

Breaking Bread Together: Community Begins With Simple Acts

It was Christmas dinnertime in Pittsburgh, and the four of us singleton 50-something guys and a 30-something couple were standing in a circle, hands joined, in a former rectory's kitchen.

Humans were made to crave community connections. But despite more government spending on social programs each year, we're increasingly isolated; some even say we're facing an [epidemic](#) of loneliness. And as our community bonds grow weaker, government grows stronger. That's because community is the bedrock of freedom, the first check against overweening power. And the path to regaining power over our own affairs is through our communities.

"OK, we all know how it goes," says Chris, our host for the Christmas evening dinner. *"Bless us oh Lord, for these thy gifts..."*

We say the blessing. Still holding hands, heads bowed, we then recite the Apostles' Creed. I think we're done, but then one of the 50-somethings—Mark—launches in with *"Our Father..."*

Sometimes I can't say the Lord's Prayer without thinking of football. In the mostly Catholic area of Pittsburgh where I grew up, we players recited the Lord's Prayer huddled together before games. Many of us were from churchgoing families, and someone might just start reciting, and the rest of us would follow.

Sitting around the table in the high-ceilinged dining room with those folks, talking with the 30-something lad about his boyhood in Catholic Youth Organization basketball and dances,

and thinking of how lucky I was growing up in my large family when I did, made me glad.

We attended First Presbyterian Church in downtown Pittsburgh, where Dad was an elder. We had boys club—with workshops for carpentry, electrical projects, and more—youth group, and father-son work weekends at camp when we'd repair cabins and build new ones. On a Saturday before Christmas, the church fathers and sons would lug a huge Christmas tree into the sanctuary, down the aisle, past the altar, to set it up for the season.

The events of these memories happened decades ago. My parents are long dead, and my 11 siblings all left the Pittsburgh region. I sometimes feel like a stranger in my familial land. Old friends, kin, and connections are gone, but the physical terrain remains.

We've become a disconnected society, and the lack of ties many of us once had in church and elsewhere leave us wanting. Add the isolation wrought by technological changes—we control our conversations by text or email—plus the mandates from COVID, and the atmosphere can make any of us feel lonely sometimes.

And as we pine, the millstones of government grind.

The premise of Robert Nisbet's book [*The Quest for Community*](#) is that the weakening of institutions like church, family, and neighborhood left a vacuum. "The combination of search for community and existing political power seems to me today, just as it did twenty years ago, a very dangerous combination," Nisbet wrote in the preface to the 1970 edition of the book, first published in 1953.

For years we've lived with totalitarian-style curfews, COVID lockdowns, vaccine mandates, and other overreaches many of us never thought could happen. The government has been allowed to grow hugely powerful even as our communities grew disconnected and thus unable to organize and defend themselves from

government encroachment.

The notion of a sought-after statism replacing one's church affiliation doesn't seem futuristic anymore. And a sort of self-serve idea of "community"—be it one's racial background or a tribal affiliation like the rainbow flag—now is ever-present.

So, maybe it's time to build up true community and share hope with each other.

If not for Chris urging me to sup with him and some friends on Christmas (I didn't know who would attend, nor did I know any of them very well, other than Chris), I'd have spent Christmas alone, not visiting anyone on that holy day for the second year straight due to COVID issues. I'd planned on the solitude and was going to blow off Chris's invitation by not responding. A while later, he called again to make sure I was coming, so I said I wasn't sure.

"Come on over, have a good Christmas dinner and drink some beer," he chided. "What else are ya gonna do?"

I went, and the food was very good, but it was the fellowship that was unexpectedly nourishing.

As I was leaving, shaking hands with our host while loaded down with home-baked ham, I mentioned that Christmas is weird for me, since I miss my folks and my brothers and sisters.

"I know, I feel the same way," said Chris, who is half Irish and from a Catholic family of eight kids. His regular Christmas dinner plans had fallen through, "So this year, I figured I'd start my own tradition," he said.

Amen. I aim to do the same. And not just on holidays. Community won't happen by accident.

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