Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

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A COOPERATIVE FAITH Mark 6:1–13

In a column written by my favorite conservative commentator David Brooks, published a week ago, (*Honolulu Star Advertiser-*6/30/18), retiring Chief Justice Anthony Kennedy is quoted. In 1992, Kennedy approved of the shift from a focus on shared community to the value of individual autonomy with the following words:

“At the heart of liberty is the right to define

one’s own concept of existence, of meaning,

of the universe, and of the mystery of human

life.”

Kennedy’s quote is a celebration of individualism. Each one of us, apart from anyone else and the community surrounding us, has the right to define our own existence and its meaning, and even the mystery of human life. We have the right to do this all by ourselves, apart from grandparents, parents, friends, teachers, philosophers, or theologians. In the end, it doesn’t matter what they say. We have the right to define our own life and its meaning.

Let me say at the outset that this kind of thinking is in opposition to everything the Gospel of Jesus Christ stands for. Jesus was not a proponent of individualism and individual liberty. To the contrary, his message and ministry was based on the importance of *relationship*, which he summarized as loving God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

David Brooks adds a realistic note. If we are required as individuals to determine life’s meaning all on our own, without the help of others, are we not giving ourselves an impossible task? Who among us can do such a thing, unless we are a Socrates, a Plato, or an Aristotle? I do not know about you, but when I reflect on my own search for meaning, it was the faith of my grandmother and mother, the faith and theological insights and social commitments of my father, and the wisdom of countless teachers and friends that shaped my own understanding. The influence of others continues to this day. I did not and do not have to do it all on my own. Of course, I do not have to accept everything that everyone has shared with me. Each of us in the Christian community is asked to own the faith for ourselves, and each human being, whether religious or not, must shape a world of meaning for themselves, but on the other hand, we don’t have to start from scratch. Indeed, if we do start from scratch, we do so at our own peril.

Individualism in North American culture is highly overrated. It has not resulted in social cohesion or a commitment to the common good. It, on the other hand, has resulted in a divided society, the loss of a shared morality that holds us together, and the disappearance of the human solidarity that can teach the value of neighborliness. Individualism has resulted in the creation of a fractured society, which now threatens to undo us as a people.

And as for the idea of the independent self, can we not say that it is an illusion? Not one of us could exist without the help of others. Others, some half way around the world, pick the beans I use to brew my morning coffee. Others make the Anahola Granola I enjoy. Still others grow my breakfast fruit. And we could go on and on. The guiding word is not independence; it is inter-dependence.

It is said rightly that it takes a village to raise a child. And then there is that insightful African proverb that says: *“Because we are, I am.”*

Earlier I suggested that the Gospel of Jesus Christ stands in opposition to individualism. Actually, I was thinking about this morning’s scripture reading from the Gospel of Mark. At several points our reading celebrates inter-dependence. Jesus goes back to his hometown and on the Sabbath he begins to teach in the synagogue. Those who knew him as a carpenter as his father was before him, and as the son of Mary, begin to question his authority to teach and his power to heal. Who does this upstart think he is? Jesus replies with the saying that has become so familiar: ”Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their kin, and in their own home.” (Mark 6:4) There follows in the reading two verses that are often overlooked: “And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.” (Mark 6:4–5) Revealing indeed! In order to do deeds of power, Jesus needs to rely on the belief of others. If they do not believe, Jesus is incapable of doing what he is sent to do. Jesus has to rely on the belief of others. It’s all about inter-dependence.

The theme carries through to the next part of the reading. Jesus gives the same authority to teach and heal to the twelve disciples that he himself has. He sends them out, not one by one, but two by two. The disciples will need the companionship and assistance of one another. They are to take nothing for their journey except a staff. No bread, no money for them! A staff, sandals and a single tunic will suffice. Behind this instruction lies a way of life. The disciples are to be dependent upon the kindness and hospitality of others. If they enter a home, and they are welcomed, they will stay there and minister in that place. If they are not extended hospitality, if they are not welcomed, they are to shake the dust from their feet and move on to a place that will welcome them. It is there that they will proclaim the Gospel of repentance. It is there that they will cast out demons and anoint the sick with oil. The disciples, just as Jesus himself, will need to depend on the faith and hospitality of others in order to do the work Jesus calls them to do. It’s all about inter-dependence.

In yesterday morning’s column by David Brooks (*Honolulu Star Advertiser* 7/7/18), the legacy of Mr. Rogers is explored. Brooks recalls the time that Fred Rogers met a 14 year-old boy whose cerebral palsy had left him unable to walk or talk at times. Rogers asked the boy to pray for him. Writes Brooks:

The boy was thunderstruck. He had been the object

of prayers many times, but nobody had asked him

to pray for another. He said he would try since Mister

Rogers must be close to God and if Mister Rogers

liked him he must be OK.

A commentator named Tom Junod complimented Mr. Rogers on the way he cleverly boosted the boy’s self-esteem. But that is not how Fred Rogers looked at the situation. He said to Tom Junod:

“Oh, heavens no, Tom! I didn’t ask him for his prayers

for *him;* I asked for me. I asked him because I think

that anyone who has gone through the challenges like

that must be very close to God. I asked him because

I wanted his *intercession.*”

Truly, it’s all about inter-dependence. We are to appreciate the faith we see in each other. We are to pray for one another. We are in this journey of faith together. We are to rely upon one another so that we can be in ministry together. We are to depend upon one another so that we can serve the common good of all. We are to look to others to enrich our own faith and understanding. Jesus himself has showed us the way.

It just may be that the value of inter-dependence can be the Christian community’s gift to a world so in need of community and human solidarity. It can be if we set aside the individualism that has made its way into American Christianity. The goal of Christian faith is not to get *me* into heaven. The goal of Christian faith is not to make *me* happy. The goal is to embody the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our life together so that we may have the grace, strength, and courage to serve the needs of our world. May God help us so to do. Amen.