

2022.08.28 - Called To Community - The Spiritual Power Of Community

So What? Jesus called us to community as a way of life to heal our divides

Feel What? Hopeful

Now What? Bring your hurt and doubt about community to Jesus. Remain open as to how you can heal and flourish in community.

VISION CASTING

The purpose of Tallgrass at The Well is to create community together by inviting everyone into the Way of Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

We're beginning a new series about Christian community and its importance to our lives. Over the next few weeks, we want to consider ways in which we can prepare ourselves to experience the fullness of what community so we can be formed by it and give back as well. We hope you will consider joining a group to experience life-giving relationships. Today, I'd like to talk about the power of community.

In the 1950s in New York City, a regular meeting of mismatched acquaintances had been occurring already for the better part of a decade. Mismatched because they were from differing backgrounds of scholarship, ethnic makeup, gender, artistic appreciations, and, yes, politics. It came to be known by historians as the New York Intellectuals. Hitler's Holocaust had already come to a close, but its full horrors were still being discovered. And the woman at the center of the conversations was Hannah Arendt (*er-int*), a German Jew who had escaped her arrest by the Gestapo and fled to the United State.

If you were to put your ear to the apartment door of these dinner parties, you would hear the clinking of cocktail glasses that and a rousing laughter which interrupted prolonged shouting matches. But there was no aggression or malice involved. The club was united

by a passion to debate and seek the truth in order to avoid anything nearing the Holocaust ever again.

Alissa Wilkinson, "The Radical Power Of Friendship": "It was a recurring reincarnation of a tradition stretching back a century or more, to the European salons run by women, often Jewish women, with a keen interest in ideas, art, and people. This moveable feast went on for decades, with new faces, new concerns, but always the same goals: to find oneself among friends or frenemies, lovers and former lovers, colleagues and cordial nemeses, and hash out what was going on in the world while nourishing the soul (and the stomach, too). ...You can see why this group of intellectuals mattered to [Arendt]. They helped her think, but they also modeled a crucial concept: Revolutions may be happening all over the world, but right here, in this little group, in this little apartment, among friends and frenemies, the subversive potential of friendship was constantly unfolding."

Arendt would go on to write at length about the dangers of totalitarianism and the destruction it leaves in its wake. Many of the ideas she has come to be respected for most likely began as concepts wrestled with in that tiny cloister of confidants.

A couple decades later, a shift took place in American culture. Robert Putnam described in his book, *Bowling Alone*, as a decline in social capital expressed in a waning interest in civic and communal engagement. His research noticed how, since the 1950s, there was a continued loss in membership in organizations such as the Knights of Columbus and the League of Women Voters. He most aptly used bowling leagues to illustrate his point: The number of people who bowled had increased in the 20 years before his research, but the number of leagues had plummeted. More people were bowling than ever before, just not together.

We know that many people still do come together for social purposes, such as intramural sports, online forums, or church groups. But recently there have been studies released on what is called the Law of Group Polarization. This research says the more people group together with others who are only like-minded like they are, they become more extreme in their thinking. It's a sort of groupthink where you grow more out of touch with how anyone outside the tribe thinks, and you even become more threatened by beliefs that contrast with your own. The group is more likely to increase rigid rhetoric and cast anyone in another camp as dangerous and threatening to them.

So we face twin dangers today: First, that our culture pushes us ever further towards loneliness, which is only heightened by digital disembodiment. Second, because we are

social creatures and we will most likely seek out the building of relationships, but we'll do so in homogenous grouping which tend to push us towards radical groupthink that labels and dismisses anyone unlike the group.

Transition: How do we find flourishing and offer healing in our divided world?

SOLUTION

What we should realize is that this division is not unique to our own time. Throughout history, humanity has struggled to understand and accept each other. This is the world that the writers of the New Testament are intimately familiar with, which makes it relatable to us now.

Derwin Gray & Frank Viola, “The Race Card Of The Early Christians” - “The world of the first-century was littered with racism and oppression. In the mind of a first-century Jew, Gentiles (Africans, Romans, Greeks, Syrians, Asians, etc.) were created to fuel the fires of hell. When a Jew called a Gentile ‘uncircumcised,’ he spit it. It was a name of profound contempt. If a Jewish person married a Gentile, the Jewish parents held a funeral service for their child. In their eyes, their child was dead. On the flip side, Gentiles regarded Jews to be sub-human. Historically, the Jews have been an oppressed people, living under the thumb of one Gentile nation after another (e.g., Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Rome). In all of human history, there has never been so much animosity, hatred, and violence between two groups of people as there has been between the Jew and the Gentile.”

We understand this divisiveness. We relate to two warring sides. And this is exactly what the Apostle Paul writes about in the letter to the Ephesians. In his epistle, he describes the brokenness all of humanity has experienced and the resulting alienation from God. Our sin has put us at odds with our Creator. But into this canyon-wide chasm, Jesus entered and healed the rift with his sacrificial death. Jesus has made a way for two sides to be healed and united once again.

But even more than this, Jesus' work has also made it possible for humanity to heal the divides that plague it. If Jesus can bring healing between God and humanity, how much more so should it be possible for us to work through our own issues?

Here's how Paul describes all of this:

Ephesians 2:11-22, NIV: Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the

circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Paul describes the Church as being made up of Jews and Gentiles—think of this as all the people most likely to never get along—who now worship God in unity and are a witness to the power and goodness of God. He has broken down every wall we’ve ever possibly erected against each other. Black and white. Russian and Ukrainian. Union and Confederate. Democrat and Republican. East Coast and West Coast. Catholic and Baptist. Jayhawk and Wildcat. Coke and Pepsi. None of these divisions hold a candle to the unifying power of the Cross of Christ.

Hugh Halter & Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom* - “When talking about community and otherness, I think we sometimes forget that all the passages on community, ‘one-anothers’ that we’re called to weren’t written to just white evangelicals, or Hispanic communities, or affinity-based small groups. The context is actually quite in opposition to what we’re used to. They speak to people who were divided by ethnic lines, deep traditions, skin color, and alternative worldviews. The call of community isn’t about finding people just like us, or at the exclusion of any people. Community in the biblical sense is clearly about unlike people finding Christ at the center of their *inclusive* life together. Thus, issues of community reflect powerful dynamics of how God brings very diverse people together for his glory and his witness in the world.”

Transition: So what makes Christian community so special?

APPLICATION

Tim Keller, “5 Features That Made The Early Church Unique” - “Before Christianity, there was no distinct ‘religious identity,’ since your religion was simply an aspect of your ethnic or national identity. If you were from this city, or from this tribe, or from this nation, you worshiped the gods of that city, tribe, or people. Your religion was basically *assigned* to you. Christianity brought into human thought for the first time the concept that you *chose* your religion, regardless of your race and class. Christianity also radically asserted that your faith in Christ became your new, deepest identity, while at the same time not effacing or wiping out your race, class, and gender. Instead, your relationship to Christ demoted them to second place. This meant, to the shock of Roman society, that all Christians—whether slave, free, or highborn, or whatever their race and nationality—were now equal in Christ (Gal. 3:26–29). This was a radical challenge to the entrenched social structure and divisions of Roman society, and from it flowed at least five unique features.”

1. They were multi-racial and experienced unity across ethnic boundaries.

When we look at the movement of God’s Spirit through the book of Acts, for example, we see a broad coalition of people from all kinds of races and ethnicities united to a startling degree in order to form community and further the Jesus mission of preaching the gospel to the nations.

2. They were a community of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Even while Christians experienced criticism, exclusion, imprisonment, and persecution—including martyrdom—they taught radical forgiveness and withholding retaliation. The goal was turning enemies into friends for the sake of the kingdom.

3. They were famous for their hospitality to the poor and the suffering.

Everyone was expected to care for their own family and tribe. But Christians were known to be extravagant givers and remain in cities where disease and plague was rampant in order to care for the dying. Often, they paid the price with their own lives.

4. They were a community committed to the sanctity of life.

Whereas the Roman practice of “infant exposure” resulted in unwanted babies thrown onto garbage heaps, Christians rescued them and raised them as their own.

5. They upheld a sexual countercultural.

While Roman women were expected to remain chaste, men of the time were almost required to have sex with people lower on the social ladder as an expression of status. Christians seemed prudish as they taught sexual appetite should be controlled and expressed toward one's spouse. And they saw women as equal partners because they also fully represent the *Imago Dei*.

The results of this unique community and peculiar habits were such that at its inception, Christians numbered around 1,000 in 40 AD, which was 0.0017% of the world's population. And by 350 AD, the church had grown to 33.8 million people, or 56.5% of the world population.

How do we account for this exponential growth? Certainly, it wasn't about following some strict rules that set them apart from their culture. No, instead of the rules being a precursor for differentiation, their behavior as an overflow of the gospel and the new life created by the Spirit formed them into something unique and powerful. It was the gospel that brought a diverse group together and forged them in the fires of conflict, both internal and external to the Church. And they were bonded together by the unifying cry of God's love, experienced in Jesus, which compelled them to welcome everyone still outside God's family.

Jonathan & Melissa Helser, *Cultivate* - "Jesus created home everywhere....He tithed a tenth of his life on Earth to ministry, and when he did ministry, it looked like family. It looked like home. It looked like meals and laughter, tears and sorrow, walking and talking and intentionally living life together. It looked like flying-high moments of feeding the five thousand, healing the crowds, speaking on the mountain to the hungry hearts, seeing eyesight returned and endless bleeding stop, and then effortlessly landing emotionally, spiritually, and physically with a tiny group of friends. He knew how to teach them to fly high in faith and boldness and then to land in a home of friendship with each other and understanding of the Kingdom."

This is the heartbeat of the Church that has reverberated throughout the centuries down to us, and this is the supernatural power of community we are called to experience:

1 John 4:7-12, NIV: Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live

through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

And pay particular attention to how often John uses “we” and “us.” Love is only truly possible when there are others to love.

Transition: Now, as soon as we read this, there is often a visceral feeling that comes with it.

OBJECTIONS

There are many who have been hurt in community. We’ve experienced the dark side of Christian community where those who say they represent Jesus have done just the opposite and manifested the ugliness of our fallen human condition. What do we make of that?

First, know that I am sincerely sorry for hurt that others have caused you. I make no excuses for Christians not living up to the expectations and example of Jesus. I’ve been on both the giving and receiving end of that.

I can’t promise you a pain-free experience in community. But I do believe that healing is found in community, as counter-intuitive as that may seem.

INSPIRATION

In the show *The West Wing*, Leo McGary tells a modernized version of the Parable of the Good Samaritan to Josh Limon. He says, **"This guy's walking down the street when he falls in a hole. The walls are so steep he can't get out. A doctor passes by and the guy shouts up, 'Hey you. Can you help me out?' The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a priest comes along and the guy shouts up, 'Father, I'm down in this hole can you help me out?' The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a friend walks by, 'Hey, Joe, it's me can you help me out?' And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, 'Are you stupid? Now we're both down here.' The friend says, 'Yeah, but I've been down here before and I know the way out.'"**

We may be hurt in community. But we are also healed in community, not isolation, as we so often imagine we can be.

Transition: Here is my invitation to you this week, and you can begin now in how you walk this out together with God.

CONCLUSION

Next Step:

- Bring your hurt and doubt about community to Jesus. Remain open as to how you can heal and flourish in community.

Prayer

Invitation