

The Challenge of Community

June 27, 2018

It's good to build relationships with people. In the office building of the Presbytery, a woman works every evening to clean our space, the bathrooms, and other offices on our floor. Usually she is cleaning in the hallway outside the Presbytery office about the time I'm leaving for the day. With my limited Spanish, I try to exchange a few pleasantries, including thanks for how nicely everything smells as she's cleaning.

Not long ago, I went through my routine to leave office and lock up. I had a big box to carry to my car, so I left that in the office while I used the bathroom before the drive home. I came back, grabbed my box and purse, turned out the lights and locked the door. My office companion wasn't in the hallway, but our paths don't always cross. As I opened the back stairwell door, I heard the rumbling of her cleaning cart at the far end of the hallway. During my descent, the stairwell door opened above me from our floor, and the woman shouted down to me, "Senora!" She began gesturing and explaining in Spanish that, apparently as I was using the bathroom, I had managed to tuck my skirt into the back of my stockings. Without her decision to hurry down the hallway and into the back stairwell to alert me, I would have been literally "hanging out there" exposed to all the world and the weather.

It's good to build relationships.

We don't always know who will be a blessing to us, but we know that we're called to be in community. From God's creation of two people to be companions to Jesus' teachings and healings drawing the outcast back into community, we learn God's desire for us. The Presbytery's oft-stated core value of authentic relationships honors that calling.

But it also challenges us in several ways. It challenges us to consider how broadly we draw the boundaries of our community. Does it include people who don't speak our first language? Does it include people of different religions or different citizenship? Does it include people of different socio-economic class? If we truly value authentic relationships, then differences like these become secondary to our efforts to get know each other deeply.

It also challenges us to decide the norms of behavior for our relationships. It would be easy to provoke each other on any number of issues, or to avoid one another altogether. In Hebrews 10:24-25, we receive a different encouragement: "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Though it might seem simpler, the answer is not to provoke each other to quarreling, nor to avoid each other. Rather, we are to provoke the best out of each other through encouragement, love, and good deeds. What a joy! As we reaffirm our commitment to the core value of authentic relationships, we can learn to trust each other and share genuinely about our struggles, questions, and celebrations. Through encouragement and love, we will have each other's backs, so no one is left "hanging out there." Trust me when I say how good that feels.