

True Communion

Mt 9:9-13, 18-26

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Read Mt 9:9-13, 18-26

Networking or communion?

I do not use Facebook.... and I feel rather sorry for myself that I do not have an iPhone or a Blackberry. But I Twitter, I have my own website, I maintain a heap of blogs, and I am continually using Skype and MSN for communication.

Have you been networking a lot in the past week? That is immensely important for being successful in life.

On Skype you can decide to turn on or off the option for other people to see how many contacts you have. Oh, how important it is that other people realize how large our networks are, because that gives the impression of success!

We want to let other people know about our networks, because without our networks, we are nothing. At least, that is common idea: Being widely connected is of utmost importance. We must be spiders in a web of relationships.

Networking means purposely connecting with other people, mainly for the sake of advancing our own career, or for furthering some special goals you have in your work, or in church. Without those connections, it is much harder to get done what you must do, or what you want to do.

Networking, I believe, is a symptom of the **individualism** that is so rampant in the Western world. It is an effort of individual people to create a semblance of togetherness in order to extract maximum per-

sonal benefit for oneself from contacts with others. And if I read my Twitter well, it is mostly about I, me, and myself. If you use Twitter, you know what I mean. ‘This morning I had an egg with breakfast; I did not boil it long enough...’

The Church has always used the word **community** for how we relate to one another.

Community is not so focused on what we want to achieve, but on who we are, and on who the other person is, more than on what she or he can do for me.

Keywords in real community are mutual respect, love, freedom to express one's personality, care for each other. This is something we all need, as we have been created by God as social beings.

Egyptian society, where I live, has much more of an eye than we in the Western world for family and friends, and for enjoying those relationships just for the sake of being together. I have learned much from living in that society for over 18 years.

On the other hand, I also see how many Egyptians suffer from the fact that their social life is packed with the need to heed authority and regulations. Many are deeply unhappy about this. Arab society is permeated with laws, often very oppressive laws, comparable with many of the laws ancient Israel in the time of Jewish had, dictating every aspect of social life.

Individuality of the lawless: at the expense of communion

Jesus had a life overflowing with friends and family. Even in the last, very tense, week of his life, he took much time to have deep and intimate relationships with his friends, real communion with his closest companions.

Jesus is often portrayed in the gospels while at diner tables: times of celebration of intimacy and community. Often these meetings were also moments of great tension with his fiercest critics, the Pharisees. That was not so much for what was on the table, as for who were on the chairs.

N.T. Wright, the Anglican bishop of Durham (England), says about the meal of Jesus in the home of Matthew:

Jesus was, as it were, celebrating the messianic banquet, and doing so with all the wrong people. [N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London, 1996), p. 431-2.]

According to the religious laws of Israel, Jesus should not be eating with Matthew. So when he had a meal with Matthew and his friends, the Pharisees were greatly upset and asked the disciples: ‘How can your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners!’

Tax officials are never the most popular people in a country; in this case, Matthew was collaborating with the Roman occupiers of Israel. He was a Jewish man who had sold his soul to the Romans.

For the *a-moral* social climbers in Israel, one of the most desirable tasks was tax collecting. Those jobs usually went to the highest bidders; Josephus describes around the year 93 AD in his book *Antiquities of the Jews* (Book xii, iv, 4) that (what he calls) ‘the principal men of dignity’ – meaning the wealthiest Jews - would bid for the right to collect tax on behalf of the Roman occupiers. We call this system *tax farming*.

The highest bidder would be entitled to cash the taxes along a highway or at a city gate, and of course, in order to make this profitable, the tax collector extorted as much as he could from his own people.

Matthew had his customs house outside Capernaum, on the highway between Syria and Egypt, with a lot of heavy traffic. Anyone passing through had to pay him, for the products they carried, the animals they were going to trade in Jerusalem, or just, for passing. An immensely lucrative business it must have been, for Matthew had a house large enough to host a rather big feast for all of his friends and for Jesus and his disciples.

Matthew had placed himself outside the community of the Jewish church, he did not care about its laws – and he had all the money he needed for leading his own life and for expressing his individuality just as he wanted to, he was *a free man*.

Was he? His individualism came at a prize. People like Matthew were scorned by their own people for not leading a life under the yoke of the law, for their political support to the Romans, for extorting money from the Jews, and for defiling themselves with contact with Romans.

In his *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (1876), the Messiac Jew Alfred Edersheim describes the Jewish attitude to the tax collectors. They were declared incapable of bearing testimony in a Jewish court of law, it was forbidden to receive their charitable gifts, to change money out of their treasury, and they were ranked with harlots, heathens, robbers and murderers. No wonder the rabbis formally excommunicated them from the religious and communal life of the synagogue. So, they were, officially, not allowed to participate in the communion of the people of God.

The present Roman-Catholic Pope Benedict XVI wrote a wonderful book about Jesus; in this he describes Matthew as one who ‘worked hand in glove with the reigning power and had to be classed as a public sinner on account of his social position’. [Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York, 2007), p. 178.]

Everyone in the city of Capernaum knew Matthew; everyone despised him. Well, maybe not everyone, because he had his house full with people. He had been networking a lot, and he had his own sordid group of friends together in his house. People that were, like him, publicly known as sinners. An interesting bunch of people that must have been. Scum. Profiteers. Collaborators.

I purposely say that Matthew had networked; I would not call the meeting of this bunch of people 'communion'; communion suggests togetherness based on accepting one another for who you are; the meeting of these sinners and tax collectors was, I think, mostly focused on what they could extract from one another. And, I guess, their unity was more based on the fact that others rejected them, than on their own liking for each other.

The group of the excommunicated. Individuals thrown together because they belonged nowhere else. The cement in their relationships

was their choice to all do as they pleased, with no respect for the laws of God and for authority in the Jewish church.

Community of the law: at the expense of individuality

Jesus feasts with those people. The Pharisees, however, were outside, afraid to defile themselves. They did not want any form of closeness with ‘those people’.

The Pharisees themselves were a tightly knit community of people trying to serve God. That desire to serve God was very commendable.

Their need for communion was met to a certain extent by all of them living according to the strictest interpretations of the laws of God, in accordance with traditions. The high walls of intricate laws, the *shari'ah* of Judaism surrounded their community.

In such society, and I know this from life in the Arab, communal and strict adherence to laws does really create a sense of togetherness. The Islamic month of fasting, *Ramadan*, was celebrated last month; people really feel good by all together following the strict rules of fasting. It certainly creates a strong bond. And outsiders to Islam, like the millions of Copts, are very careful not to be seen eating and drinking in public, because they might easily suffer the anger and scorn of the Muslims; they are seen as fracturing the community in Egypt.

The Pharisees strengthened their communion by the exclusion of people who did not follow all the laws of God. You were either in or out.

Rules and authority, that kept them all together, and if you did not conform to that, you could count on being excluded. A popular verse for these Pharisees was Psalm 26:4-5:

I do not sit with deceitful man
Nor do I consort with hypocrites
I abhor the assembly of evildoers
And refuse to sit with the wicked.

Individuality was not respected much, as individuality was a danger to the group and its traditional focus on the law and proper behavior.

Anyone showing his individuality and not agreeing to all of the rules was cut off from the group.

The Pharisaic society offered community at the expense of individuality. And may I suggest, this is actually also less than true communion.

We see this very strongly being played out in the Arab World. Conformism is demanded, and individualism is rejected. This is painful for many, for not only have we been created as social, communal beings, but just as much as valuable individuals.

Each person is entitled to express him- or herself as he or she is, and if people do this, they can really strengthen the community they are part of. But for the Pharisees, this was unacceptable.

From the perspective of this worldview of the Pharisees, the anger at Jesus was logical. Jesus was enjoying food and drinks, probably bought with evil gain from the tax collection, and likely, unclean according to Jewish law. He was rubbing shoulders with all sorts of low lives who were unpleasant, and ritually unclean as well, as they did not follow the proper laws and lifestyle as prescribed by God.

Communion of Jesus

Jesus did not agree with the concept of communion that the Pharisees had, and He created a new community. The same bishop N.T. Wright whom I already cited, says:

Allegiance to Jesus himself constituted a new family tie, overriding all others. [N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London, 1996), p. 431-2.]

Jesus broke down all barriers between people. The community He creates is not based on exclusion – but on inclusion. Social background, religious status, lifestyle, all this is secondary. The heart of the community around Jesus is grace, generosity, forgiveness, and acceptance. And this community is not based on law, but on love, because Jesus himself is the center of the communion.

The rulebook is not central, as the Pharisees would want it. Jesus shows this very clearly in the meetings he had immediately after the

meal at Matthew's home: Jairus, the leader of the synagogue in town comes and urges him to come and heal his daughter. She had just died, but he believed Jesus could raise her to life.

Jesus hurried to the house of Jairus, but he was interrupted: A woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years touched the fringe of his cloak, believing Jesus could heal her.

Well, that is what He did, but mind you, the woman was unclean. Impure. Just as all the friends of Matthew were untouchables. According to the laws of Moses, anyone touching such a woman became unclean as well and had to go and purify himself in the temple through sacrifices. Jesus did not do that.

Next, without any purification, Jesus also touches the daughter of Jairus, and by touching her, according to the laws of Moses, He again made himself unclean. You were not allowed, according to Mosaic Law, to touch a corpse. The Pharisees would have said – and maybe that is what they *did* say – that this was all totally shameful and a dishonor to God and his holy laws.

But Jesus embraces all in need – and is prepared to not worry about ceremonial laws for the sake of these people. Not in order to condone lawlessness, but to draw people out of their misery into a new community around Himself. That is what the Christian life is about.

Jesus had fellowship with all who wanted to be with Him; and He tells the Pharisees off for their view of religion that pushes people away from this community of God. He quotes from the prophet Hosea: 'Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'

But did the Old Testament not demand sacrifice? Yes, of course. But the Pharisees had forgotten that all the laws of God were an expression of His love for mankind, and that our proper response to God, is to also love our fellow man.

God is gracious before He is demanding! A religion that gives exactly 10% of mint, dill and cumin but leaves undone the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faithfulness, is nothing but a sad distortion of the will of God.

Jesus saw Matthew in his tax office, and invited him to become His follower. As Capernaum was the city where Jesus lived, He must have known Matthew and his reputation. In spite of this, He did not first tell him off, He did not first demand a radical makeover; He did not first demand a righteous lifestyle. Jesus saw Matthew, not as a sinner in the first place, but as a creature of God who was in need of healing. An individual in need.

John Calvin says about Jesus' invitation to Matthew:

Jesus teaches that the healing of us all depends not on the merits of our own righteousness, but on His sheer generosity.

Jesus simply invited Matthew: come and follow me. Be with me. Become part of my new community. Now Matthew must have understood enough of that generosity of Christ to leave his booth, lock the door, and follow Jesus.

Why did Matthew decide to change his life and follow Jesus? I guess this can only mean that he had been unhappy with his lifestyle for a while. It is unlikely that he decided to change his life from one moment to the other.

He had lived for years as a true individualist, someone who did not care a bit about the criticism of the Jewish community. He lived his own pleasant wealthy life, yes, with many scumbags as 'friends', but so what. But that did not satisfy the deep hunger for real communion with other people and with God.

He had heard, of course, of Jesus before, as Jesus often stayed in his town. And Matthew had heard of the events that had occurred in town just the day before: Jesus had miraculously healed and forgiven the sins of some people.

Exactly what Matthew needed – a new start, a new life. And as he now met Jesus personally, as Jesus looked him in the eye and invited him: come, follow me, he knew the time had come.

Follow. That is not the trademark of individualism. But Matthew did not care any longer. He wanted to be part of the community around Jesus.

The new community was not about rules, laws, habits, authority, as the Pharisees would have it. It respects each person's individuality and creativity as a unique creature of God.

But the new community was also not a togetherness based just on mutually beneficial arrangements, as individualist Matthew was used to among his mates. In the new community, authority and rules for life are part of the deal.

Legalism and the misuse of authority are destructive for true community.

And their opposites, individualism and a rejection of rules and authority are just as destructive.

For real community, you have to be drawn to Jesus who is the heart of the new community that God is building. And that changed the life of Matthew.

By following Jesus, he became pleasing to God. What the law could not do, Jesus did. Matthew followed and obeyed the generous Jesus; the generosity of Jesus immediately rubbed off: Matthew introduced this Jesus to all of his friends, by organizing a diner party.

Our community

The Pharisees looked at that party of sinners, and what they saw was a whole bunch of sick people. Untouchables. Jesus rebukes them for their attitude. 'If you consider yourselves experts in the realm of spiritual and religious health, why do you not show mercy to Matthew and his friends? If you consider people "of that sort" to be sick, then heal them, do not walk away from them.'

In a sermon on this diner party at Matthew's home, Saint John Chrysostom in the 4th century explained that if the doctor is not willing to put up with the decay of those who are sick, he can not heal them. [John Chrysostom, *Gospel of Matthew* Homily 30.2]

The doctor must be in touch with those who are sick. Therefore Jesus, as the great physician of the soul, lives with the people, eats with all, inviting them to a life in communion with Him.

Not only those known as sinners, but the Pharisees as well, were in need of healing. Both the unrighteous and the self-righteous are in need of the healing Master. Actually, no one of us can do without Jesus the healer, but where He is allowed to be the center of the community, people experience wholeness. Health.

In the old *Book of Common Prayer* of 1559, the general confession of the whole congregation, of all people in church, good, bad, pious and not so pious, was:

ALMIGHTIE and most merciful father, we have erred and strayed from thy waies, lyke lost shepee we have folowed to much the devises and desires of our owne hartes. We have offended against thy holy lawes: We have left undone those thinges whiche we ought to have done, and we have done those thinges which we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us, but thou, O Lorde, have mercy upon us miserable offenders.

We all confess: there is no health in us. We are all, at all times, in need of the Great Physician, Jesus Christ and we have no right whatsoever to look down on sinners like Matthew, and we have no right to look down on self-righteous Pharisees, because like them, we have no health in us. We are not so different.

That is why we are so unbelievably blessed that Jesus is inviting us, today again, to His fellowship. We are all welcome. And while we participate in the meal with Him, not only do we rejoice in the mercy he offers to us. We also pray, again in words of that old confession:

Restore thou them that be penitent, accordyng to thy promises declared unto mankynde, in Christe Jesu our Lorde. And graunt, O most merciful father, for his sake, that we may hereafter lyve a godly, ryghtuous, and sobre life, to the glory of thy holy name.

Now if Jesus offers that generous mercy to all of us, of forgiveness and of a changed life, we can only follow Him and offer the same mercy to all other people. We open the doors of our lives, the doors of our church, so that others can also enjoy the feast with Christ and the healing He offers.

He calls us to even go further, to go into our world as physicians, to be his healing hands among our friends, colleagues, people in our street, and to administer Jesus' medicine to people hungry for true community.

Peace and healing are present in the community around Him, where we are all able to be ourselves, where individuality is celebrated, where forgiveness and love abound, and where communion is fostered because we all focus on our generous and merciful Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us also follow Him, generously feasting with all people, in church and outside church bringing peace, and healing.

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen.