

Homily

The American political scientist Robert Putnam sounds a herald note of warning in his book, *Bowling Alone*. Published in the year 2000 at the start of the new millennium, Putnam makes a concerning observation: community life is collapsing as people are becoming ever more disconnected from one another. In-person social interactions become less frequent, less spontaneous, and more curated. He points to the declining membership in civic and community organizations, including the church, as evidence that people are less likely to participate in civic society. But it is declining membership in one particular organized recreational league that he finds symbolizes this trend: *bowling leagues*. Although the number of people who bowl is on the increase, the number who belong to leagues has decreased sharply. It's the phenomenon of people bowling alone that Putnam uses to illustrate how the social bonds that bring people together in social and civic life are breaking apart.

But solo bowling is but one example of a much broader trend: churches, political organizations, service clubs, scouting and girl guides, parent-teacher associations, neighborhood advocacy groups—all of these groups that form civic society have seen declining membership, as more and more people disengage from political involvement. The drop in voter turnout is another key indicator of this decline. While Putnam is speaking from the American context, his findings hold true Canada as well, where we have seen a similar decline in civic participation and voter turnout.

And so the question: what lies at the bottom of this disengagement in political and civic life? According to Putnam, the key factor is an attitude of increasing distrust towards government, as well as civic society. A society that loses trust in government and civic society begins to experience fragmentation and isolation, as people go their separate ways, interacting only with close friends and people who share similar views. The loss of trust in civic society makes it more and more impossible to have conversations about difficult and timely problems. For any society to flourish, trust is essential.

In our passage this morning from John's gospel, we see a pattern of distrust. Jesus encounters a man who has been blind from birth. The disciples ask whether it was the man or his parents who sinned—for in their minds, what other explanation could there be for his blindness? Later, after his sight has been restored, the man goes and gives people an account of how it happened, and repeatedly he encounters distrust. Some cannot believe that this is the same man as before; others cannot accept the man's account of how Jesus restored his sight; and still, others are offended by the fact that he has been healed on the sabbath—the holiest of days when no work is to be done. Even his parents are nervous,

not wanting to put their status in the faith community at risk by acknowledging that Jesus has healed their son.

Distrust abounds as the man insists that Jesus is a prophet whose gifts of healing are from God, and the community accuses him of having been born in sin—how dare he would try to teach them! And the man driven out by the community. Distrust, disbelief, and dispossessed – a community which ought to have been celebrating a miracle as the man is healed is instead torn apart and person already on the margins cast out. The traditional authority structures are interested in self-preservation, and are determined not to share power with anyone who might challenge the status quo. People go their separate ways, as the political and religious leaders continue benefitting as they always have, the people following as they always have, and those on the margins staying put on the margins—as they always even. Even though his sight is restored, the man is even more alone.

In our current time and context, we are—as a planet—looking down the barrel of a microscope at a virus. I have been heartened and inspired, as I have observed people around the globe acting in solidarity with one another as we collectively try to slow the spread of this virus. I have seen and heard many, many stories of people pulling together to support neighbors and loved ones—especially those who are elderly or unwell—while also trying to keep them safe, and practicing social distance. On the news, we have observed commitments from various levels of government to help people who face loss of employment, loss of income, or loss of health if they become sick. Is there more that can be done, or should be done? Absolutely. Are there reasons for criticism? Yes. But by and large, I have observed that in our Canadian context, people are bonding together socially and politically, even as we distance ourselves physically.

And in our own faith community, as I call our members, I hear over and over again that people are being cared for. I also hear eagerness from people to practice different forms of worship online. There's a commitment that even if we cannot gather in-person on Sunday mornings, we should still gather—somehow. And so here we are, listening to a pre-recorded service of morning prayer posted to the parish website, sitting in the comfort of our homes, possibly in pyjamas. It's a different way for us to be the church. But I think it's exciting, and a wonderful opportunity for us to be reminded that the church is not the building, rather it is the people and our shared faith in Christ and our commitment to living out our baptismal promises. While in-person contact and gathering for corporate worship are critical to our life of faith, I am reassured that in these extraordinary times we can still be a community.

The challenge we face, however, remains what Putnam warns us of: the loss of trust. At present, we struggle to trust that our health, or the health of our loved ones, will be safe. And we cannot trust our own health, out of fear that we may be asymptomatic and may unknowingly share the virus with others. This is, at a basic level, the source of our fear during a pandemic: we do not trust the health of others, or ourselves. And that is a frightening thing, and it is why—for the time being—we are being called to practice social distancing.

As we grapple collectively with the challenges of COVID-19 and its impacts on our social interactions, our healthcare system, and our political life as a nation, we perhaps have an opportunity to be reminded never to take for grant the many blessings we have enjoyed: the blessing of being able to shake a hand, or embrace a friend in a hug; the blessing of being able to come together as families, friends, colleagues, and the church; the blessing sharing a meal together in fellowship; the blessing of being able to visit elderly parents or grandparents in care facilities without fear of transmitting illness; and the blessing of having universal access to vaccines and life-saving medicines.

Our time navigating COVID-19 together as a society is a reminder that we can never be blind to the many blessings we enjoy, for things can change in the blink of an eye. We must not cease caring for one another, in whatever way we safely can at this time. And we must not lose trust in each other, or in God. For we are called to place all our faith and trust in Christ Jesus; who heals, restores sight, binds up the broken hearted, and who casts a light so that in the darkest of times, we may trust that God will lead us home. For once I was blind, but now I see. Once I was lost, but now am found. Thanks be to God. Amen.