

The beautiful passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians operates on two levels: on the metaphysical level, it reminds the Philippians that God's power is exercised through humility and powerlessness, and that what seems to us to be most powerful can be felled by someone who dies on a cross. On the organizational level, it urges the congregation at Philippi not to compete with each other and strive for the highest status, but to operate in solidarity, as a community. But of course it's not a question of one level or the other; each speaks to the truth of the other.

I've been a little bit allergic to the term "community" since my last year of divinity school, when the university's clerical and technical workers organized and then went on strike for comparable worth. They formed a picket line around the divinity school, and every day students had to decide whether to cross the line or not—for three full months. This occasioned great distress, which was the union's strategy: if you can't get your opponent to negotiate with you, you find ways for other people to put pressure on them to negotiate. So hundreds of upset students and faculty were thus activated to complain to the university and pressure the trustees to negotiate.

At the divinity school, some students supported the union and some did not. And this caused hard feelings and what was frequently mourned as "a loss of community." We urged each other to get past our hard feelings; we participated in a few well-intentioned meetings to try to understand one another, but it was for naught: each side felt disregarded and diminished by the other. Real things were at stake, and each side was acting to deprive the other side of those real things. And I for one came to hate the accusation that activists were destroying our community. I

thought it was no kind of community if it didn't include the striking secretaries and food service workers. I thought my classmates on the other side were simply conflict-averse and cowardly. They thought my side was ideological and self-righteous.

So there's that about community: it can be an ideal that shatters easily, or a veneer that peels off quickly, under adversity.

Now, it's also the case that Paul himself was no touchy-feely teddy bear for community under some circumstances. He could get quite exercised about Christians who he thought were teaching incorrectly about Jesus' Way. He calls them "false teachers," and he does not offer them much grace in his letters. This continues to be a hallmark of Christianity today, at least in some churches, the preoccupation with "correct" teaching. Last week I was trying to figure out how to get one of the kids I'm a guardian for to her job at 11 on Sunday. It occurred to me that perhaps I could drop her off at a nearby church on my way to Indianola, and she could be safe there till it was time for work. So I looked up that church's website, and discovered quite the emphatic orientation toward correct belief, which correlates (in my mind, at least) with attitudes that would not be hospitable to this girl. So my brief fantasy of Christian community, liberal and conservative cooperating to accomplish an end defined by love, went by the wayside—I didn't want to take a chance on her not being safe. Their emphasis on correct teaching, including biblical inerrancy and a literal reading of scripture, told me that we were not really part of the same community.

That rupture is a microcosm of the rupture in our society. And what is to be

done? Paul tells the Philippians that the way of God and the way of Christian community is to look out for the interests of others. He reminds them that Christ intentionally, deliberately, chose a life and death of powerlessness, and that was the means of his victory and exaltation. But how's that working for us? I don't see meekness and agreeableness rolling back corporate tax breaks, strengthening safety enforcement in nursing homes, raising pay for childcare workers, or stemming gun violence. Are we Christians, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked, of any use?

I have to believe that we are. And I have to believe that the way toward a more robust community is the slower but gentle way. I've just re-read Paolo Freire's classic *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which is no picnic believe me, and he says over and over again that liberation is a slog that you can't do an end run around by solving problems *for* people or *telling* them what the solution is. The transformation of consciousness that makes liberation possible has to take place in dialogue, with mutual respect, organically. To the extent that we have privilege, we must exercise it on behalf of those with less privilege, which means advocating for public policy changes—but while we are persistent, we also have to be patient, and not think that the only two options are to give up or to look for a quick but mean resolution. Neither of those is a real option, if we are serious about making the world a better place.

The 13th century Persian poet, Sa'di, wrote a poem in which a person has a conversation with a shard of a clay pot. The person says, *Are you Musk? Or amber? Your scent is intoxicating!* The clay shard answers back, *I am just a humble piece of clay.*

But for a day or two

I've kept the fellowship of roses.

*It's their companionship
that has had an impact on me.
Otherwise, I am just ordinary clay.*

In the Abrahamic religious traditions, we human beings understand ourselves to be made from clay, from the earth. “Dust you are, and to dust you shall return,” we remember on Ash Wednesday. “You are the potter and I am the clay,” we sing with the prophet Jeremiah. We are like clay pots—but it is possible for a clay pot to become as fragrant as a rose, by keeping company with a rose. People are absorbent, and fragrance is catching. As is gentleness, as is compassion. What this poem suggests to me is that the church’s role as the faithful remnant is to spread compassion by being compassionate, to spread the quality of Christ’s forbearance by being forbearing. To be seen engaged in the struggle for justice, but humility and compassion, is to show that it can be done and that it’s worth doing.

Omid Safi, the director of Duke University’s Islamic Studies Center, says that

Community is an almost alchemical reaction that happens among all that we are capable of being and becoming. [repeat]

Each of us is like a musical symphony, made up of so many unsung notes. It is the encounters with our fellow human beings that determine what notes emerge from us. We have a say in the matter, we have so much say in the matter... but the beauty of our companions also has a say. The beauty of our fellowship has a say.

<https://onbeing.org/blog/seeking-community-here-and-now/>

The Christ-hymn in the letter to the Philippians tells us that what God accomplishes, God accomplishes through humility and self-emptying. If we are

serious about getting things done, we need to do them with humility and attention to the interests of others. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, Paul tells the Philippians—that is, figure out how to address problems. “For *it is God who is at work in you.*” We have to figure out what to do, but *how* to do it is with the mind of Christ, whose triumph and exaltation are the products of his gentleness, patience, and compassion.