



Day 7: Liberate from Bondage

Exodus 1:15–2:15

¹⁵ The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶ “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” ¹⁷ But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸ So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” ¹⁹ The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” ²⁰ So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²² Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.” ^{2:1} Now a man from the house of Levi

went and married a Levite woman.² The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months.³ When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river.⁴ His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.⁵ The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it.⁶ When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she said.⁷ Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?”⁸ Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother.⁹ Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it.¹⁰ When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, “because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.”¹¹ One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk.¹² He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.¹³ When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in the wrong, “Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?”¹⁴ He answered, “Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Then Moses was afraid and thought, “Surely the thing is known.”¹⁵ When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well.

This is a narrative of resistance, the story of a cast of women who maneuvered within an oppressive system to contribute to the struggle for liberation from bondage. These women play an essential role. The text presents them as “defiers of oppression ... givers of life ... wise and resourceful.”¹

The midwives

Exodus 1:15–22: The text begins with the story of the midwives, the second phase in Pharaoh’s intensifying plan to wipe out the Israelites who had become “more numerous and more powerful” than the Egyptians (Ex 1:9). Social and physical abuse of the Israelites has failed to reduce their numbers. The Pharaoh summons the midwives Shiprah and Puah. The two named women stand before an unnamed, paranoid king. The

authors of the text, eager to usher in the arrival of Moses, tell in only a few verses of these two midwives who refused to obey the Pharaoh’s directive to kill the new born sons of Israel. They thereby upset the oppressor.

When instructed to kill the newborn sons of Israel, the two midwives say nothing in response. They continue to go about their business of assisting women to give birth to new life. Very little is known about these women—their nationality, their faith or piety. Are they the “Egyptian midwives of the Hebrews,” or “Hebrew women” who are midwives to the Hebrews? Whether Egyptian or Hebrew, they refuse to function as agents of death, even though the command was given by the Pharaoh himself. But why? The text says that they feared *ha elohim*—the gods (Ex 1:17). Is the god they fear the God of the Hebrews? Or do they just fear the divine in general?

Are they protecting their own people, or are they taking up the cause of a community that is not their own? Whoever they are and whatever their motives, they refused to be intimidated by the powers that be, who wanted them to turn birth into death.

When called to the palace because of their disobedience, the midwives merely shrug: The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them. Their response is ingenious. First, they counted on the fact that the male Pharaoh probably knew little about women's experiences. Moreover, the Pharaoh hesitated to question them any further, possibly out of fear of revealing his ignorance.

Second, the response seemed to have appealed to the Pharaoh's racist tendencies, the "us/them" mentality. They declare that these Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women. They are *hayot*, "like animals," who do not need midwives. The midwives imply that the Hebrew women seem to be good only for breeding, and hence they deliver before the midwife arrives. The information confirms the Pharaoh's suspicions that the Hebrews are different, and that pleases him.²

Third, they also affirm what the Pharaoh cannot hear. The Hebrew women are, they argue, *hayot*, which also is rendered as "full of life."

They stand in the tradition of Eve, the mother of all living beings. These mothers are so full of life that even a death-dealing Pharaoh cannot quench its force. And indeed Pharaoh is no match for maternal power.³

God does not speak to them from a burning bush. Their actions are guided explic-

From where do these women derive their sense of responsibility?

itly by their fear of the gods, implicitly by an innate respect for life and love of children. They have no authority to confront the Pharaoh directly, no strength to make demands of him, no power to call down plagues upon him. They simply circumvent him. They out-manuever him, appealing to his ignorance and his prejudice. Their quiet revolt buys time for the Hebrew children. More children are born and they thrive. God rewards the midwives' efforts and blesses them with households of their own.

Eventually, however, the Pharaoh renews his assault, this time assigning all Egyptians the task of Hebrew infanticide. Into this vicious context the baby Moses is born.

Jochebed, Miriam and the daughter of Pharaoh

Exodus 2:1–10: The quiet defiance and scheming, the risking and the process of liberation begun by the midwives is continued by other women. After his birth, his mother Jochebed (Ex 6:20) saw that he was a fine baby, so she hid him. When she could not hide him any longer, she prepared a basket for him, and placed him in the reeds of the Nile. In doing so, she paradoxically was following the orders of the Pharaoh. The river, however, turns out to be a source of salvation rather than death. Safe in a watertight basket, watched over by his sister, the baby is placed among the reeds on the bank of the river.

Jochebed probably knew that something significant might occur. Hence, she instructs Moses' sister to watch and see "what would happen to him" (Ex 2:4). Very soon the Pharaoh's daughter and her entourage come down to the river to bathe. The Pharaoh's daughter would not bathe at just any place along the river. Jochebed knew where she bathed and placed the basket holding Moses in a strategic location, hoping that the prin-

cess would find him. In a sense, Jochebed places the fate of the child at the feet of the Pharaoh's daughter, somehow intuiting, hoping and trusting that this daughter of the Pharaoh could not carry out her father's vicious policy.

Her risk pays off. Pharaoh's daughter sees the child, hears his cry and is filled with compassion. She knows well that the child was one of the Hebrew children. Yet she

embodies a compassion that goes beyond the natural feelings of pity for a crying infant; it is compassion for one whom she recognizes as the child of the enemy, one of the Hebrew children.⁴

When it becomes clear that she seems ready to take responsibility for the infant, Miriam comes forward and offers to find her a wet nurse. She brings Jochebed to nurse him!

It would be naïve to think that the Pharaoh's daughter was unaware of what was transpiring. It is more plausible that she silently acknowledged the efforts being made to save the child from death. The actions of this non-Israelite woman are presented in direct parallel to those of the God of Israel: she "comes down," she "sees" the child, "hears" its cry, takes pity on him, draws him out of the water, and provides for his daily needs (*cf.* Ex 3:7-8).⁵ Soon God does for Israel what she does for Moses.

The daughter of Pharaoh aligns herself with the daughters of Israel. Filial allegiance is broken; class lines crossed; racial and political difference transcended.⁶

How does a person born to privilege become obsessed with a sense of justice? From where did Moses get such a sense of justice that he would rise up in righteous anger? Why were his blood ties to the Hebrew slaves more significant than his obvious, daily ties to the Egyptian throne and its power?⁷

So it was that his own mother nursed the infant Moses, although the Egyptian princess adopted him. Throughout the whole story, when we look for God's providential action, it is found not in direct divine intervention, but through the sagacity and resourcefulness of these women. The birth of Moses and his being saved from death are due to the actions of women.

As the years went by, Moses grew up as a young prince in the power, pomp and luxury of the palace. The people to whom he was related by blood were living in slavery, while Moses lived in luxury.

Moses: from prince to fugitive

Exodus 2:11-15: We would expect Moses to stay in that comfortable, exclusive world. He had been reared and educated to be an Egyptian, a member of the ruling class, and it would have been highly advantageous for him to maintain that position.

However, a day came when Moses "went out to his people and saw their forced labor" (Ex 2:11). Here, the verb "to see" is found in a form meaning that Moses was "caused to see." Was God behind this apparent and sudden recognition of the Hebrews' plight? Surely he must have ventured out before and seen how the Hebrew slaves were treated! Something happened inside him that made him "see" and act. On noticing one of the Egyptian overseers beating one of his people, a blood relative, he stepped forward in righteous anger and killed the overseer. With that act of earnest, but misplaced idealism, the prince became a fugitive.

It is hard to say what would have happened to the Israelites had Moses not had such a strong sense of justice. Could it have been that his mother, while nursing him told him of the slavery of the Hebrews under Egyptian domination, of the God of the Hebrews? It is possible that she spoke of the day of deliverance from

bondage to be brought about by a leader under the guidance of their God? She probably sang to him,

the songs of faith; and that in doing so, she planted in his soul, with words and rhythm, the pride of a people and the glory of their faith in God.⁸

Besides his biological mother, the mother who adopted him also circumvented the Pharaoh's rule and saved him from death. She could also have instilled in him a respect for life, justice and human rights. We do not know how much connection he had to his sister while living at the palace, but she too may have told him a little about the Hebrews, their history and their God.

In any case, Moses seems to have been influenced by his family, both natural and adopted. They inculcated in him a sense of justice and appreciation for life. These innate lessons came to the fore when he saw the Hebrew slave being beaten.

What can we learn from this text?

- Liberation is achieved through joint endeavors. We must acknowl-

edge the corporate dimension of the struggle and the efforts to overcome oppression. Women who are too frequently ignored have ways of defying oppression and bringing about liberation.

- For true liberation, we need to transcend barriers of caste, class, religion, race and gender.
- Leave room for intuition, or for what may not be logical, but is bred into a person's very being. God speaks to us often through the simple goodness we encounter in a variety of people. That goodness, and the nature of the relationship, causes us to hear and to learn in a fashion that is much deeper than pure logic.
- There is no single or pure strategy for liberation to be achieved. We need to be resourceful and wise to discern the most appropriate strategy, even if this means maneuvering within an oppressive system.

Monica J. Melanchthon

What are some of the struggles for liberation in your context? What contributions are women making to the struggle for freedom? How have issues of race, class, gender or caste hindered the fight for liberation? In your context, what devices of resistance do communities in struggle use? Where or from whom do we derive our own sense of justice, especially those of us who live lives of privilege and opportunity?

Notes

¹ J. Cheryl Exum, "You shall let every Daughter Live": A Study of Ex 1:8–2:10," *Semeia* 28 (1983), p. 82.

² Dana Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, & Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), p. 92.

³ *Ibid.*

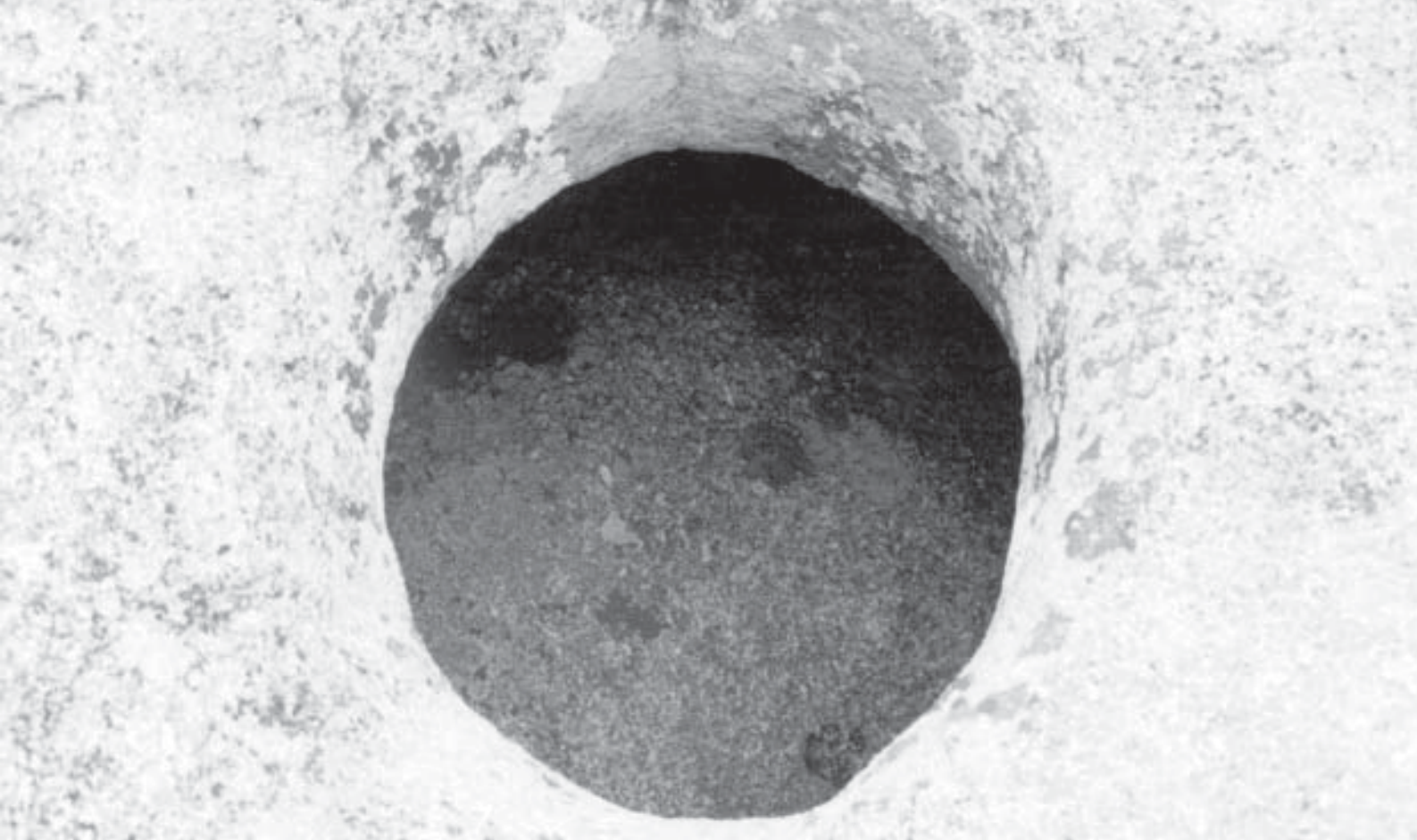
⁴ Eileen Schuller, "Women of the Exodus in Biblical Retellings of the Second Temple Period," in Peggy Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 179.

⁵ Terence Fretheim, *Exodus. Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 38.

⁶ Phyllis Trible, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies," in Ann Loades (ed.), *Feminist Theology: A Reader* (London: SPCK, 1990), p. 26.

⁷ J. Ellsworth Kalas, "Because my Mother Told Me," in *Old Testament Stories from the Back Side* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.



Luke 8:26–39

²⁶ Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷ As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. ²⁸ When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me”— ²⁹ for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) ³⁰ Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. ³¹ They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. ³² Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. ³³ Then the

demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.³⁴ When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country.³⁵ Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.³⁶ Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed.³⁷ Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned.³⁸ The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying,³⁹ “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Deliver us from evil—the combat for human dignity

This is an uncomfortable story. The graphic description of a demoniac, the contest between Jesus and the demon Legion, and the horrific fate of a large herd of pigs—all this is elaborated beyond the usual constraints in Gospel accounts of Jesus’ healings. It has a taste of ostentatious performance, evoking fear as much as joy. This is not the mild mercy of healing hands; this is healing as combat. This is showing who in the end is in complete command in a world constantly threatened by chaos and disruptive forces. Which power is this? Whose power is it?

Having mastered the storm and the raging waves (Lk 8:22–25) Jesus goes ashore on Gerasene territory. Its location is identified, yet we can no longer identify the place with any certainty. Could it not be anywhere and everywhere? It could not. Jesus has moved to “the opposite side.” Most likely he is on

pagan, that is non-Jewish, ground. Since pigs are unclean animals to Jews, the presence of a large herd of swine feeding on the hillside would not be possible in a Jewish setting. So by crossing the sea, Jesus arrives in the land of “the others.”

Having calmed the threatening powers of the roaring sea and the fear of his disciples, this calm is gone the moment he steps on land. The first person to welcome him is without clothes, a wild and screaming man. He is possessed, or as the text rather particularly states, he has a demon. A distinction is made between the demon and the man himself. Luke informs us that he is “a man of the city”; he belongs to the place, but has become alienated from it. He exists on the fringes, even outside human community. He loiters naked among the tombs or is driven into the desert; places the living avoid, where demons were said to roam. The possession had dispossessed him of everything he ever had. And yet, despite his alienation and raving behavior, he is still a human being, “a man of the city.”

Are there persons in your community like this man? How do others relate to them?

Surprisingly, Jesus' power to exorcise or command the unclean spirit to leave the man is not a major issue in the story. It is mentioned almost parenthetically in verse 29. The dialogue or contest between Jesus and the demon is over the conditions of the demon's surrender: Where should the unclean spirit be allowed to go?

In the negotiation between Jesus and the demon the revealing of names plays an important role. Behind this is a popular belief and the fundamental premise in magic that a strong bond exists between a spiritual being and its true name. Domination over a spirit is obtained by knowing and using its name. There is power in knowing the name; calling out the name is an effective weapon. In the healing stories the demons often know Jesus' true name and reveal who he is. On the whole they are right; they speak the truth. It may sound strange that the very same words that are a proclamation of faith in the mouth of a believer, can be a demonic threat and serve almost as a curse. How can one know for sure which is which?

In this present story, the demons seek to control Jesus by pronouncing his name. But when asked about their own name, the demons try to distract Jesus by giving their number or a pseudonym implying number: Legion. Legion is a word from the Latin. The Roman military unit called the *Legio* consisted of between four and six thousand soldiers. Does the demons' name indicate not only a number, but also a political, anti-Roman meaning or code? Is the demon in fact the Roman army, keeping people under occupation and in bondage? Is this a story about liberation from political and social oppression? The time has come indeed for captives to be released and the oppressed to go free, as Jesus programmatically proclaimed in his first public speech (Lk 4). Even if it is difficult to find a political statement embedded in the name Legion, such an association need not be excluded. But it may be a conve-

What is the power of naming in your culture? How are demons and demonic forces viewed in your society? By your church? What are the implications if we speak of evil forces or use such language about other people and movements?

niently neat demythologized reading, assuming that demons are abolished and replaced by political and social entities which then take on demonic features.

Within the story the name "Legion" is explained in verse 30 as a matter of number. It is not just one demon but a whole multitude. Letting them loose has a potentially devastating result, and should be handled with care. The demons acknowledge their defeat in having to leave the man, and beg not to be tormented: Jesus should not "order them to go back into the abyss." In Mark's version of the story (Mk 5:1–20) the demons fear being sent out of the region, but Luke makes them fear being dismissed to their place of origin, the abyss where the spirits are confined (*cf.* Rev 11:7; 17:8 and 20:3).

The image comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew *tehom* or "the deep," the sea under the earth where the monsters live. This was the symbol of threatening chaos and disorder, constantly kept under control by the Creator. In stormy weather every sea might become a place of this same recurring drama. Therefore, the combination of the two stories, the calming of the storm and the healing of Gerasene demoniac, is not just a matter of narrative or scene shifting to get Jesus from one side of the sea to the other. From the first story we already know that the winds and the water obey Jesus: he is in command even of the abyss.

What does it mean to you for Jesus to be in command of "the abyss" in your life or world?

Apparently, Jesus allows the multitude of demons to stay around and, according to their own wish, the unclean spirits enter a large herd of unclean animals. One could pity the swine, or be amused by the humorous aspect of the story. The demons get to where they want to go, but their effect on the swine is such that they end up in deep water anyway. Jesus actually dupes them.

With the demons kept safely in their place, Jesus restores good order; he keeps the ordered world in place. The naked and screaming man, closer to dead than living, is now “clothed and in his right mind.” The Greek term *sofrosyne* (here translated “in his right mind”) is sobriety and clear-sightedness. This Greco-Roman virtue of self-control was very highly esteemed. The man is restored to his senses and to the human community. He becomes what he was supposed to be: “a man of the city.” His dignity as a human being is again manifest for everyone to see and recognize.

As the spectacular news start to spread, the local people do not rejoice.

They are scared, so scared that they ask Jesus to leave. A large herd of swine is lost and there are powers at work which are dangerously strong and seemingly uncontrollable. The city is not ready to accept that the healing and restoration of this man to the city is beneficial and good to anyone other than himself. No wonder that he wants to stay with Jesus! But Jesus sends him away, telling him to return to his home.

In a place full of fearful hostility, the man from whom the demon has been driven is called to be a witness to God’s good deeds by speaking from his own experience. A healing story ends as a missionary story. Perhaps this story first was transmitted as an account of how a Christian community was founded here. They kept repeating and elaborating how the gospel was first proclaimed among them by a demoniac who under dramatic circumstances had been restored by Jesus to full human dignity and belonging. This is what God can do.

Turid Karlsen Seim

When people today are restored to health, for example, from mental illness, how ready are people to receive them back into the community?