

The next time you're trying to exit the mall parking lot on a busy shopping day and some driver lets you in line in front of him, give thanks to God because, according to recent research, there's a good chance that driver is a religious person. But maybe, if the research is right, it's that person's fellow worshipers you should be thanking instead. A study, conducted by Harvard professor Robert Putnam and scholar David Campbell, published in their book *American Grace: How Religion Is Reshaping Our Civic and Political Lives*, unveils some of their conclusions.

According to their study, religious people are three to four times more likely to be involved in their community than are nonreligious people. They're more apt to work on community projects, belong to volunteer associations, vote in local elections, attend public meetings, and donate both time and money to public causes, including secular ones. The study also showed that religious people are, in general, just "nicer." They do good deeds, help both neighbors and strangers, give money to panhandlers and let others cut in front of them in line.

But here's why you might want to thank the driver's fellow worshipers instead of God: Putnam and Campbell say that the reason religious people are nicer, and are better citizens, isn't because of religious teaching, per se. They're behaving well, not because they're trying to secure a place in heaven, or because they're afraid of divine judgment; rather, they're that way because of the *relationships* they have in their places of worship.

The authors theorize that if someone from your "moral community" (as opposed to, say, someone from your bowling league) asks you to volunteer for a cause, you're more likely to agree. The effect of these relationships is so strong, say the authors, that people who attend religious services regularly, **but don't have any friends there**, behave more like nonreligious people than fellow believers when it comes to civic involvement. "It's not faith that accounts for this," says

Putnam. “It’s faith communities.” And faith-community relationships are so powerful that the authors have dubbed them “supercharged friends.”

Our first reading this morning from Acts is a case in point. The action takes place in Philippi, where Paul and Silas are tossed in the slammer on phony charges of “disturbing the city” and “advocating customs that aren’t lawful for Romans to adopt or observe.” And before being thrown in jail, the pair are stripped and beaten with rods. All of this because Paul called a demon to come out of a slave girl, thereby depriving her owners of the income they received from her fortune-telling.

As we explore the story we note that this trouble happens to Paul *and* Silas, and that they go through it together. We suspect that while the whole affair must have been painful and terrible, the companionship, and goals held in common by the two missionaries, must have also made it somewhat easier to bear. In fact, our narrative today suggests this very thing, for after Paul and Silas are flogged and put into the dungeon in stocks; they pray together and sing hymns together. Theirs was a supercharged friendship if ever there was one.

Actually, although the New Testament gives us quite a bit of information about Paul, and some about Silas, we don’t have a clear picture of what relationship the two might have had before they became companions on their journey. Acts 15 mentions Silas as a leader “among the brothers,” which, in that context, means he was a member of the church in Jerusalem. In that setting, he would have known of Paul because Silas was one of those chosen by the Jerusalem church to carry a letter to other congregations offering the gospel message to the Gentiles. And that was a matter that Paul and his first missionary companion, Barnabas, brought before the council. But we have no idea whether Paul and Silas had any connection beyond that church council. It’s unlikely they were golfing buddies.

Eventually, however, after Paul and Barnabas parted company, Paul, according to Acts, “chose Silas and set out.” There has to be more to it than that, of course. At minimum, Paul had to have observed something in Silas that led him to think he would be a suitable companion and coworker. And Silas must have seen in Paul’s invitation some idea that the two could work together and accomplish something they couldn’t do singly.

Without Paul’s invitation, we might wonder if Silas would have gone out to spread the gospel on his own. We have no indication that he had any such intentions. He likely went because Paul, a member of his “moral community,” *asked* him to. And once Silas agreed, he admirably held onto his faith with Paul and the two of them kept their mutual commitment to Christ, even while in a stockade, a jail cell.

All this suggests there’s something to be gained from going to church that cannot be had by staying home and listening to a sermon on television, worshipping through a religious Internet site, or relying on private devotions alone. A congregation as a whole is a supercharged friendship where we draw forth good things from one another for the benefit of others.

There’s one other phrase we shouldn’t miss in the verse that tells us of Paul’s selection of Silas. It says Paul set out with Silas, “the believers commending [Silas] to the grace of the Lord.” In other words, the Jerusalem congregation was in full support of Silas’ participation in the mission, and the members gave him their blessing. The pair accomplished a lot for the kingdom of God, and our reading gives us one example.

While in prison, Paul and Silas prayed and sang, an earthquake occurred, shaking the area so violently that the jail door sprung open, and all the prisoners’ chains became unfastened. The jailer assumed the prisoners had escaped, and, expecting to be held responsible, was about to kill himself. But Paul stopped him

by assuring him that everyone was present and accounted for. Recognizing that God's power was present in Paul and Silas, the jailer asked them what he needed to do in order to be saved. They told him, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." He did, and soon he and his "entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God." A whole family was blessed because of the faithfulness of Silas and Paul.

That most certainly falls in line with the results from Putnam and Campell's study! Religious people are good for their communities, for civic life, and for those around them. And part of the reason for this, is because they call forth good things from one another. In fact, it isn't that difficult to find stories of how supercharged friendships within congregations can accomplish great things. Here's one example that ended up involving two congregations:

Several years ago, First Presbyterian Church in Hollywood, Florida, sent a team of members to a leadership summit at Willow Creek Church near Chicago. There, they heard rock star and human-rights activist Bono challenge attendees to do something about the AIDS epidemic around the world. The team was inspired to find a way to do that. (In that context, Bono was a member of their larger moral community, and people were moved to act because he asked them to.)

Shortly after the leadership attendees returned home, someone noticed an article in the local paper about the spread of HIV in Haiti. The news was shared in the congregation, and some members began exploring what might be done there. As word began to spread, one church member who had friends who attended Temple Beth-El, a Jewish synagogue in town, asked the First Presbyterian pastor if he thought the church might be interested in teaming up with the synagogue for work in Haiti. So the pastor asked the rabbi, who asked his congregation, and a partnership was born. Yes, the two congregations were from different faiths, but in terms of their interests in the world, they belonged to the same moral community.

Eventually, these partnered congregations learned through a nonprofit organization in Haiti that there was a need there for an orphanage for HIV-infected children, and they committed themselves to asking their respective congregations to make it happen. Dubbing their joint effort Hollywood CARES (Caribbean AIDS Relief Education and Support), the two congregations committed to raising \$24,000, which was enough to run an orphanage there for two years. When the contributions from members of both congregations were counted, they totaled nearly \$35,000, meaning they could fund almost three years of operations.

Of course, I'm certain that numerous Faith communities around the world can tell of similar good things that occurred because someone had a vision and asked others to help. In fact, our memorial garden here at First Lutheran began because one person, a man by the name of Monty Bowman, was willing to share his dream and ask others for help! Which begs the question, can you think of other ministries here, or at other churches, that started with a single individual's dream?

And here's the bottom line for us today: The Body of Christ we belong to consists of countless congregations which provide us with moral communities, supercharged friendships. And in that regard, each of us who claim to be a disciple of Christ are a member of Christ's body and are bound together with countless others, as Jesus points out in today's Gospel. So, if you have a vision, and you help your fellow worshipers see it as well, perhaps you may find the help you need sitting in the pew right next to you.

Paul asked Silas, and because Silas said yes, the jailer was saved, his household was blessed and lots of other people heard the gospel as well. Some Florida Presbyterians asked their Jewish neighbors, and because both groups said yes, children in Haiti were snatched from death. Such things start with a vision, but they can move beyond that. Because when we make it a point, a priority, to worship side by side, our companions in the pew are more likely to say yes than

no! That is evidence of the power of Christian fellowship and the power of Christ to make a difference through us in a world that needs God now more than ever."