

## **Called to Support One Another**

### **Introduction:**

**Why are we in Christian community? So far, we've talked about what it means to serve together in Christian Community, what it means to love each other in Christian Community, and how and why we worship in Christian community. This morning we are going to consider one more important aspect of Christian Community; a central responsibility of the Christian community is to support/take care of one another in all aspects of life.**

**Ancient Context:** In the Acts passage read for today, the early church had discovered some of the challenges that would arise in the midst of bringing a diverse group of people together in community. In the early church there were two distinct groups of Jewish Christians: those of Greek background (or at least who primarily spoke Greek) and those of Hebraic background (or who primarily spoke Hebrew). What was happening was that the Greek widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And to understand, the Jewish practice that the early church was continuing would give each widow fourteen meals per week, enough for two meals a day. So this was no small amount of food. The neglect may have been purposeful, or it may have simply been that there were so many new Jewish Christians that certain segments of the diverse group were getting lost in the shuffle. Either way, the apostles heard the issue, gathered together to discuss, and appointed seven members of the community, called deacons, to make sure that there would be even distribution of the food for all of the widows.

Oftentimes when this story is talked about, the focus gets placed on the way in which the all members of the Christian community are supposed to be equal, regardless of their ethnic background. This is important to remember, especially when it comes to community, that we are all worthy in the eyes of Christ, and that nobody in the church should be experiencing favoritism

However, the lesson I want to draw out from this story, this morning, is that the early church had systems in place to take care of their members, especially those who were in real physical need. They knew and understood that a central responsibility of their new faith community was to support and take care of one another in all aspects of life.

**Modern Context:** The modern church bears this same responsibility. In a culture that encourages individuality and prizes independence, that says we can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, and that discourages reliance on others for our needs and in many cases shames people who rely on programs like Medicare/Medicaid, WIC, and welfare, the church is once again called out to be different. Additionally the church is not a club or group of individuals who happen to follow the same belief system and get together every once in a while like the Lion's Club or the Boy Scouts, but rather it is a body, where each member belongs to each other and is responsible to and for one other.

**Transition:** So this morning we are going to consider three areas in which the Christian community is called to support and take care of one another: physical needs, emotional needs, and spiritual needs.

### 1) Supporting physical needs

The early church in the book of Acts is really a fascinating study of what genuine community looks like, and again, is deeply challenging to the individualism that is so pervasive in America today. Listen to the description that Luke gives of the church activities, and imagine what that might look like for us today:

**Acts 4:32-37**

<sup>32</sup> All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all <sup>34</sup> that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales <sup>35</sup> and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. <sup>36</sup> Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Some things that stand out to me in this passage:

-The believers were in one heart and one mind. This element is crucial to what was to follow because if they weren't unified in what they believed and in their love for one another, then there would be no way that they could sacrifice so much for each other.

**-There was no needy person among them. Remember, the church in Acts was a diverse group of people, and one could assume it included both wealthy and poor persons. Yet because of their unity, they believed it was important that no one went without. This doesn't necessarily mean that their financial wealth and possessions were leveled to be the same, but it does mean that they believed very seriously that they should be able to support whatever needs the others may have, even if that meant sacrificing some of their own material and monetary gain. How did they do this?**

**-Members of the church would sell property, houses, and land, take the money gained, and give it to the apostles to distribute in whatever way they saw fit.**

**Can you imagine, the love and care we would have to have to be willing to give over money equivalent to a house or acres of land to the church in order to help pay the bills and put food on the tables of other Christian families? In many ways, the early church functioned like a close family would; it's not that unreasonable to think of family members taking care of each other in this way. My parents have given me more than one car, not because I asked or because they felt obligated to, but because they love me and want to support me still in any way they could. And how many of you can think of a time when a family member gave or loaned you money, or when you gave or loaned another family member money? Most of us are more than willing to help our close relatives out in this way. But the binding element in the church isn't last name or blood relation, but commitment to Christ.**

**So, why should we be willing to help out our fellow Christians in the same way that we might help a family member? Because our faith in Christ compels us to act like Christ towards one another, which means feeding, healing, visiting, and clothing each other. In the book of James, the author tells us that if our faith isn't compelling us to take care of our Christian brothers' and sisters' physical needs, then our faith is dead.**

**James 2:14-17**

<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?

<sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

So what does this look like at Oak Grove? I am happy to say that this is an area that our church is particularly gifted in. When someone is sick, or has a child, or is displaced from their home, meals are brought. Sometimes this is formalized in a meal train, and sometimes it just means bringing extra food over at random. We help do housework for each other, we provide childcare, and we work on each other’s cars. We even have a “nurture and care” budget line item from which we use money to meet needs of church members. Still, I would encourage all of us to continue to explore ways in which we can support each other, both officially through the church, and informally through our relationships. As a Christian community, we are called to support each other’s physical needs.

## 2) Supporting Emotional Needs: Encouraging one another

Why do we have friends? We have friends because we want people to share life with, whether it means we go see movies together, go to our kids’ ballgames together, have cook-outs together, or even commiserate about our spouses and children together. And if our friends are good friends, we may even turn to them for emotional support when times are tough.



The church community, too, is called to support each other's emotional needs. The book of Hebrews is an especially important book of instructions for the communal life of the church. In **Hebrews 10:24-25**, the author encourages Christians to continue to gather, and in that gathering to offer one another emotional support.

<sup>24</sup> And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup> *not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another*—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

What does it mean for us, as a community, to encourage one another? In some part, I think it means to be available to one another both in good times and in difficult times. It means when we ask each other “How are you doing?” that we go in expecting to hear more than just “fine, okay, or great,” knowing that there is always more bubbling underneath than can be seen from the surface. It means offering our real, genuine presence because we know that's what Christ has done for us and what Christ calls us to do.

**What does emotional encouragement look like at Oak Grove? I saw encouragement this winter when I attended the WL-S girl's final basketball game; I was overwhelmed by all of the Oak Grove people who were there that didn't have kids on the team, but wanted to show support to our players and to the school community. I also think about Everett Yoder and the many notes of encouragement he has written over the years to people in the church. And I think of June and Joyce Hostetler, who came to Erin's grandfather's funeral, even though they had no connection to him directly. As a Christian community, we are called to support each other's emotional needs.**

### **3) Supporting Spiritual Needs**

**Finally, we are called in Christian Community to support each other's spiritual needs. Specifically, I want to consider how this happens through accountability and discipleship.**

#### **a. Accountability**

We build each other up spiritually when we hold each other accountable and are held accountable. This, again, is a very uncomfortable practice for our culture, which encourages privacy in many of the areas we are actually supposed to be open about in the church, such as sex, finances, and politics. It's also uncomfortable because it means being open to chastisement and discipline, when it comes to areas of sin, and being willing to call others to account in the Spirit of Christian love. Paul tells us in Galatian 6:1-2 that it's actually beneficial to the community when we keep each other accountable in this way.

**“<sup>1</sup>Brothers, if someone is caught in a trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him with a spirit of gentleness. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. <sup>2</sup>Carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the Law of Christ.”**

## **b. Discipleship**

Accountability is really one piece of the larger puzzle of Christian discipleship. And Christian discipleship, that is, to follow after Jesus, happens best when it happens in the context of community. Because in community, we can encourage one another to continue to grow in faith, serve as examples for newer believers, and look to our elders for illustrations of a faithful life.

Solomon tells us in Proverbs 27:17 **“<sup>17</sup> As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”**

Specifically, we can “sharpen” one another by pushing each other further into our discipleship journeys in the ways that we act like Christ.

**Hebrews 10:24 says**

***<sup>24</sup> And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds***

**By supporting each other in the faith community, we can build up and be built up into better disciples. These are just two of the many ways that we can meet each other's spiritual needs. At Oak Grove, we do this through small groups, through missional discipleship groups, through our Sunday School classes, through informal prayer times, and probably in many other ways I'm not even aware of. As a Christian community, we are called to support each other's spiritual needs.**

**Conclusion:**

**In the "Expositor's Bible Commentary on Acts" by Richard Longenecker, the author writes: "Acts 6:1-6 is particularly instructive as something of a pattern for church life today. In the first place, the early church took very seriously the combination of spiritual and material concerns in carrying out its God-given ministry. In doing so, it stressed prayer and the proclamation of the Word, but never to the exclusion of helping the poor and correcting injustices...Second, the early church seems to have been prepared to adjust its procedures, alter its organizational structure, and develop new posts of responsibility in response to existing needs and for the sake of the ongoing proclamation of the Word of God..."**

**It's no question to me that Oak Grove takes seriously both physical and spiritual concerns when ministering to its own community. I would even say that we work very hard and supporting our neighbors who don't attend church in similar ways, both physically, emotionally, and spiritually. What I want us to imaginatively wonder about together is, what would it mean for us to be prepared to alter our procedures, our structure, and even to develop new posts of responsibility in order to continue to live together in community, supporting one another in all aspects of life?**

**The dark side to support ministries in community is the possibility that in building and supporting Christian community by taking care of one another, that we will become too inward focused at the expense of the Gospel. What we see in the Acts passage, however, is that taking care of each other was important enough to make sure that people with that gifting would be put in charge of that ministry and that it would really happen. We also see the church continuing to grow even when energy was being diverted inward. I believe this is because the church in Acts worked hard at striking a balance between outward Gospel mission and inward Gospel mission; that is, between fulfilling the great commission given by Jesus in Matthew 28 to share the good news and make disciples and Jesus' words about feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, showing hospitality to the stranger, and visiting the imprisoned in Matthew 25. In the Acts passage, this balance happened when the 12 apostles got together, recognized that they had been called as evangelists to preach the Gospel, and so discerned who might be a good shepherd and could take care of the hospitality ministry. This goes back to APEST that Dick talked about a few weeks ago, where Paul says in Ephesians 4:11-13**

***<sup>11</sup> So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up <sup>13</sup> until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.***

**Pastoring or shepherding, the role of hospitality and taking care of others, is an essential gift within the church. For a church to function as Jesus intended it to, it must include and empower all five gifts, Shepherding being one of them. But it is something too, that even though not everyone may be called to the role of shepherd, we are all called to support one another in the ministry of shepherding. And in doing so, may it be said of Oak Grove and Logan and Champaign Counties as Luke records in Acts 6:7**

**<sup>7</sup> So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.**