

The Community of the Baptized

Almost twenty years ago, Robert Putnam wrote a book called, *Bowling Alone*. He described how citizens of this country have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors—and just about everything else. “We’re even bowling alone,” Putnam wrote. “More Americans are bowling than ever before, but they are not bowling in leagues.”

This break-up of community has more impact than you might imagine, because community is good for us. “Joining and participating in one group cuts in half your odds of dying next year.” And yet, over the last twenty-five years, attendance at club meetings has dropped 58%, family dinners are down by 43%, and having friends over has declined by 35%. There’s no single cause to all of this. “Changes in work, family structure, age, suburban life, television, computers, women’s roles and other factors have contributed to this decline.”

Those changes have led to similar declines in the Christian Church as well. Attendance has dropped, membership declines, and congregations struggle to survive as people go off to “do their own thing” rather than gather with fellow believers on Sunday mornings. It’s become popular to be “spiritual but not religious.” Those words are really just an excuse that not only lets me decide how (or if) I want to worship God, but also allows me to imagine and decide who or what I want God to be.

So, while Putnam and others work to reinvent American society and bring communities together once again, the Church works to revitalize its “communities” (also known as “congregations”). But there’s a big difference. Civic communities have to find or create something that will bring people together, something they might have or learn to have in common. In the Church, we already have something in common: our Baptism.

We who gather on Sunday mornings have been baptized into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. God Himself chose us, forgave us our sins, adopted us into His Family, and promised us more than we could ask for or imagine. We have been re-created by God to be, as we so often confess, “the communion of saints.” All of this has been brought to you by Jesus Christ, in whom we trust, in whom we live and move and have our being, and in whom we have forgiveness, life, and salvation.

I think back on all the congregations where I have preached, all the people looking back at me. Some were relatives of others in the crowd, others were neighbors. In some places, everybody knew everybody else; in other places, they didn’t. Yet they heard God’s Word together, prayed together, sang together, received the Lord’s Body and Blood together. Each assembly was a community established not by the will of man, but by the power and gift and love of God. They were gathered around God’s Word and God’s Sacraments, because “The Church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered” (Augsburg Confession VII). That’s where the Holy Spirit has promised to work, and so that’s where the Church is.

As our Christmas celebrations subside and a New Year begins, the Church Year offers us what we might think of as a minor festival of “New Beginning.” This year, it will be on January 12th, the First Sunday after the Epiphany. It’s the day we remember the Baptism of our Lord Jesus. His Baptism paved the way for our Baptism, and all the gifts God gives with it.

Take the time to reconnect with this Community, your congregation. Get to know your fellow saints, or to know them better. Remember, God Himself baptized you into this Community. Gather with us, as we gather to receive His gifts!