

“Together”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

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For so many reasons, these past weeks of social distancing and staying-at-home have been difficult. I don't need to tell you that! It does not become normal to preach here to an empty sanctuary. The longing to be *together* again is significant. AND, it's not yet safe. The day of reconvening in person *will* come someday. And until that day, we will ensure that there are ways to stay connected—and, perhaps even deepen connections—because community matters. Practically this means that we will continue online services and/or hybrid services for the indefinite future. I know many of you do not anticipate feeling safe leaving your home or gathering in a group for many months. Even if we return to some kind of in-person gathering, we will continue to ensure online access to those who cannot gather in-person. This is the least we can do to stay together.

Being together matters. But, what kind of togetherness are we missing now? We may certainly miss friends and family members with whom we are not sheltering-in-place. I've heard the sadness of many of you to not be able to hold your grandkids . . . as well as of kids and youth longing to be with anyone beyond their parents and siblings. Perhaps you might also be missing the proverbial 'water-cooler' at work—the sociability with work colleagues that is harder to reproduce online. And, if you are an essential worker still reporting to a jobsite, I suspect the sociable banter is significantly different at this time.

By necessity, this crisis has reduced our connections—the numbers of people with whom we come into contact, the duration of in-person contacts outside our designated shelter mates, and often *how* we connect with those beyond our home. If we do leave our houses, the face coverings we now wear reduce our appreciation of facial expression and social cues. Rather, their presence reminds us to keep our distance and to hurry safely home.

ARGH. It's enough to make one want to scream!

Even as we may question the wisdom of those who rush back to newly reopened restaurants, stores, parks, or other places, perhaps we also get it. We likely feel the longing to be together with others.

In his seminal work, *The Great Good Place*, sociologist Ray Oldenburg helps to explain the power of this longing to make connections with others. More specifically, he argues we need connections in “third places”—places that are neither home (the first place) or work

(the second place). Third places are sites like street cafes in Paris, beer halls in Germany, pubs in Ireland. Third places can also be local bookstores, cafes, convenience stores. Although the place may differ, they all serve a longing for human communion.

According to Oldenburg's description, third places share a number of characteristics. Firstly, they are "neutral ground" where people can come and go. As such, they can also serve as social levelers where a variety of people from different backgrounds, social classes, etc. can gather. In fact, one of the joys of third places is that many of our roles that define us in other places are suspended. While third places have regulars that shape the character of a place, they also are accessible to new folks. Part of their accessibility is simply being open. Oldenburg explains: "Third places must stand ready to serve people's needs for sociability and relaxation before, between, and after their mandatory appearances elsewhere."

Third places are sociable places with a tug towards a mood of play and laughter. As sociable places with a wide tolerance for inviting people in, they are places where we can learn to interact with a wide range of people—not just in terms of social location, but also in terms of personality. Yes, that person may be a bore and this other person a bit "off", but they too are part of the communion of the place.

I miss my third places. Do you have a third place? What third places do you miss? I want to try something new and "poll" you—if you are on Zoom, a polling question should have popped up on your screen. As you are able, please respond. [Poll: Q1: Do you have a third place? Yes. No. I'm not sure. Q2: If you have a 3rd place, what kind of place is it? coffee shop, restaurant, library, bookstore other store, other place.]

Oldenburg thinks that if you have a third place, you're lucky. He bemoans the many city planners who segregate places of work and home without leaving space for third places. In his 1996 preface to the second edition of his book, Oldenburg mournfully cites the absence of third places for people to gather in a crisis. When available, these gathering places can help stage a community's response to events like hurricanes. Their absence is such a loss for Oldenburg because "third places serve to sort people according to their potential usefulness in collective undertakings." Born in open diversity, third places could be a site for gathering, sorting resources, and staging responses.

Of course, we've been living in a crises very different than a hurricane or Nor'easter. And given the nature of *this* crises, we are basically barred from gathering in any kind of third places. Heck, many of us cannot or do not leave our first place, our home! In this way, Oldenburg's analysis of the importance of third places help us to name one of the losses we

may be keenly feeling. The loss of lingering in neutral spaces where some faces may be familiar regulars and others may be strangers. The loss of comfortable, playful banter over a cup of coffee with a friend. I think of our congregant, David Lang, who was such a regular at the Starbucks in Cochituate that they prominently posted the notice of his death and a statement of their loss. These third places can become places that root us and link us to others in real and powerful ways.

At our best, I believe First Parish can be a third place. One of my favorite moments of this year came in late January before a Sunday Service. I was in a corner of the Vestry setting something up from where I listened to the rising hum. Folks warmly greeted one another again and again. A simple sense of being there, together, radiated in the room. I miss that more than I can say. I miss being with YOU.

So much has changed in recent weeks and more will change again in the coming weeks. Slowly the reality of the depth and duration of the impact of Covid-19 sinks in. We may think we 'know' this, but then suddenly find ourselves *feeling* it in ways that knocks us off our feet. This is not a matter of a month or two. We are in this for a long haul of rolling changes and persistent uncertainty.

Within such a forecast, it no longer makes sense to simply 'hold our breath' until we can surface again in a 'normal' world. Rather, we must start to ask how can we live sustainably and meaningfully in *this* context?

Like any third place, we are most definitely a mix of people of different interests, resources, capacities, and needs. Already we have seen how some step forward to help with Tech and others to ask for help getting on Zoom. Some have been grateful to request and receive a mask while others have been busy on their sewing machines. Still others picked up the phone or started typing emails to check on others through the new Neighborhoods system. Others needed to receive that call. Together we reach out to offer what we are able and to receive what we need.

So, my question is: what next? What needs remain unmet that we might be able to support within the resources of our congregation? What do *you* need? What might you be able to offer?

For me, I've been wondering about our lawns. If the next safe step for gathering will be outdoors while maintaining social distance, how might we create safe opportunities to be together? And, if we create such opportunities, how can we also include those who cannot

join us in person? Or, what if we thought beyond First Parish to the town? Are there ways we might offer our lawns or parking lots to others in need of spaces to safely gather?

Such musings are practical questions, yes, but they also get to the core mission of who we are. Oldenburg writes, "In true communities there are collective accomplishments. People work together and cooperate with one another to do things which individuals cannot do alone." What do we wish to accomplish together?

There will be many lessons from this experience of weathering these months of the coronavirus. My hope is that one of the lessons will be that being together matters, that community matters. We not only need connections with other people. We also need places in which we mix and meet others, especially those that teach us to appreciate and to learn to live with a range of personalities, backgrounds, skills, and passions. Right now such "places" are largely virtual, but at some point, we will be together again.

And so, I ask again, what next? How might *we* as community work together to do what we could not do alone? Please share your thoughts for what needs we might address as well as any resources, skills, and capacities for helping. Again, I want to underscore that we are all *different* in what we can do and in what we need. That's more than okay. The magic of third places is watching what might emerge from such a mix.

I'll close where I began. The past weeks of social distancing and staying-at-home have been difficult. Looking ahead, we face more difficult weeks and months. But, we are not alone. We are together. And, as a community we can do together what individuals cannot do alone. Let us draw strength from this.

So may it be.
Amen.