

Embracing Challenges in the Pursuit of Community

Please turn with me to Acts 1. Last week we looked at God's call to the church to be more than a once a week meeting, more than a crowd of people getting together. God has called the church to be a community of believers. And that takes commitment because community doesn't come quickly and it doesn't come easily.

This morning we're going to look at another important ingredient that God uses for growing community but before we go there, I want to continue to lay a biblical foundation for why Christian community is so important to God and to us.

Last week I cited Genesis 2 when God said it is not good for man to be alone as evidence that we were created for relationship and community. The truth is, if being alone was ever going to be a good thing, it would have been a good thing for Adam. He had it as good as any bachelor could ever hope for. The world was his man-cave. He could watch as much football as he wanted and eat pizza and wings every night if he wanted. I mean, think about it! Adam could make as big a mess as he wanted and there was no woman there to tell him to pick up his socks or take out the garbage. If God had left Adam alone in the garden, we might know the answer today to a question that has baffled great minds for centuries: *If a man is talking in the forest, and no woman is there to hear him, is he still wrong? We might know.*

But God said, *it's not good for man to be alone.* Mankind was created for relationship and to live in community and we can trace that right back to our creation. We were created for community. But we can actually trace our desire and need for community even further back than the garden - we can trace it all the way back to our Creator. The Bible tells us that God is a Trinity: one God in three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's beyond our comprehension, but God has existed in community forever. In his book, *The Connecting Church*, Randy Frazee writes: *What this means is that community is not just something God thinks is a good idea; it is the way his very being and nature are expressed. The Bible tells us that God is love. 3 And for love to exist, there must necessarily be a relationship of persons in which it can be expressed.*¹

If God were not a triune God, if God existed alone in eternity past before He created anything, then He would have had no way of expressing love until He created other beings. In that sense it wouldn't have been true that God is love before there was anything to love. But God is a triune God, existing in loving fellowship and perfect community from eternity past. God has forever existed in community and when He began to create, He who is love just poured out that love on His creation. The Bible says that God created us in God's image so at the deepest core of our being we are made for and we long for community. In Christ, God has united us in community in a half dozen ways: as brothers and sisters in the family of God, as members in the body of Christ, as living stones being built up in the temple of God, as subjects in the eternal kingdom of Christ, and on it goes. We're stuck with each other, because together we're connected to Christ. This connection is so tight, that John writes that if we don't love each other, then we don't love God. (1 John 4:20)

¹ Frazee, Randy. *The Connecting Church 2.0: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Kindle Locations 763-765). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

So community is not optional for us as believers. God calls us together as His people, and He works in our lives to draw us closer together as a community of faith. So we need to be committed to community. But there's another important ingredient that God uses to strengthen us as a community, and to see that let's read **Acts 1:12-26** together.

While Acts 2 gives us an incredibly powerful picture of Christian community, the picture painted here in Acts one is probably closer to what people think of when they imagine what community should look like. A few tight friends who know each other well, in an intimate setting (an upper room), enjoying sweet fellowship and prayer together. They've been practically living with each other for the past three years so they know each other really well and are very, very comfortable together. They share good memories together. As Peter gets up to share from God's word, they remember some great times and funny times with Peter - remember the time he walked on water? Yeah, until he got scared and sank like a stone. Jesus had to save him! Oh, remember that time Jesus called him Satan? That took him down a peg or two. Good memories - they know each other. They love each other. As they worship and pray and break bread together you would have a hard time finding a tighter group of friends or a deeper sense of fellowship and love than this small community is experiencing.

I have experienced that kind of sweet fellowship at different times. I remember when I was a new believer attending a Methodist church, meeting in people's homes and there would be such a feeling of love and friendship and fellowship that it was like taking a warm bath in the love of God. I wouldn't want those nights to end. For many of us, that might be what we think of when we think of community: small, intimate, loving, peaceful. A part of us longs for that. And it's a good thing - it's not a bad thing. But the Lord loves us too much to let it stay that way for long. Because here in Acts 1, the big lesson about community isn't found in what's happening, it's found in what's about to happen. Let's keep reading: **Acts 2:1-8**

God moves this tight-knit community out of the intimate, comfortable upper room into the crowded streets of Jerusalem and things are about to get really uncomfortable. Their little, loving community is going to start growing exponentially and with that growth will come a whole lot of new challenges. The Hellenistic widows will be neglected in the distribution of food, as the gospel overflows the boundaries of Israel and Gentiles start coming to faith in Christ there will be doctrinal controversies over how to incorporate Gentiles into a Christian community that up until then had been all Jewish. Disagreement over how the gospel of grace and the Jewish law interact will erupt. Differences in ministry philosophies will break friendships apart like between Paul and Barnabas. And Paul even warns the Ephesian elders that wolves will enter the flock of God looking to devour sheep for their own selfish purposes.

The outward focus of the believers will necessarily produce a lot of challenges for the Christian community but those challenges are a part of God's plan for His people, and they are a part of His plan for us as well.

We all have our upper rooms - those places we feel comfortable and safe in. And we can want to stay there, but God loves us too much to let us stay there. If we want to grow together as a church community, we need to be willing to embrace challenges because challenges aren't a disruption to God's plan, they are essential to God's plan. We may prefer comfort, but comfort doesn't press us to grow. We

may long for things to be easy, but easy never forges greatness. Theodore Roosevelt expressed this when he said:

Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, [and] difficulty... I have never in my life envied a human being who led an easy life. I have envied a great many people who led difficult lives and led them well.

So I want to talk to you about challenges. Specifically embracing challenges in the pursuit of community. To shift our thinking from "challenges and problems and difficulties and hardships means something is wrong" to challenges and problems and such are a part of God's plan to move me out of my upper room and help me to grow. This won't be exhaustive, but these are some big challenges that all of us will face at some point in some way.

1. Challenge #1: To love one another

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

As I shared with the KWA students in chapel last Wednesday, God is love, so if He is living inside of us, John says it will work its way to the outside of us. We will love one another. But John doesn't just say it will happen, he urges us to *make* it happen. *Beloved, let us love one another.* Yes, Jesus' love is inside of us, but we need to take steps to show it.

John Mayer sings Love is a verb. It isn't *just* a verb - you can do things that look like love without actually loving. Paul describes someone who gives everything away and offers their body to be burned - which is some pretty intense verb action - but doesn't have love. So we can do things that look loving without loving, but love will always include action. John reminds us of that greatest of all acts of love: God sent His Son to take our punishment upon himself. Love is a verb. So we want to ask God to pour His love for others into our hearts and then look for practical ways to show it.

The most peaceful church in the world isn't be the loving church, it's the indifferent church. The church where the mantra is live and let live, because nobody cares enough to get involved. You are free to come and go, take what you like, leave what you don't like, and no one's ever going to bother you. And you won't have to get involved in anyone else's life. It may sound like a really comfortable upper room, but if God's moving in our lives, we can't stay there. God moves us into the crowded streets where His love is looking for ways to love and care for people.

And here's what we will find. As we step out of our upper rooms to take the risk of loving one another, we'll also find we begin to *like* each other more. We might think, "there's really no one I identify with or enjoy that much in the church." But sometimes the issue isn't that we don't *like* them, the issue is that we don't *know* them.

2. Challenge #2 - Engaging with people when it's uncomfortable to do so

On a very basic level, the challenges that hit the early church were the result of an ever expanding circle of people. How much easier and more manageable if they had just stayed a 120 close friends in the upper room? Maybe every once in a while brought in a new person to the inner circle.

A lot of people feel very uncomfortable meeting new people. Someone told me recently they just don't feel they're very good at it. I think we all deal with that to one degree or another. Other people may not have a hard time saying hello to a new person, but that's where it stops. Fear of offending or intruding or lack of interest keeps us from going any deeper, and so we stay on a superficial level all the time. If our community experience is all surface and no depth we will feel an emptiness and shallowness in church life.

Please, don't take this and get weird. It's ok to be kighthearted and connect over fun things we have in common. In fact, it's healthy. And don't try to "force" things. It's ok to kick someone's door in if their house is on fire. It's not ok to kick their door in to invite them out for coffee. Respect people where they're at, don't try to force anything. That's not the point of this. But we do want to push past the awkwardness and engage with people. We do want to be open to the Lord's leading to leave our safe upper room and connect with people in ways that might not be in our exact comfort zone.

- For some the upper room might be leaving church as soon as it's over without talking to anyone, and the Lord will lead you to slow down and purposely strike up a conversation or two. That might represent a serious step of faith for someone.
- For another, the upper room has been avoiding new people because you aren't comfortable meeting people you don't know but the Lord leads you to start a conversation with them. Nothing heavy, just friendly. Maybe you feel led to invite them to your community group, maybe even out to lunch.
- And for yet another, leaving the upper room might be approaching a friend and asking how they're doing. You've had them on your heart, but you don't want to offend them. Stepping out to express care might mean you let them know you've had them on your heart. Or asking them how they're doing. It might mean inviting them over for lunch. Or out for coffee.

Here's why. Sometimes we just see each other on a surface level. Smiling, put together, everything's good. But there are stories all around us. We have them too. In those stories there are needs and struggles, as well as dreams and aspirations. No one here is one dimensional. And no one here is an island. As we step out of our upper room and express care, God may use us to help others in their story. It's definitely easier not to get involved, but love demands that we do - at some level. God calls us out of the upper room of avoiding people out of fear to the crowded streets of engaging with people even when it's not comfortable to do so.

3. Challenge # 3 - Opening our lives to one another

As CGs start up, I want to encourage you to pick one and attend it, and I want to encourage you to try to open a portion of your life to one another. We want to open our lives in appropriate measures. I hate to keep qualifying, but I feel like these points can be taken to weird extremes. There is such a thing as TMI.

The pastor of a church in Illinois shared with his congregation that he was determined to be more vulnerable with them. The congregation appreciated that...until Sunday after Sunday he started to dump

his dirty laundry on them. They got to know when it was coming - about a third of the way through the sermon he would step around the pulpit and say "let me be real transparent with you..." and the church would collectively cringe. One member said, "you'd get twitchy wondering what's next." When the church began to get the reputation in the community of being the home of the "TMI pastor" they knew they had to say something. There is such a thing as TMI - but there's also such a thing as TLI - too little information.

In community groups, we want to be honest, and share our lives with one another. We want to go deeper than discussing concepts and talk about where that Bible verse hits my life, how God is working in me or convicting me or not. Honesty. We can be honest without being exhaustive. Not inappropriately TMI'ing, but stepping out of our upper room and sharing more of our lives with one another.

4. Challenge #4 - Forgiving one another (ask band to come up)

In community, we will sin against each other. We will at points probably hurt each other in some way. Someone will disappoint you. And few things can cause us to take our Christianity off the crowded streets and tuck it away in a safe upper room like being hurt.

I've seen people who have been really hurt by other believers and one of the things they often struggle with is suspicion. They don't want to be hurt again, and they fear it will happen again. So they try to be safe. I understand that, it's challenging when we've been hurt to step out and give trust again.

Forgiveness is key. It's not easy, it's challenging. But as Colossians 3:13 says, *Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*

Forgiveness is the glue that keeps hurting relationships together. Forgiveness is the bond that keeps offended parties from breaking apart. In community, we deal with issues, we don't ignore them, but we must be ready to rise to the challenge of forgiving one another.

Our community is built on Christ, who forgave us of all our sins. We wouldn't be a community, there wouldn't be a church, if not for forgiveness. Maybe the Lord is speaking to someone here and you have been hurt by a brother or sister or even by a church. And you are tempted to climb back up the stairs to the upper room where it's safe. As we close, will you allow the Lord to give you power to step out and forgive? He will help you, He will enable you.