

Community is Life Together

Anabaptist pastor and community leader Eberhard Arnold writes in the book "God's Revolution": "Everywhere the world is going to pieces. It is crumbling and rotting away. It is going through a process of disintegration. It is dying. And in these fearsome times, through the Holy Spirit Christ places the city-church with its unconditional unity right into the world. The only help for the world is to have a place of gathering, to have people whose will, undivided and free of doubt, is bent on gathering with others in unity."

Interestingly enough, Eberhard Arnold wrote this challenging statement on community in Germany during the rise of Nazism; yet his words are just as applicable to us in the world we face today. And this is because he taps into an eternal truth. The community of faith was, is, and will be God's refuge for humankind in the midst of the struggles of a fallen world.

Google defines community as "a group of people living together in one place, especially one practicing common ownership" or "a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals." According to this definition then, types of communities might include towns, neighborhoods, school districts, friend groups, clubs, and teams. There can also be communities within communities, for example, ethnic communities within larger cities and singles groups or people grouped by age within churches.

Why do we become a part of these communities? We join communities because we want a sense of belonging and a feeling that "my presence matters in this world." Catholic social activist Dorothy Day writes: "We have all known the long loneliness, and we have found that the answer is community." Through community we build relationships, establish and affirm identity, and stave off that feeling of isolation.

All of us belong to many different and varied communities, with different purposes, rules, and make-up. I belong to the community of Oak Grove, as well as West Liberty, and to the community of WL-S alumni, the community of seminarians, the community of record collectors, and the community of dog owners. Today, what I want to suggest is that there is a significant difference between Christian community and all other types of community.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was another German who was exploring the importance of Christian community during the rise of Nazism in Germany. He believed so strongly in the importance of Christian community that he formed an intentional community of men at the seminary he ran who lived together, worshiped together, studied together, worked together, and played together. And in this grand experiment, he was able to test what it meant to fellowship and love one another in Christ as an alternative to community in the world. This community lasted for several years until it was eventually shut down by the Gestapo. But luckily for us, he recorded what he learned during this time in his book "Life Together," which I will be referring back to frequently as it really helped to inform my thoughts this week. On the definition of Christian Community, he writes: "Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ" which means "that a Christian needs others for the sake of Jesus Christ" and "that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ."

Christian community is different from secular community because all relationships within it are mediated through Jesus Christ. What does this mean? This morning we are going to explore two aspects of Christ's mediation in our Christian relationships. 1) We love others because of Christ's love for us. 2) We love others through Christ's love for us.

1) We love others because of Christ's love for us.

In our passage today, Jesus is winding down His time with the disciples before He would be arrested, tried, and crucified. And since he knew that in a short while He would no longer be able to teach them directly, Jesus wanted to make sure that leave them with some of His most important teachings. Now, Jesus did not tend to be particularly clear in the way that he taught his followers, often using parables and object lessons to make a greater point that usually left them scratching their heads. This is why the passage for today is so significant because although it may have been difficult to fully understand, Jesus was totally direct in what he wanted them to hear. In fact, he calls it a command. In **John 15:12**, Jesus says: ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

In this simple yet loaded commandment, Jesus wanted them to know that love would be an essential part of their Christian community.

If you look specifically at the word "as" I think that you can draw two meanings out of it. First, Jesus is telling His disciples to love each other "in the same way" that Jesus had loved them. This would be a tall order because soon Jesus would be laying His life down for them. Their love for each other was to include service, accountability, and sacrifice, in the same way that Jesus had modeled for them during his ministry. Secondly, Jesus is telling them to love each other "because" he loved them as well.

Paul gave this same command, in **Romans 15:7**:

"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."

The key connecting word in this verse is "just as." Just as Christ has done for you, you should do for others.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says it like this: "What God did to us, we then owed to others. The more we received, the more we were able to give; and the more meager our love for one another, the less we were living by God's mercy and love."

Essentially Jesus is telling the disciples that one of the bases for relationships in Christian community is to "pay-it-forward." The disciples and we have received the gift of ultimate sacrificial love, and to honor the giver and the gift, we choose to also love others in return. Any other response would be selfish.

2) We love others through Christ's love for us.

This might be the most significant difference between Christian community and secular communities; we are never in a relationship with another Christian without the presence of Jesus. Bonhoeffer writes "Within the spiritual community there is never, in any way whatsoever, an "immediate" relationship of one to another."

Picture this: We love Christ, who loves others, and we love others inside of that love of Christ, so therefore we love others through Christ. Jesus is always the intercessor, mediator, pathway, stream, of our love for others. In that way, Christian community is so much stronger than any other form of community. Because outside of Christ, relationships depend on our own ability to give and sustain meaningful love and connection with others; they also rely on the other's ability to receive and reciprocate that love. And we are all very aware of how fickle, how temperamental the human ability is to love and be loved. Christ's love, however, is perfect and unending, and so by having Him as a third party to all relationships within our Christian communities, we can persevere in spite of our weaknesses.

Transition: So, at the center of relationships in Christian community is Jesus Christ. We love because of Him, and we love through Him. And in this, the community is drawn to a center much deeper and stronger than what defines secular community, things like location and common interest. However, we need to be aware that even though Jesus is our center and mediator, we are still a community made up of people, who in spite of our best efforts are still imperfect because of sin. Therefore, we need to consider a few pitfalls that we need to navigate when doing life together in Christian community.

Navigating the Pitfalls:

1) Our Idealization of Christian community:

We all have an ideal vision for what true, faithful Christian community looks like. This may be a community focused on service, or social justice, or Christian education, or being multi-cultural, or that everyone in it adheres to whatever moral standard we've developed. And when our vision fails, we get disillusioned. The truth is, any vision for community that isn't centered on the person of Christ, worships the vision as a false idol. Bonhoeffer states that: "Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial."

Transition: Not only do we have to keep Jesus at the center of our community, but we also have to keep our own selves in check.

2) Our lack of humility:

A large part of whether or not we can live in Christian community is whether or not we can recognize our own faults or sins before others and before Jesus. We can never truly love another person for all of who they are, including both their holiest moments as well as their darkest sins, until we've come to terms with our own sinfulness. It really goes back to Jesus' words on judgment in Luke 6:42 when he says: "How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

Christians are going to fail you. And Christian communities will never be perfect. But if we approach one another with humility and awareness of our own abilities to fail, then we can avoid destroying Christian community by showing grace and humility in our love for one another. Bonhoeffer states it well in that: "Therefore, will not the very moment of great disillusionment with my brother or sister be incomparably wholesome for me because it so thoroughly teaches me that both of us can never live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ? The bright day of Christian community dawns wherever the early morning mists of dreamy visions are lifting."

Conclusion:

So, our relationships in Christian community are centered on Jesus Christ, who mediates our love for one another. This means that we love others because of Christ's love for us and that we love others through Christ's love for us. Because of this, the Church, which is not the building but rather the people gathered together, is stronger, better, more healing, and more fulfilling than any other community that the world has to offer. And if we can gather together around the love of Jesus, in full humility, and lay down our own visions of the "right" community in exchange for Jesus, then we can truly offer people in our other "communities" a gathering place of strength and refuge from a world crumbling around us. And we can say together, like the Psalmist, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!"