Sunday, October 4, 1987
COMMUNITY AND COMMUNION
John 17:20-23

I don't know very much about wild geese from my own first-hand experience. However, in my reading this past summer, I came across a revealing fact about geese. That fact is this — geese flying in formation fly seventy percent faster than a single goose. Not only can they fly faster when in formation, but also for longer periods of time. Blue geese have made it from James Bay in Canada to coastal Louisiana in sixty hours; some claim forty-eight. That's seventeen hundred miles. Other birds have been documented in much longer flights.

Why is flying in formation so much more efficient? "Formation flying of birds improves aerodynamic efficiency." Geese "fly in a 'V' formation because it equally distributes the drag saving." The experts on flying geese also maintain that the lead bird does not necessarily have the most strenuous position. This came as a surprise to me — I had always assumed that the lead bird was the pioneer, breaking the current and thereby providing an easier flight for those who follow behind, much like the driver of a small car or a bicyclist who gets almost a free ride, however dangerous, in the wake of a large truck or bus.

Some of this is true with birds in flight, but it is part of a complex aerodynamic process. Apparently, the benefit of the upwash field created by the "V" formation is shared by all its members, including the lead bird. He or she is not a lonely, long-suffering martyr out there in front receiving all the cold blasts of strong countercurrents.

"The upwash beyond the tip," writes these observers of birds flying in formation, "creates a favorable interference... each bird flies in the upwash of neighbors with less lift power needed than when alone." And that includes the lead bird. Indeed, other studies reveal that geese in flight rotate the lead position in a fashion that reflects the changing circumstances of the entire flock.

These facts about geese flying in formation make quite a metaphor for the church and for other human communities as well. Our Christian faith teaches that we find our meaning in life in our relationship with God and with one another. Without living in community with others, our lives become meaningless and empty. To put it another way, we cannot be whole in and of ourselves. God has so made us that we are meant to live in community with others.

In a book that was published last year entitled, Habits of the Heart, by Robert Bellah and others, the habits of the hearts of the American people are analyzed, and the conclusion is that one of the major problems threatening our society is "radical individualism." Bellah and the other authors believe that we have become so individualistic, so utilitarian, that we can no longer make moral sense of our lives. Too many of us have become like the lone goose, and we find it difficult to fly alone.

While it is true that our Christian faith teaches that God has created us each one unique and with our own identity, it is also true that we can never be completely whole in and of ourselves. We cannot be perfect. We are social creatures who desperately need each other, not merely for sustenance, not merely for company, but for any meaning to our lives whatsoever. St. Augustine once wrote about God, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." But this is not all there is to it. A later theologian corrected St. Augustine's statement to read, "Thou hast made us for thyself and for one

another, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee in one another and in one another in thee."

Here's another fascinating bit of information about geese flying in formation. As they fly together, they make a honking sound. And most of this honking comes from the geese toward the back of the "V" formation. It's called "Honking from Behind."

Who in the church is not already familiar with "Honking from Behind?" "Why don't we ever sing the good old hymns?" "That's not the way we used to do things in this church." "Why is the church always asking for money?"

But the "Honking from Behind" of the geese is not complaining, according to the bird experts. It is rather the means by which they keep in touch and encourage one another during flight and alert one another to danger. By changes in modulation, pitch, and frequency, they have a vocal network of mutuality and encouragement. That's the kind of honking from behind that all churches and communities need.

So geese fly in formation — that is not new to us — but it may be news, as I mentioned earlier, that in formation, in unity, in community, they have a seventy percent advantage over a single goose seeking to do his or her "own thing." And the same is true for us.

The single Christian is often self-affirming and self-defending. I hear individuals say, "I have no use for the church, but I try to live by the teachings of Christ." Or others say, "There are so many hypocrites in church, I can't worship with them." So it is off to a lake in solitude or to the hills to find God. Still others say, "My religion is a private affair, a personal matter between God and me." I hope it is at least that — but it can be so much more. To be a Christian is to be a part of a community, and like the wild geese flying in formation, it is the community that gives us additional strength, speed, and endurance. And it is especially when we are in community that Jesus promises to be with us in power. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I also," said Jesus.

This morning on World Wide Communion Sunday, we gather with others in this community called the church all around the world. We are gathered around Christ's table using a variety of liturgies and practices indicating that even though at one level we are divided, on God's level, we are united. We are one in spite of ourselves. Amen.