

HOPEFUL COMMUNITIES  
a talk by  
Father Tom Picton, 11/29/2018

Metaphor is a window into the heart of human desire and longing. It reveals the human spirit as it fuses our deepest held beliefs with our lived experience. Community as metaphor expresses the truth of our longing for relationship, the best expression of our humanness. When we are as committed to listening to our Higher Power, the Divine, God or however you choose to name your Higher Power, as we are to listening to ourselves and to listening to others, we enter into an experience of human relationship called Community. Listening to God, self and other creates Community. This divine/human interaction is indeed a healing process. Truly, community is a healing metaphor for a fragmented world. It is not an option. It is an obligation for anyone who has committed himself to bring about a better world for humankind.

The most profound longings of our contemporary human spirit are variously contained in the language of critics, scholars, theologians, spiritual writers and poets and those ordinary folks who can verbalize their inner pain. Repeatedly, we encounter persons feeling alone and orphaned. Some years ago, when I was working in New York City, a 35-year-old divorced man who had been homeless for a few years on the streets of New York sat with me in tears and said, "I don't feel like I belong anywhere or to anyone. I just feel unwanted and not connected to anybody. I just keep looking for things to make me feel better. I have experimented with drugs, indulged in alcohol, and binged on sex. The pain of the chasm of not connecting with anyone grows deeper and wider every day. Nothing lasts that gives me relief from my pain. I feel like I am on the very edge of dropping out, giving up. I am trapped, cold, alone. I can't get out. Nothing makes sense anymore." His expression approximates that of a prisoner in self-enforced solitary confinement. In the act of expressing his truth, and in response of someone listening to his excruciating pain of helplessness and isolation, he begins his journey toward freedom and reconnecting to humanity and to

something larger than himself – something we sometimes call God or Higher Power, or the Unseen One.

Daily news commentaries unveil progressive fragmentation, division, and self-serving separatism in our society. Separatism is often disguised and justified under the rubric of nationalism or individualism – my issue, my agenda above anyone else's agenda or issue. To recover from the stunning and disheartening consequences of enforced and formalized division and separatism, we face with greater determination the pain and suffering all around us and renew our commitment to spiritual values of compassion, justice, peace, reconciliation and the common good. Repeatedly, our poets, spiritual writers, ecologists, sociologists, business analysts and religious leaders reflect to us the dangers and numbing effects of individualism, separatism and the disregard of unity and the common good. They reflect the need to invite those who promote fierce commitment to their own agendas of survival in isolation to change, to become part of something larger than themselves, to participate in Communities of Hope.

What are the demands and consequences of living at the heart of the metaphor? What does it mean for you and me at various moments in our human journeys to commit and entrust ourselves to ultimate belonging – to the creation of Communities of Hope which attest to the truthfulness of spiritual values of compassion, justice, peace, reconciliation and the common good?

This question is currently occupying a central focus for the Institutional Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And it is a question that institutions must begin to answer by calling themselves to accountability. We know well that norms which were enough and effective yesterday are painfully inadequate to address the crises of today. Yet, despite uncertainty and criticism from those upon whom we have counted, we entrust ourselves to spiritual values that transcend our petty, self-centered, divisive issues that lead to nowhere.

We must risk new ways of being community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – communities of celebration that radiate coherent unity and hope to society. More and more communities like the St. Francis Homeless Community – communities of marginalized persons who are immersing themselves with other marginalized persons and the most vulnerable. In the blighted core of our cities and towns, communities of persons living on the edge are embracing spiritual values and becoming communities of prayer, respite, and hospitality – a contradiction in an environment charged with violence, separation, division and suspicion.

Communities of Hope are responding to those trying to survive on the edge of society to help themselves. Spiritual reflection, common prayer, radical simplicity and advocacy without imposing one particular religious doctrine or point of view form the non-negotiable basis of their community life. Surrounded by more affluent neighborhoods, a growing enclave of people living on our streets are becoming Communities of Hope giving hospitality to other sojourners living on the edge. St. Francis Homeless Community challenges our stereotypes of what it means to live on the margins, spiritually inspired and committed, and full of possibility for the future.

Communities of Hope are consistently faced with the risk of becoming sidetracked from their dynamic function of bringing forth a new way of life based on collaboration, mutuality and respect. The dominant system will try to entice them to set aside their identity and replace it with its own. It will consistently and untiringly try to seduce them with power and money to abandon their mission of proclaiming compassion, truth, justice and healing. If Communities of Hope remain faithful expressions of the human desire for healing, solidarity with the suffering and vulnerable and longing for communion with God and with creation, they will continue to agitate and disturb pervasive systems stuck in the status quo.

We pray in the words of the Prophet Jeremiah that we will continue to “seek God with all our heart, with a single loyalty, with a centered hope.” (Jer. 29:13)

