Sunday June 11, 2000

# BOWLING ALONE Acts 2:1-8

"Bowling Alone" is the title of a new book just published. The title comes from an essay which the author Robert D. Putnam wrote in 1995, in the Journal of Democracy. In that essay he argued eloquently that important social institutions, the ingredients of social capital, he calls them, are in a state of disrepair especially in the United States. As his symbol, he chose a humble example that hit straight home: Americans like to go bowling, just as in the 1950's, but they don't bowl in leagues nearly as much as they did in the past. They go off and do it by themselves. It was a metaphor for how disconnected we have become.

Mr. Putnam's hypothesis is that social life in this 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 the way we live, work and play.

The essay got a lot of attention. Within months, he was a celebrity. His picture appeared in People magazine. The President invited him to bowl at the White House. But the success of Mr Putnam's theory brought out a multitude of critics eager to shoot it down. All right, bowling leagues are out of fashion, said his critics, but what about soccer leagues? What about the Internet and Email? Sure the PTA, the Elks, the Moose Lodge and

some churches are hurting, but new groups, new connections are replacing them.

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

According to the research in Mr. Putnam's book, soccer leagues have not substituted for bowling leagues. The organizations that have been gaining membership cannot replace the Lions, the Rotary, the Optimists, the Elks, the American Legion, the Masonic Lodge, the Red Cross, the church or the B'nai B'rith. For the most part the new organizations are "mailing list" groups requiring little more than a periodic dues contribution and sometimes not even that. They are only surface connections which maintain a facade of formal affiliation but they do not connect people in significant face to face meetings and therefore do not foster long-term caring relationships.

In physical communities and face to face groups

which meet regularly we are forced to live and interact with people who may differ from us in many ways. But virtual communities offer us the opportunity to construct very select groups and we can withdraw by going offline or simply turning off the computer or have our name taken off the mailing list. They do not engage us in person to person relationships. They do not connect us in significant ways.

The main point Mr. Putnam makes in his book is that by virtually every conceivable measure what he calls "social capital" has steadily eroded. Why is this important? Because having social capital has a profound positive effect on individuals and communities and even the entire nation. A growing

body of research suggests that civic connections which include church membership and regular participation in worship help make us healthy as individuals and as communities. In his book, he has an entire section on the importance of religious participation.

The loss of social capital is felt in critical ways: communities with less social capital have lower educational performance and more teen pregnancy, child suicide, low birth weight, and prenatal mortality. Social capital is also a strong predictor of crime rates and other measures of neighborhood quality of life as it is of our personal health. For example, in quantitative terms, if you both smoke and belong to no groups which provide

social capital, it's a close call as to which is the riskier behavior.

What Mr. 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 that which we call the Holy Spirit is most active among us when we are gathered together to worship God and also when we work together for the betterment of the community as a whole. Jesus said, "Where two or three or more are gathered in my name, there am I also."

In the story of Pentecost read earlier from the Book of Acts in the New Testament, the first sentence

reads: "When the day of Pentecost had come, there were all gathered together in one place." And then it continues to relate how God's Spirit was experienced

in ways that gave them a new sense of their relationship to each other even though they were a very diverse group of people. Their differences were not erased, but transcended.

The story describes their diversity in terms of the individuals being from different nations and speaking different languages, but now they began to understand each other. The point the story is making is the same as Mr. Putnam is making in his book, BOWLING ALONE. We need to be connected in positive ways that transcend our

diversity if we are going to be healthy individuals and 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 do we have people with certain visible diverse physical characteristics that can be easily recognized such as color of skin or ethnic heritage?

I usually answer by saying that we have a very diverse congregation. In fact most of the diversity among human beings on this earth exists under the skin and is hidden from view. We have singles, married, young, old, short, tall, rich, poor, people

with good health and not so good health, light complexion, darker complexion, some with lots of hair on their head, some with almost no hair. We have people from many different national heritages, German, French, English, African, Native American, Russian, Swiss, Scandinavian, Oriental, Spanish, South American, and more. We are also a congregation with a wide diversity of skills and intelligence--some have superior athletic ability, some are very artistic, others are quite musical--we have a wide diversity of gifts and abilities among us. Then too, we have people with a wide diversity of professions and occupations: teachers, students, carpenters, police officers, fire fighters, physicians, lawyers, ministers, bankers, sales people, nurses, retired people, you name it

and we have it. And think of the wide variety of religious backgrounds, Roman Catholic, Lutherans, Methodists, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterian, Unitarian, United Church of Christ, Reformed Church, Baptists, Christian Scientists, Jews, Mormons, Episcopalian and more. We are more diverse than that group of people on the first Pentecost.

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

So it's no surprise that the research shows a

positive connection between religious faith that includes church attendance and participation in other kinds of church groups and better physical and mental health.

Listen to these revealing statistics from recent research: a review of more than 80 studies conducted in 1999 found that "lack of organizational religious involvements leads to a 20 to 60 percent increase in the odds of experiencing a major depressive episode.

In a study of 4000 people older than age 65, Duke University researchers found that people who attended religious services at least once a week and who prayed or read the Bible regularly were 40

percent less likely to have high blood pressure compared with people 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 seven to 14 years of life expectancy.

Indeed, 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 of all sorts.

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

Here's what one woman who is part of 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

serious illness, these same folks were supporting me through prayers and any needs that I had. I can now see clearly the blessings I have because of this ministry. It has also helped to remind me to reach out to others who have the same need. Through the above, I have become acquainted with the staff and will continue to tell others about this wonderful ministry at First-Plymouth."

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 like I'm needed and I'm proud to belong to the Singles Ministry."

Here's another testimony. "Since my divorce, the First-Plymouth Singles Ministry has provided a means for me to grow as an individual on a mental and spiritual level. I've gotten support, developed friends, 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 3 years ago after 45 years of marriage. I got active with the Singles Ministry just 2 years ago. I started with the Grief Recovery Workshop--which was a God-send 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 full

and rich now.. It's been an open door to get back into the social community of life. It provides activities that I can go to alone and not feel bad or discriminated against--or hit on. It has brought me closer to the church."

That's exactly what Putnam is talking about in his book, BOWLING ALONE. It illustrates how important face-to-face groups are. Here's what 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 the 1999 spate of schoolyard 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. It's no surprise. The Bible

teaches that God made us for each other and that to love God is to love others. That's health giving. As Putnam points out, where people are trusting and trustworthy and where they are subject to repeated interactions 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 for us to continue to find ways for bringing diverse people together in all kinds of ministries. Putnam in his book 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.