

“I am the vine and you are the branches. Abide in me and I in you.”

John 15:5

Listen to this extraordinary and very odd statistic. In the 1980s and 90s the number of bowlers in America has increased by 10 percent. **BUT** the number of league bowlers has decreased by 40 percent.

Let me say that again: In the 80s and 90s the number of bowlers in America has increased by 10 percent. **BUT** the number of league bowlers has decreased by 40 percent. Nearly 80 million people went bowling at least once in America last year. That's about one-third more than the number of people who voted in the last Congressional election. It's also the number of people who attend church regularly in this Country.

What's going on here?

Add to these statistics a set of statistics that you all know only too well. Organizations traditionally supported by women like the League of Women Voters and the PTA saw a dramatic membership decline in the 1970s. The Lions Clubs, the Elks, the Masons and Shriners all have seen a serious membership decline since the 1980s. The number of voters has decreased, but worse than that, the number of people who say that they have attended a public meeting on town or school affairs in the last year has fallen by more than a third since 1973.¹

Newspaper reading; TV news watching; attending political meetings; petition signing; running for public office; attending public meetings; serving as an officer or committee member in any local clubs or organizations; writing letters to the editor; participating in local meetings of national organizations; attending religious services; socializing informally with friends, relatives or neighbors; attending club meetings; joining unions; entertaining friends at home; participating in picnics; eating the evening meal with the whole family; sending greeting cards; attending parties; adults playing sports rather than watching it on TV; donating money as a percentage of income; working on community projects; giving blood. All these social and socializing activities are on the decline in the last half of the 20th century.

Almost the only groups that are growing are support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and the American Association of Retired Persons. Support groups or what are sometimes called 12 step groups, are places where folks meet socially while holding each other accountable in a disciplined way. AA is a marvelous model for the church.

The AARP on the other hand requires nothing of its members but to pay dues. There is no real membership responsibility beyond that. You pay your dues, you get a newsletter and a lobbyist in DC presents the membership statistics to a Senator or Congressional representative whose vote is needed. It's a membership organization which requires nothing more than being over 50 years of age. No local meetings or organizations, officers, committees. And it's growing.

What in the world is going on?

Sociologists are reporting on an increasing individualization of American life since the 1970s. This has always been a country that has celebrated the individual and we wouldn't want to stop doing that. This is as it should be created in the image of God that we are. But it is also a country that has celebrated its voluntarism, as the French writer, Alexis de Tocqueville noticed in his visit to our land in 1831. De Tocqueville wrote in his report, "Americans of all ages, all stations of life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations...In democratic countries knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others."

And that aspect—that ability to combine together for the social good—has decreased rapidly in the last half of the 20th century.

Our social connections are deteriorating at an alarming rate. We are retreating into the sanctuary of our homes in what might be called a "national agoraphobia"; a fear of public places.

Talk radio trades on the anxieties, angers and fears of individuals in its audience. It rarely tries to get those people mobilized to make a difference in society, to join together to meet in a social group to talk through what might be done about the things that the talk show host is complaining about.

Our social connections are frayed. The fabric of our life together is torn. Increasingly we are a people who express anger rather than hope. And the resulting pressures on family life are, I think, dramatic.

In the Gospel of John Jesus speaks eloquently of our connectedness in him. He is the vine and we are the branches. We are a whole tree made of parts which are rooted in Christ. That is the first principle of being the church.

In the great American debate about what's wrong, Jesus is encouraging us to get connected again. To work harder at being connected to one another. Abide in me and I in you.

In my family at least, it is the women who work at being connected. My aunt Mary calls us all together 4 to 5 times each year. For Christmas, Easter, weddings and graduations of her grandchildren and yes, even funerals. Her daughter, my cousin Peggy was killed in an auto accident at the age of 42 leaving four pre-teenage children behind. We gathered like and marvelous family we are around Peggy's coffin and prayed and loved her into the next life. My aunt Mary is my surrogate mother.

In England there is also a Mother's day, but it is called "Mothering Sunday." It is still the Sunday in which they honor their Mothers, but it is interesting that the name of the day is a participle built on the verb "to Mother." And it is an activity in which all of us can share.

We need desperately in our time to have the broken connections of our culture

healed. We need to be reconnected one to another, branches to the vine. We need to accept responsibility for one another. To bear each other's burdens and share each other's joy.

And I don't think that it's too great a romance to say that Mother's have done that best in our culture. Is that a genetic property or is that socialized into them? I don't know. I just know this. The work must be done. I know that it is not productive work and men in our culture don't like doing work that is not productive of something -- a paycheck, a beast killed in the deep dark forest, a repaired automobile, something to show for our work.

But the work of repairing society's brokenness, indeed the brokenness of anyone, is frustratingly non-productive. There is not much measurable to show for such hard work as making a society out of a bunch of disconnected individuals.

Only our brokenness shows up in statistics that are growing increasingly alarming. Increased violence among our youngest children. Increased cynicism and anger in our electorate. Declining number of voters and a concomitant increase in the number of complainers who have not heeded their mothers' advice not to say anything if they can't say anything good.

The church is a kind of dinosaur in this disconnected age, isn't it? To take seriously our social connectedness is a piece of work born of another time. But in this age in which folks spend too much time alone, the church needs to boldly proclaim the necessity of our connectedness to each other.

In a moment we will come to the table of the Lord--our confirmands for the first time. In the old church there was a table on which we placed the communion ware, the bread and the wine. On the face of that table were written the words, "This do in remembrance of me." Only recently have I been made aware of this play on words. In an age of dismemberment--of our divisions and isolation, the church comes to the table of the Lord in an act of re-memberment. The putting together of that which has been torn asunder. As the old wedding vows used to put it, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder."

We've been kidding Betty Behling about the church we will be building. Betty has taken charge of the kitchen and its affairs for as long as anyone knows. It is her space. But lately we pretend to be reporting to her that the building committee has decided that there will not be a kitchen in the new church. We'd save lots of time and money by eliminating the kitchen. She goes white and then purple and then red.

It's not true, of course. The church needs a kitchen where food is lovingly prepared so that the community can be gathered around the tables and remember the Lord who is the vine and who abides in us and we in him.

The proclamation of the church in our time must be this: Christ calls us to connectedness so that we may begin the difficult work of remembering a dismembered social fabric.

1. All statistics are from Robert Bellah, et al. "Individualism and the Crisis of Civic Membership" in The Christian Century May 8, 1996 p. 510ff.

