



Community of Hope

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This morning we gather, at the beginning of this new term, as a community known as Eastern Mennonite University. We come together as a collection of individuals, each with unique histories and experiences, gifts and strengths, weaknesses and challenges.

Some of us have been members of this EMU community for nearly 40 years, others for scarcely 40 hours. The EMU community is different simply because each of us is here. And, when any of us leaves, it is changed again.

Community – a word that is so common (no pun intended) that its meaning is all but lost on us. A few weeks ago a young, pregnant mother was brutally murdered when another woman decided to take her baby as her own. Apparently she had planned the episode for several months—communicating with the future victim through the internet, supposedly brought together through membership in the “rat-terrier” community. It would be humorous if it weren’t so horrific.

One can find many “communities” on the internet these days. As one person put it, there is even an anarchist community, surely an oxymoron if there ever was one.

What does it mean to live in authentic community? There is plenty of evidence that simply working and living in close proximity to each other does not, in itself, result in community. Last fall I learned about one of our students who had been a first-year student a year earlier but chose to transfer to another college. Someone asked her why she chose to leave EMU. Her response was that while she liked her classes and professors, “the students weren’t friendly.” It turned out that for most of the year she was calling her boyfriend and mother back home every day, several times every day.

I heard that story one day and later was driving across town to an appointment. I came to a stoplight and saw what looked to be three students (at another university) walking down the sidewalk together, two of them chatting on cell phones as they walked. And, I wondered to myself, would any of them say that JMU is not a friendly campus?

I hear other stories that stretch my concept of real community. Students IM-ing each other while sitting next to each other in a dorm room. Any of us choosing to communicate about difficult issues by using email rather than to engage in face-to-face dialog and conversation. Many corporations have long practiced “casual Fridays” to allow employees to dress less formally in the business “community.” Just last month it was reported that the latest movement is to practice non email days on Fridays—no one is allowed to send an email or read one on Fridays. I wonder how it would change our experience of community to ban emails and cell phones for just one day a week.

All of us crave authentic community. We have ethereal visions about the perfect community, where there is no conflict, everyone loves everyone else, smiles everywhere, never a cross word or a misunderstanding. Shalom. Peace. Love. The kind of community that each of us surely experienced when we went home for the holidays, at least in our hopeful imaginations.

The reality is often something else. Our world is not at peace. Our families are far from perfect. We know too much pain and suffering. Even when we don't experience death and devastation personally, we see it played out on the news nearly every day. We know the disappointments of dreams that turn into nightmares. Life was meant to be another way, most of us think, and yet it brings unexpected challenges. Our closest friends disappoint us, and we know we disappoint them. As parents we have dreams for our children, we pray for them every day, and our hearts are nearly ripped out when they make decisions that endanger their very lives.

Is it possible to find hope in a world where raging tsunamis roar into villages and, in a matter of short minutes, snuff out the lives of hundreds of thousands of innocent victims? How does one find hope when illness strikes seemingly indiscriminately? Is hope just a mirage, a mesmerizing glimmer in the distance, appealing yet without substance? Does community, with all its imperfections, have anything to do with hope?

Vaclav Havel put it this way, “Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

Emily Dickinson was more poetic:

“Hope is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tunes without the words—
And never stops—at all—

Jean Kerr's words are perhaps more cynical or at least playful, “Hope is the feeling you have that the feeling you have isn't permanent.”

I suggest that hope is impossible to find apart from community. And it's very difficult, if not impossible, to find true community only after one faces a crisis. It has to be cultivated when life is good.

Ronald Rolheiser, in his book, "The Holy Longing," paraphrases I John 4:20

Part of the very essence of Christianity is to be together in a concrete community, with all the real human faults that are there and the tensions that this will bring us. Spirituality, for a Christian, can never be an individualistic quest, the pursuit of God outside of community, family, and church. The God of the incarnation tells us that anyone who says that he or she loves an invisible God in heaven and is unwilling to deal with a visible neighbor on earth is a liar since no one can love a God who cannot be seen if he/she cannot love a neighbor who can be seen.

The sociologist George Washington University Amitai Etzioni says the term "community" has not been overused as much as abused. He argues that an authentic community must include both genuine bonds of affection and shared moral values.

This morning, as we launch a new semester, whether it is your 80 th semester at EMU or your first, I invite each of you to find hope in community.

At EMU we remind ourselves frequently that we are part of the entire global community. We put real flesh on that community by our cross-cultural experiences. In a minute we will gather around those who are about to embark on such experiences for this term and will be absent from us.

I invite us to experience community with another part of the world today by praying together for those in so many Asian countries whose lives have been turned upside down by the tsunamis of the past weeks. In a few days we will have a link on our web site where any of us can go to make cash contributions to alleviate some of the suffering. I understand that student leaders will also be planning for a way for us to send material aid in the weeks ahead.

For some of us the devastation in Asia seems pretty far away. For others, family members were potentially involved. I invite anyone who is from that part of the world, or has family there, or has lived there in the past to stand.