Sunday, June 11, 2000
**BOWLING ALONE**
Acts 2:1-8

"Bowling Alone" is the title of a new book recently published by Robert D. Putnam. The title comes from an essay Putnam wrote in 1995 for the Journal of Democracy. In that essay, he argued that important social institutions — what he calls the ingredients of social capital — are in a state of disrepair, especially in the United States. As his symbol, he chose a simple example that hits home: Americans still like to go bowling, just as they did in the 1950s, but they no longer bowl in leagues as much as they used to. Instead, they go bowling alone. It's a metaphor for how disconnected we've become.

Putnam believes that our country has unraveled in the past 25 years. People don't join things the way they used to. Neighbors don't know each other as well. We have become more individualistic in how we live, work, and play.

The essay got a lot of attention. Within months, Putnam became a celebrity. His picture appeared in People magazine, and the president invited him to bowl at the White House. But the success of Putnam's theory brought out a multitude of critics eager to challenge it. His critics argued that while bowling leagues are out of fashion, soccer leagues, the internet, and email have taken their place. They claimed new ways of making connections have replaced the old ones like the PTA, the Elks, and the Moose Lodge.

The objections were strong enough that Putnam devoted himself to refuting them. He enlisted over 50 researchers to gather evidence to support his thesis, and they found it. The book, Bowling Alone, is an extensive elaboration of his argument. It's a documented catalog of social disengagement of almost every kind: political apathy, declining church attendance, eroding union membership, the decline of bridge clubs, community organizations, dinner parties, and more.

Putnam's research shows that soccer leagues and new forms of connections have not replaced the more traditional ones. The organizations that are gaining members today cannot replace groups like the Lions, Rotary, Optimists, Elks, American Legion, Masonic Lodge, Red Cross, the church, or B'nai B'rith. Most new organizations are "mailing list" groups requiring little more than a periodic dues contribution. These surface connections may maintain a facade of affiliation, but they don't connect people in the significant, face-to-face ways that foster long-term, caring relationships.

In physical communities, face-to-face groups allow us to interact with people who may differ from us in many ways. However, virtual communities give us the opportunity to construct very selective groups, and we can easily withdraw by going offline or unsubscribing. They don't engage us in person-to-person relationships that connect us in meaningful ways.

The main point Putnam makes in his book is that by virtually every measure, what he calls "social capital" has steadily eroded. Why is this important? Because social capital has a profound positive effect on individuals, communities, and even the entire nation. A growing body of research shows that social institutions, including church membership and regular participation in worship, help make us healthier as individuals and as communities. In his book, Putnam has an entire section on the importance of religious participation.

The loss of social capital has critical consequences: communities with less social capital have lower educational performance, more teen pregnancy, higher child suicide rates, low birth weight, and increased prenatal mortality. Social capital is also a strong predictor of crime rates and other measures of neighborhood quality of life, as well as our personal health. For example, if you both smoke and belong to no groups, research shows that belonging to a group is a stronger predictor of health than whether you engage in risky behavior like smoking.

What Putnam's research has revealed is not new to the Biblical tradition and the life and teachings of Jesus. The Christian faith, with its Jewish foundation, has always taught that God's Spirit — or what we call the Holy Spirit — is most active when we are gathered together to worship and when we work together for the betterment of the community. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

In the story of Pentecost, as read earlier from the book of Acts, we see that "they were all gathered together in one place." The story continues to tell how God's Spirit was experienced in ways that gave the gathered community a new sense of their relationship to one another, even though they were a diverse group of people. Their differences were not erased but transcended.

The story describes their diversity in terms of nationality and language, but now they began to understand each other. The point is the same as Putnam makes in Bowling Alone — we need to be connected in positive ways that transcend our differences so we can live in healthy communities.

Part of our problem today is that we define diversity too narrowly. When people ask me if we have much diversity in this congregation, they usually mean whether we have visible diversity, such as skin color or ethnic heritage. I usually respond by saying that we have a very diverse congregation. In fact, most of the diversity among human beings exists under the skin and is hidden from view.

We have singles, married people, young, old, short, tall, rich, poor, people with lighter complexions, darker complexions, some with lots of hair and some with very little. We come from many national heritages — German, French, English, African, Native American, Russian, Swiss, Scandinavian, Oriental, Spanish, South American, and more. We are a congregation with a wide diversity of skills and intelligence. Some have superior athletic ability, some are artistic, others are musical. Then, too, we have a wide diversity of professions and occupations: teachers, students, carpenters, police officers, firefighters, physicians, lawyers, ministers, bankers, salespeople, nurses, retired people — you name it! And we come from a variety of religious backgrounds: Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterian, Unitarian, United Church of Christ, Reformed Church, Baptist, Christian Scientist, Jew, Mormon, Episcopalian, and more. We are more diverse than that group on the first Pentecost.

And like the story in Acts, we are gathered together in one place today and each weekend, and in many other kinds of groups that meet here throughout the week. All of these activities increase our social capital.

It's no surprise that the research shows a strong link between church attendance, participation in church groups, and better physical and mental health.

Listen to these statistics from recent research: a review of more than 80 studies conducted in 1999 found that “lack of organizational religious involvement leads to a 20-60% increase in the odds of experiencing a major depressive episode.” In a study of 4,000 people over age 65, Duke University researchers found that people who attended religious services at least once a week and prayed or read the Bible regularly were 40% less likely to suffer from depression compared with those who did not.

A University of Texas analysis found that people who never attended religious services were 1.87 times more likely to die during a nine-year period than those who attended services. That translates to an additional 7-14 years of life expectancy.

Social connectedness is one of the most powerful determinants of our well-being. The more integrated we are with our community, the less likely we are to experience colds, heart attacks, strokes, cancer, depression, and premature death.

That’s why ministries like our Singles Ministry, which we celebrate today, are so important. The same is true of our Ghana Partnership, the Stephen Ministry, Church School Classes, youth ministry, and all kinds of other face-to-face groups.

Here’s what one woman from our Singles Ministry wrote for me to include in this sermon: “After losing my husband suddenly two years ago, I realized I had to make a new life for myself. I attended a Singles+ breakfast several times and pleaded with folks to sign up for bridge, which a few did. From that time on, the group has grown to about 35 members. We’ve emphasized fellowship, and that remains the goal. A year ago, during a difficult time, the group supported me through prayers and any needs I had. I can now clearly see the blessings I have because of this ministry. It has also helped remind me to reach out to others who have the same need. Through this ministry, I’ve become acquainted with the staff and will continue to tell others about this wonderful ministry.”

Another participant in the Singles Ministry said, “Since joining the Singles Ministry, I feel like a real member of the church. I have made friends, both married and single. I’m learning about the church. I can volunteer my time and talents. I feel needed, and I’m proud to belong to the Singles Ministry.”

Here’s another testimony: “Since my divorce, the Singles Ministry has provided a means for me to grow as an individual on a mental and spiritual level. I’ve gotten support, developed friendships, made social contacts, and come to be proud of my single status. Joining the Singles Ministry was the best move I’ve made.”

Someone else said, “The Singles Ministry has given me back my life. I lost my husband three years ago after 45 years of marriage. I got involved in the Singles Ministry just two years ago. I started with the Grief Recovery Workshop, which was a Godsend for me. It helped me tremendously. I have been blessed by the ministry. I often say that my life before the Singles Ministry was empty. It is now full. It provides activities I can go to alone without feeling bad or discriminated against — or hit on. It has brought me closer to the church.”

That’s exactly what Putnam is talking about in Bowling Alone. It illustrates how important face-to-face groups are. He says, “Social capital improves our lot by widening our awareness of the many ways in which our fates are linked. And this is especially true when individuals meet together and represent a wide diversity. People who have active and trusting connections to others — whether family members, friends, or fellow bowlers — develop or maintain character

traits that are good for the rest of society. Joiners become more tolerant, less cynical, and more empathetic to the misfortunes of others. When people lack regular, significant connections to others, they are unable to test the veracity of their own views, whether in the give-and-take of casual conversation or in more formal deliberation. Without such an opportunity, people are more likely to be swayed by their worst impulses. It is no coincidence that random acts of violence, such as school shootings, tend to be committed by people identified, after the fact, as 'loners.'"

Putnam's book, Bowling Alone, is filled with research of this nature. But it's no surprise. The Bible says that to love God is to love others, and that's health-giving. As Putnam points out, where people are trusting and trustworthy, and where they interact regularly with fellow citizens from diverse backgrounds, everyone benefits, and God's Spirit dwells among us.

That's why congregations like this one are so important — not only to us as individuals but to the larger community as well. Therefore, my vision for this church is to continue finding ways to bring diverse people together in all kinds of ministries. Putnam says that faith-based communities are crucial in providing the needed social capital in our society. He claims that religion has played a major role in every period of civic revival in American history, and it will continue to do so in the future.

The experience of Pentecost happens over and over again as we gather together, and the more diverse we are, the better it is for all of us. Amen.