
sometimes only a few feet wide,
with one-thousand-foot drops on either side!

It takes over an hour and half to do this section because there are hundreds of people scrambling up the rock, most of which are holding – for dear life – onto this single chain that poses as a safety measure on the climb. For anyone afraid of heights, this multiplies the terror, because you may wind up standing in one place for minutes with only the sheer drop to think about. Liz had wanted to do the hike, but I thought I had convinced her that we were too tired from the Narrows. But that is when God put the Holy Community to work.

In the day after the Narrows, we decided to take a tour bus to see more of the park. While on that bus we heard one person declare, "Angel's landing will be the best hike you ever do in your life!" This peaked Liz's interest. A few minutes later, while enjoying a cup of coffee at Zion Lodge, a man who just came from Angel's landing told us, "I have done it five times. I would not trade that experience for the world!" The final nail in the coffin, so to speak, happened when we ran into a couple we previously met on the Narrows who said, "Absolutely do it! You will want to turn back, but don't. It is fantastic!"

Well I wasn't going to do this hike, but clearly this Holy Community of hikers had inspired Liz, so off we went. I stopped after the first two miles, but Liz

went on the narrow cliff, headed for the top. Immediately, my heart dropped into my throat. And my mind kept racing through the worst scenario that would come from one errant step.

After about 45 minutes I began to wonder if something had happened to her. I thought certainly she would have returned by now.

People kept coming off the mountain, some terrified, others nonplussed. One family said, "The Vegas strip was much more dangerous!" Another said, "You want to know what is really terrifying, the port-o-potty just up the hill over there!"

After an hour, I was a complete wreck. I started asking every person who came off the hike if they had seen her. I asked them when they set off, to try and determine if she should be down by now. After an hour and half, I was convinced something had happened. After all, two young men said the whole thing only took them 30 minutes! But then, the blessing holy community went to work.

A couple that had passed us on the way up just came off the climb! And as I spoke to them, they assured me if tragedy had struck, they would have heard. Even though I was not fully convinced, their compassion and understanding offered me...not peace exactly...but a measure of comfort in my agony, their sympathy gave me hope.

So maybe Liz was okay! And then, glory! There she was! I have never felt so relieved in my life. But even so, the terror and its after effects lasted deep into that night as I had horrific dreams of that hike!

I asked Liz how in the world she made the hike and she too experienced the power of Holy Community. She said,

Cautious Confidence. You have to be careful the whole way but at the same time believe you can make. The confidence comes from all the encouragement on the way up. A man said, "You're doing a good job." Someone else said, "I want to tell you you're almost there but you're really not. But don't give up! Keep going!"

She, too, found great strength through Holy Community. She was able to continue to climb because of the simple words of encouragement.

It was a Sunday and on the way down from the "hike of horrible horror," we overheard a conversation between a young girl and her father:

"Dad, this is way better than being in church!"

And the Dad, turned to her motioning to the people and the wonder of God's creation and while saying, "Honey, This IS church!"

This is what makes First Presbyterian Church and all the communities of faithful followers so wonderful, amazing, and powerful and why, even though my month was unforgettable, I ached to return to you.

Holy Community is this bond we have right here, for each other, given to us by Christ.

Together, as we encounter the beauty of life in one another and in God's creation, our unity and our love enable us to give one another strength and hope for whatever we face in this life as we look forward to joy in the next. Amen.