



Solitude Is Where Community Begins, by Henri Nouwen

Solitude is where community begins. That's where we listen to God. Sometimes I think of life as a big wagon wheel with many spokes. In the middle is the hub. Often in ministry, it looks like we are running around the rim trying to reach everybody. But God says, "Start in the hub; live in the hub. Then you will be connected with all the spokes, and you won't have to run so fast."

It's precisely in the hub that we discover the call to community. It's remarkable that solitude always calls us to community. In solitude you realize you're part of a human family and that you want to lift something together.

By community, I don't mean formal communities. I mean families, friends, parishes, twelve-step programs, prayer groups. Community is not an organization; community is a way of living: you gather around people with whom you want to proclaim the truth that we are all divine.

Community is not easy. Somebody once said, "Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives." In Jesus' community of twelve apostles, the last name was that of someone who was going to betray him. That person is always in your community somewhere; in the eyes of others, you might be that person.

Why is it so important that solitude come before community? If we do not know we are the beloved sons and daughters of God, we're going to expect someone in the community to make us feel that way. They cannot. We'll expect someone to give us that perfect unconditional love. But community is not loneliness grabbing onto loneliness: "I'm so lonely, and you're so lonely." It's solitude grabbing onto solitude: "I am the beloved; you are the beloved; together we can build a home."

Sometimes you are close, and that's wonderful. Sometimes you don't feel much love, and that's hard. But we can be faithful. We can build a home together and create space for the sacred.

Within the discipline of community are the disciplines of forgiveness and celebration. Forgiveness and celebration are what make community, whether a marriage, a friendship, or any other form of community.

What is forgiveness? Forgiveness is to allow the other person not to

be God. Forgiveness says, "I know you love me, but you don't have

to love me unconditionally, because no human being can do that. We all have wounds. We all are in so much pain. It's precisely this feeling of loneliness that lurks behind all our successes, that feeling of uselessness that hides under all the praise, that feeling of meaninglessness even when people say we are fantastic—that is what makes us sometimes grab onto people and expect from them an affection and love they cannot give.

If we want other people to give us something that only God can give, we become a demon. We say, "Love me!" and before you know it we

become violent and demanding and manipulative. It's so important that we keep forgiving one another -- not once in a while, but every moment of life. Before you have had your breakfast, you have already had at least three opportunities to forgive people, because your mind is already wondering, "What will they think about me? What will he or she do? How will they use me?"

To forgive other people for being able to give you only a little love -- that's a hard discipline. To keep asking others for forgiveness because you can give only a little love -- that's a hard discipline, too. It hurts to say to your children, to your wife or your husband, to your friends, that you cannot give them all that you would like to give. Still, that is where community starts to be created, when we come together in a forgiving and undemanding way.

This is where celebration, the second discipline of community, comes in. If you can forgive that another person cannot give you what only God can give, then you can celebrate that person's gift. Then you can see the love that person is giving you as a reflection of God's great unconditional love. "Love one another because I have loved

you first." When we have known that first love, we can see the love that comes to us from people as the reflection of that. We can celebrate that and say, "Wow, that's beautiful!"