

“The Significance of Community”

Matthew 5:21–37

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I don't know how many of you remember the first sermon I preached as pastor of this church in June 2009. I will not ask for a show of hands. I remember for many reasons. It was a sermon based on 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, focusing on Paul's statement that he has opened his heart to the church and request that the people open their hearts to him. The title was “Opening Our Hearts to Each Other.”

It was a sermon on the central role that relationships play in ministry, an exploration of the nature and significance of Christian community. Who we are and how we relate to each other is prerequisite to everything we do, but it is also one of the most important things we do, especially in a time when so many have no place of belonging.

I felt strongly about this reality fourteen years ago, I feel even more strongly about it now, and apparently many of you do too. One of the central themes that has come out of the Dream Team's work is the significance of community, the relationships we build with one another and those we seek with the people who live around us. Over and over again in our meetings, we have said that this is one of the things we value most about this church and want to see continue.

As a result, this is the subject matter of the art banner Max Dowdle designed for the back of the Lewis Building. The Art Banner Team waited to see what themes emerged from the Dream Team's work so that we could represent them with a visual image. The banner, which we learned more about during Sunday School, and an image of which is on the front of the worship order, is a bold and beautiful affirmation of our belief in the significance of community.

I would add that the entire art banner process has also been an affirmation of art and artists. The church, especially the Baptist church, has not always been affirming. As I noted last week, Baptists, along with other Protestants, have often practiced what someone has called a

tyranny of the word. While words matter, many aspects of human experience, especially those that involve spirituality, are too large to be contained by words alone. And for the church to be all God intends, we need to embrace all the gifts God provides, including artistic gifts.

I heard an artist talk about how for much of her life, her gifts were isolated from her faith because the church didn't know what to do with artistic gifts. Then, she heard a sermon on Exodus 31 which says the Spirit was poured out on artists who made beautiful the worship space. God's Spirit was the source of artistic gifts, just like all other gifts.

It was a moment of enlightenment and transformation, an opening to integrate her very being with her spirituality, affirmation the church needs. This church has an appreciation for the relationship between spirituality and art. This space and all that is in it testify to this reality. Our new banner provides another step of affirmation, one that thousands passing by will see. That's the kind of community we want to be, one where all are welcomed, affirmed, and encouraged to share their gifts.

It may not be obvious, but this theme of community runs through our texts today, especially the reading from Matthew. It is part of the Sermon on the Mount which includes a series of sayings in which Jesus explores the deeper implications of long-established Jewish teachings. As he signaled in last week's text, Jesus is not doing away with the law and the prophets, he is fulfilling them.

The teachings address a range of subjects from murder, adultery, and divorce all the way to oath swearing, not holding on to grudges, and loving the enemy. All these sayings address God's expectations for us, and all of them address human relationships. Furthermore, as the first saying we have read makes clear, these two realities — how we relate to God and how we relate to each other — are inextricably linked.

Jesus begins by noting the ancient teaching not to commit murder, but then he goes on to say that it's not just about murder, it's about respecting human life. Anyone who is angry with a brother or sister is liable to judgment, anyone who insults a brother or sister will be liable to the council, and whoever calls someone else a fool will be liable to the hell of fire. If we are paying attention, we ought to be a bit anxious.

Then, Jesus says that if we are offering something to God and remember that we have an unresolved conflict with someone, we should leave our gift and first reconcile with that person before presenting anything to God. If we took him literally here, the church would be in real trouble! But note what he is saying. We cannot presume to have a warm and fuzzy relationship with God while running all over people in our lives. It doesn't work that way. How we relate to each other, the kind of community we shape, affects our relationship with God.

There is a character in a crime series on Netflix Dana and I watched recently who illustrates this reality. The man talks a pious game. He reads his Bible and tries to get his sister more deeply rooted in faith, constantly pushing her to read scripture and pray. But the man is a nasty bully who is hostile to anyone who disagrees with him. He participates in human trafficking and even covers up a fatal shooting. How does this square with his claims of faith? No one is perfect, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, but this man is not just imperfect. His entire life is lived in hostility toward others.

He's just a character in a crime show, but how many people in the world around us live with the same kind of hypocrisy? The author of 1 John says that whoever does not love other people does not know God because God is love (1 John 4:8). How we relate to each other offers a sign of the genuineness of our faith.

So, community is important, but what is the nature of the community we are to shape? It begins with a full acceptance of all people and building relationships characterized by mutual respect. The church is diverse by design which means we have differences. But we embrace these differences; we don't simply tolerate them. We celebrate our diversity and benefit from it.

In his book *The Passion for Life* Jurgen Moltmann put it this way.

We are no longer individualists but a congregation in which one accepts the other in the way that one has already been accepted by Christ. The old and very bleak principle, 'Birds of a feather flock together' is then no longer valid. Instead, people who are radically

different take pleasure in and accept each other. *Christian* (and this means liberating) community, then, no longer means only to sit next to those with whom I agree but also to sit next to those with whom I do not agree... we would no longer come together in order to confirm for each other the eternally same stories, jokes, and opinions, but rather would create an open and hospitable community which would bring friendliness into the unfriendly corners of this society. Congregation (or church), then, is... a new kind of living together that affirms:

- that no one is alone with his or her problems,
- that no one has to conceal his or her disabilities,
- that there are not some who have the say and others who have nothing to say,
- that neither the old nor the little ones are isolated,
- that one bears the other even when it is unpleasant and there is no agreement, and
- that, finally, the one can also at times leave the other in peace when the other needs it. (pp. 32-33)

This is the kind of community we seek to be.

But Christian community is characterized not just by acceptance and mutual respect but by a willingness to resolve conflicts, to practice forgiveness and reconciliation. This is why Jesus tells us to leave our gift at the altar and be reconciled to our brother or sister.

Human beings have differences. The question is how we deal with them. Often it is with hostility and entrenchment. I have heard many people say something like this, “When it comes to wrongdoing, I have a long memory.” That is, you-know-where will freeze over before I forgive him! I can count on one hand the significant conflicts I have seen healed even among church people, but those I have seen offer hope.

A character in Alan Patton’s novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Msimangu, talks about his personal struggles in addition to those of his country, South Africa, during Apartheid, and then he says this, “The tragedy is not that things are broken. The tragedy is that they are not

mended again (p. 56).” Leaving conflict unresolved is a tragedy because of the wounds anger leaves on us, the distance this creates with others and God, and the joy we miss by not reconciling.

I have shared with some of you a story about my reconciliation with a man who lost a son my age very suddenly. He was angry with God but couldn't get to God. So, the anger was directed at me for some time. But neither of us closed the door on reconciliation. And one day when I held his shoulder gently while sharing communion bread with him, tears started to roll down his cheek, his heart opened, as did mine, and we reconciled and became close friends until his death.

We seek to be a community where all are accepted and forgiveness is practiced, but how do we do that in this world? Not alone, but we don't have to because our community begins with God. The hands on the banner reach out not only to other hands but to a circle in the center, a bright light, some symbol of the holy, perhaps God. It is God, the God who was in Christ, who brings us together and binds us together and enables us to offer something different and much needed to the world.

The reading from 1 Corinthians 3 underscores the centrality of God's very being for the church. Paul is addressing the kind of divisiveness that inevitably creeps up in any human community, including the church. People have sorted themselves into groups linked to different leaders, and Paul is infuriated by this. As leaders, we are all just servants of God, he says.

The managing editor of *The Christian Century*, Steven Thorngate, calls attention (February, 2023, p. 25) to this reality. He notes that our solution to division is often to try to find the ideas and beliefs we can all agree on within a church, denomination, or the Church universal. But in this text, Paul does not point to any such lowest common denominator of belief. He simply points to God as the one who unites.

It is God who unites us, not any idea about or conception of God, and it is God who empowers us to move further toward the goals of acceptance and mutual respect, forgiveness and reconciliation. We may not have realized the community God envisions, but we experience a part of it, and we are working to get there every day with God's help.