

“WORDS OF WISDOM: III – HOLD HANDS AND STICK TOGETHER!”

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Ruth 1:12-19

Luke 10:1-8

One day I was driving through town, when I made the turn from Howard Street onto Bow Street to come back to the church. I was just getting near the hospital when I noticed something so sweet. A whole bunch of children were walking down the street together. They were walking on the sidewalk and there were adults in front of them and adults behind them, but what was so sweet was seeing those kids walking two by two, holding hands! Oh, it reminded me of times when I was a child, in Brownies or in school or especially on field trips – grabbing a buddy, holding their hand, sticking together.

Another woman had the same kind of reaction I did to seeing that when, one day, she was in the grocery store, and wheeled her cart over to the bakery section, and came upon this delightful group of little children watching a bakery worker decorate a cake. They were standing there, holding hands, two by two. Then, a little while later, when she got to the meat department, there they were again, but this time those precious little heads were adorned with those net caps that the workers wear. A few minutes later, as she was making her way to the checkout, she turned up an aisle and right in front of her stretching up the aisle were those dear little children, hand in hand, two by two, on their way home. (On-line, “When You Go Out Into the World, Hold Hands and Stick Together,” the Rev. Dawn Mayes, 1/27/13)

If you ever remember reading Robert Fulghum’s wonderful book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, you know that one of the things he listed was “hold hands and stick together!” It seems like such a little thing, something to keep you safe and secure, but oh my, it’s so much more than that – it’s about community and fellowship and belonging. It’s not just a good way to stay safe, no; indeed, it’s a great way to live life.

It’s actually the way God intended life to be lived. Turn to the very first pages of scripture and see what God did. God created Adam and then, as the scripture says, in Genesis chapter 2, verse 18, “The Lord God said, ‘it is not good for man to be alone.’” And so He created Eve to be Adam’s companion, his helpmate, his friend – the one with whom he could hold hands and stick together.

Jesus understood the concept of community so well. His whole life reflected that. He found community in his family – with Mary, Joseph and all the rest. He most assuredly found community with His disciples – they held hands and stuck together through a whole lot. He also found community with his friends, like Mary,

Martha and Lazarus – it was with them that he could enjoy dinner and let his hair down, if you will. And in today’s Gospel lesson, we see Jesus encouraging community in the way he sent the seventy out into ministry – he sent them two by two; not alone, but with each other – holding hands, sticking together. He knew that not only would they be stronger working together than working by themselves, but He also wanted them to share the joy of their work as well as the struggles.

If one felt a moment of timidity in doing the work of the Lord, the other could pick him or her up, and together they could face it. If one was afraid, the other could share their courage. If one knew joy and excitement, the other could experience it as well.

We were created to be in community. It’s what God intended and it’s the way Jesus lived, and how he encouraged others to live as well. Yet, somewhere along the way, we sometimes forget that. We forget what it was like to hold hands and stick together, how good that felt, because the world creeps in on us, and tells us to drop those hands, stand by yourself, be strong, be competitive, show that you’re the best, and that you don’t need anybody. You can stand on your own two feet.

How said that is, because it is not God’s intent that being in community makes us weaker. No, in fact, being part of a community, makes us stronger. When we know we’re not alone, that someone always has our back, we become more the person God created us to be.

Someone has written: “Community. Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.” (*Spiritual Literacy*, Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, eds., p. 471)

Community. Being together. Holding hands and sticking together. It is a beautiful thing. It’s a God thing. It’s who we are called to be and what we are called to do. And it blesses our lives immeasurably. And that’s what I want to talk about for the next few minutes with you. How it blesses our lives.

First of all, it blesses our lives with companionship. As you well know, ours in a fast-paced, crazy-busy, technology and media obsessed world. There are billions of people on this planet, millions of people in this country. Everywhere there are people, yet, if we’re not careful, it is possible to feel all alone. That’s why being a part of community, having someone or lots of someones with whom to hold hands and stick together is so important. When we do, we remember that we are never alone.

It’s what we see in this morning’s lesson from the Hebrew scriptures – the story of Ruth and Naomi. Naomi has suffered loss upon loss upon loss – she has lost her husband and both of her sons, and she has nothing left – literally. All she

has is her two daughters-in-law, and she encourages them both to go home to their families. One of them does, but the other one, Ruth, does not. She chooses to stay with Naomi – to be the one with whom she can hold hands, to be the one she can count on, to be the one who will remind her, literally, that she is never alone. It is, indeed, a beautiful portrait of the companionship found in community.

I read another beautiful portrait of that this week, in the story a woman named Eda LeShan once told about a day that she was visiting someone in the hospital, when she saw an elderly couple sitting together in the visitors' room. The man was in a wheelchair, his wife was sitting next to him. Eda says that she was in that room for a half hour and during that whole time she watched them they never said a word to each other, they just held hands and looked at each other, and once or twice the man patted his wife's face. Eda said that she was overwhelmed by the power of their love that just emanated throughout that room. The silent witness of their companionship was almost palpable. (Ibid, p. 436)

Friends, community is about companionship, it's about being together, it's about being there for one another. It reminds us that we are not alone, ever.

Secondly, community is all about sharing joys and sorrows. How much better is it to celebrate good things with those you love, and how much easier is it to bear the tough things of life with friends and family by your side? When Jesus sent those followers into ministry, He could envision those days when those people would celebrate together the joy of watching a heart being changed. And He could also envision those days when those people would weep together over people who slammed their doors in their faces, and refused to hear the Gospel. How much easier Jesus knew it would be for them that they were going through that together, and they could pull each other through it and move on?

Sometimes, especially when times are really tough, when someone has died, or something terrible has happened, and I see the way the church rallies around the ones suffering, I wonder how those without the community of the church ever get through those things. I see the power and peace that community brings and the strength it offers those who are hurting, and I ache for those who don't have that. The community didn't fix anything, but they were there, and just knowing that helped the hurting ones get through it.

The great preacher and theologian Henri Nouwen told about a day when a friend of his came to visit. As soon as Nouwen saw him, he knew that something was terribly wrong. And indeed it was. The man's wife has suddenly left him. Nouwen writes, "He sat in front of me tears streaming from his eyes. I didn't know what to say. There simply was nothing to say. My friend didn't need words. What he needed was simply to be with a friend. I held his hands in mine, and we sat there . . . silently. For a moment, I wanted to ask him how and why it had happened, but I knew that this was not the time for questions. It was the time just to be together as friends." (Ibid, p. 458)

That's what community is about. Being together as friends, being there in all the times of life. Celebrating when times are good, and holding hands in silence and crying when times are bad. Being together makes the good times even better and makes the bad times bearable.

Finally, being together, working together in community holds power and possibility. We can always do more together than we can by ourselves. And sometimes we can do amazing, incredible things. Someone once said, "Look at the snowflake. Snowflakes are one of nature's most fragile things, but just look at what they can do when they stick together." (Vesta Kelly) Well, we who lived through the endless snowstorms of last winter can attest to that – when those darned snowflakes stuck together, they wreaked havoc on our world.

But when we stick together, we can do amazing things. We see that all the time around here. Why just last week, together we filled two pick-up trucks full of food to help feed the hungry through the Wayfarers House! And there's a team of people on their way home from Kentucky right now who have worked together to do incredible things this week!

We've held hands and stuck together to build buildings. We've held hands and stuck together to get through the losses of dear and wonderful members of our church. We've held hands and stuck together to venture out in risky ways – like when we went knocking on doors to share about Jesus and our church.

For 215 years, come this fall, the people of this church have held hands and stuck together, and experienced the wonder and joy of community. Perhaps that's why one of the most precious things we do every week is, at the end of the service, hold hands and stick together, and sing "Bind Us Together Lord, bind us together."

My friends, God created us to be in community. He wants us to hold hands with one another. But I want to add something more. He wants us to reach out and grab the hands of those who no one is holding right now. One of the dangers of strong community is that sometimes people are overlooked, sometimes people are left out of the circle, sometimes people are excluded.

May that not be said of us as a church, or of us as individuals. May we always be looking out for others, so that no one feels alone, especially here.

I want to close with an image for you to reflect upon as you leave this place today. It's the image of two little children playing in the sand at the beach. An adult was watching them with endless fascination. The children were having a great time building an elaborate castle with moats and towers and everything. They were laughing and carrying on together, and working hard, side by side. The creation was getting to be something really special. And then, boom, all of a sudden, seemingly out of nowhere, came a huge wave, and knocked the entire thing down.

The adult was crushed for those kids, and he watched them. They stood up, looked down at the mess of sand and water that moments before had been their creation, and then grabbed hands, and started walking down the beach. A little while later, they stopped, knelt down, started scooping up sand, and started building all over again.

May that be an image of what we can do in community, what we can do when we hold hands and stick together. We can have a wonderful time together, living, laughing, playing, building, working, making things come to life – and, when bad things come along, we can get through them together, and then start all over again. We can do that – together.

Thanks be to God for the gift of community. To be able to hold hands and stick together with one another is one of God's greatest gifts in our lives. May we always cherish it, and may we always be committed to it. May it be so.

Amen.