

Second Congregational Church of Greenwich

Conversation, Celebration, Community - Of Faith

July 17, 2019

Dear Friends of Second Church,

I read in the paper today that the Office of Religious Life at the University of Southern California has just created a new position: Dean of Belonging.

The position reflects a shift in the landscape, according to the University Chaplain. When he arrived at USC over ten years ago, much of his one-on-one counseling with students was about a crisis, like a death in the family, or it was about finding the meaning of life; now, he says, students talk about their tremendous loneliness, and the fact that, while they have thousands of online “friendships,” they have little sense of how to begin the give-and-take of actual relationships, much less the hazards of their day to day management. They are on a campus with thousands of others every day, but say they have never felt more alone in their lives.

They need more coaching on how to create community in the first place—how to belong.

I'll admit, this is the sort of story that, at first, makes me sound like my great-grandfather, who would have said something like:

“You know what we had to create community? The U.S. Army, that’s what. We didn’t have time for wellness apps and drum circles and all that stuff. We were fighting the Kaiser.”

Never having fought the Kaiser, myself, it is perhaps presumptuous of me to channel my great-grandfather on this. Knowing him only much later—three major wars and many losses later—it was not always easy to fathom his understanding of community, which was far from expansive and often marked by suspicion, even anger.

I can hear his impatience with what seemed like a lack of moral fiber in the young. He often spoke about this, which was odd and unsettling when you were the audience, and young, yourself. He never had been. Being “young” in that sense was a form of privilege that his circumstances had never permitted.

So many years later, I understand some of what he meant a bit more clearly. I do think that community is important for moral fiber, and vice versa.

But the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that most people's nascent sense of belonging has always received plenty of coaching. It needs that coaching.

My great-grandfather’s limitations in this area during his later years are a case in point: whatever he knew as a younger man about the give and take of living with others, courtesy of the U.S. Army, family, work life, or his regular golf foursome, by the time I knew him, his life had shrunk, and he had neither interest nor insight in how he might belong in a changing world. We in his family knew better than to try to coax or coach him. Sadly, that suggests to me some of the limitations of belonging as he had learned it.

I wonder who might have intervened. A Dean of Belonging? Probably not. A pastor? Not much more likely. But surely there were people in his life with whom he spoke about more than superficial things, whose claims on him he recognized and honored, in his way. Why wasn't he able to maintain those relationships, even as blindness and frailty so mercilessly curtailed his circuit of the world in which he lived?

If only he might have learned how. May we all resolve to do so.

How does that learning begin? I'm not sure. But if gathering around a drum circle or speaking to a Dean of Belonging offers occasions for relationships and habits and social graces to form, I say, God bless all of that.

And as the hand of community here at church pushes and pulls and coaxes us into the ever-evolving claims of others upon our lives, may we learn to bless God in that, too.

See you in church,

Max

**Max's Sermon this week is based on Scripture from:
Luke 11:1-13**

**If you would like to hear past Sermons you can find them on our website:
2cc.org**



Coffee Hour – there is a sign-up sheet in Fletcher Hall for those who would like to bring baked goods for “Sunday Morning Coffee Hour.” We recommend that you bring approximately four dozen bite-size items. The church will continue to supply fruit and beverage.

You can also sign-up via email pam@2cc.org.

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