

We are back... together... some of us newer to Belleville, some of us long-time acquaintances, even good friends! Many people ask, Why do you “go to church?” (Or what keeps you going?) Some might say, “I always learn something new, but it’s surely true that after many years of sermons, we hear “not much new under the sun.” I might rephrase that and say, “I get new personal insights, new purpose and renewed commitment when I go to church. But what I want to emphasize this morning is the value of being together and working together in community, the value of relationships that we form here.

First, we might want to confirm the famous words that “No man is an island.” ... that loneliness is a common and painful feeling (Being in solitary confinement is one of the worst punishments of the prison system!) People can go nuts without being in relationships with other people. The flip side of the coin is of course that humans are built for relationships, need them, as is evidenced by the earliest years of life, how we need nurture from a mother and father, and guidance for many years to follow. I love the words of the song “People.” *People who need people are the luckiest people in the world. We’re children, needing other children, but yet letting our grown up pride, hide all the need inside....*

Let me share from my summertime reading a reflection from a wise spiritual writer, Sister Melanie Svoboda, of the Sisters of Notre Dame, in her book “Everyday Epiphanies.” She observed two siblings on a slide. The older sister slides down and waits at the bottom, then the younger brother, about 3, climbs slowly and hesitantly toward the top. The sister yells words of encouragement and stands at the bottom with open arms and the little brother finally slides down! Sister Melanie concludes: “How much we rely on the encouragement of others to do the hard things in life. The little boy also needed the presence of his sister, ready to catch him, at the end of the slide.” She

then makes a spiritual analogy with Jesus: “Jesus goes before us, and he waits for us - with open arms - at the end of our slide.”

Let me jump right to our situation here at Belleville. Again, some are newer, and some have found years long friendships here. Yet we are small in numbers, which can have pros and cons. Helen Hatcher, a beloved member of our Bible group, used to say, “You can’t be anonymous” at Belleville. It may be a negative for some who think, “Hey, I want to slip in and slip out... preferably in the back row! So I think I’ll go elsewhere to that church with hundreds attending. The positive side, and sometimes challenging side, is that we do get to know each other rather quickly, so the potential for friendship, for support, getting to know ourself and others at a deeper level is very great... We can interact with people around us, who can help us see our true selves, see our gifts, see our uniqueness.

People come together for all kinds of reasons, Birds of a feather do flock together... people who like the same sport or team gather together, people who like the same kind of music, people with the same hobby... There will always be clubs, groups of people that have same age or same interests.

But there can be a more powerful foundation for friendship, when the common focus has to do with faith, hope, love and peace. People say *Dolly Parton* drew people together from all different walks of life, even different political persuasions! Something about her simple and kind and honest songs! People say that the *World Cup of Soccer* recently drew diverse people together in an amazing way... perhaps the sheer love of the game worldwide (it is simple, inexpensive, no fancy equipment needed... I saw barefoot kids in the mountains of Honduras kicking a ball through makeshift goals! The sport is truly worldwide, and thus drew worldwide attention and fans. I love our little cafe-like tables! If conversation lags, try talking about Dolly Parton!

As Christians, we believe that a common focus on Christ, whether spoken or unspoken, can have amazing power for unifying people... a deep commitment to his Way should ultimately result in kindness, love, and the grace that Jesus embodied. Unfortunately, many argue over fine points of baptism, communion, heaven and hell, over literal and figurative understandings, but if the essence of Christ is welcomed, that of inclusive, merciful love, then friendship and unity is possible: friendship across the isles, unity in diversity. We can respect others who are doing their best to follow The Way, growing and learning all the time. I extrapolate that to include other faiths... that *anyone* seeking to be more Godlike, more peaceful, truthful, and just, can become a trusted friend.

I'll close with the vision and Christian experience of my good friend Ken Medema, in his song, written about 50 years ago at about age 30(!), called "Shall We Learn to Be Friends!" Ken does easily make friends with so many around the world, especially in churches that follow Christ, trusting they can be like family, like a mother, like a father, like a sister, like a brother.....

You are my sister, even when I do not know you. You are my brother, even when I do not show you. You're in my family; in Christ, you're kin to me. Now you are one with me, shall we learn to be friends. You are my mother, when I fall and when I'm hurting. You are my father, please forgive me my deserting. You're in my family, in Christ, your kin to me. Now you are one with me, shall we learn to be friends? I need you near me when my hope is gone. Come, lift me up and help me carry on. Then when you're weak you'll find me by your side, to comfort you, and see you through. You are my daughter, it matters not your race or nation. You are my son, my own, may we embrace in celebration. You're in my family, in Christ your kin to me. Now you are one with me, shall we learn to be friends? Let's learn to be friends. (Amen.)