

Community, center of our lives

Jubilee Mennonite Church

October 24, 2017

Purpose: To declare that the purpose of Christian community is worship and mutual accountability.

Message: Community as a worshipping core that truly cares and walks together for us is essential to Anabaptist Christians.

Synopsis: Community is yet another over used yet under realized term. In a culture which prizes individual rights and individual spaces above all else, talking about community as an alternative example and alternate way of being is truly a challenge to business as usual, as well as a sincere challenge to actually realize. As a result of holding Christ as the core of our life and living, we are called to be in community to center our lives and give incarnation to our faith. We come to this conviction as a consequence of the Call of Christ in our lives. In making this declaration we are called to practice both radical hospitality and mutual accountability in equal measures.

Text: Acts 2:41-47; Psalm 78:1-7

Acts 2:41 – 47 ¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

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This is a representation of my community, my social network. All of my 750 or so acquaintances from Facebook are each positioned on the outside of the circle, which represents me. The lines that criss-cross between people are the connections that the friends who have connected with me connect with each other. The greater the density of connections between one to the other, the tighter bound the web between people and how they relate to each other, the tighter the community, or so goes the theory. In reality; not so much. There are a fair number of folks here that I remember their name enough to say that they are a friend. Others are people who I have no idea who they are, but did not have the techno-savvy heart to decline their desire to be a friend of mine. But the closer we get to family and close friends, the more the threads that connect one to the other start weaving themselves together, forming what is said to be the basis of my community as represented in the cyber world. Being a person with a goodly number of moves underneath my belt, there are a number of nodes between which I relate. The web of people and places who are my support, my network upon whom I can rely upon and work with in the digital world as well as in the physical. That's the ideal. Connection is made, the web is formed and we have community in three easy clicks. The more we are connected, the more we have the community that makes life rich and meaningful.

It is not true. Ours is a culture who is among the most connected in the world, sustaining instant access to our communities with barely a fore thought. Yet, North Americans are among the most lonely people on earth. A 2006 study found that on average Americans had only two close friends in whom they could confide, down from 3 20 years previous. The percentage of people who said that they did not have any such person what so ever rose from 10 percent to 25 percent in the same time period, with an additional 19 percent stating that they only had their spouse to share with.ⁱ Mass event attendance—concerts, plays, events where you are one among a number of others—has been decreasing over the last couple of decades, while coffee houses have thrived. Why coffee houses? It's like one person says—I come for the atmosphere of people being around so I don't feel like I am alone. A simulated community. It would seem like we are good are forming groups, connecting people with similar interests, but *Community*—groups that interact and depend on each other—remains an elusive ideal, even for the power of the all-knowing social network.

We all have a primary need for community. It is how we have been wired—to come together and support each other. As social beings, we best live and move and thrive when we connect to each other. We feel better, work better, think better, act better, are just better when we have a group around us. It is how we are created. We need community to be who we are created to be.

As true as this may be, this is not fundamentally why we are here this morning, however. Our shared need for community, as powerful and real as it is does not in itself the reason why we are a body gathered here. There are any number of groups, faith based or otherwise, that can give us the connectivity that we need. Sometimes, the folks at Tim's in the morning, or at your swimming club can be as fundamental to you as the people with whom you share a pew. But the reason why we do Christian community runs deeper than that. We do Christian community because as disciples of Christ, we struggle to be who we are called to be any other way. I saw a great illustration of this just the other day at the Mennonite Brethren Study conference. Paul Kroeker, a trainer for MB Mission I believe, has had a bike made. Its ordinary enough bicycle, with the exception of the gear on the headset of the bike, making the steering backwards. His premise is simple enough. He invites anyone who cares too to try to ride the bike, and to this day no one has been able to make it work without the assistance of 3-4 people beside them to keep them on the right path. Paul likens this to Discipleship, the process of re-learning how to ride a bike seems natural, but the way of Christ is so desperately different from the natural muscle memory of how we are as people, we need the support of others to make it work. It's a great metaphor. Remind me to show you the video of this sometime. There is a lot of good entertainment value to it.

This passage that we read in Acts 2, directly following the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost we read as a history, and an odd one at that. Something extraordinary happened, wind, fire and all the rest, and then we got on with things. That's how we reason with all this. This model of the sharing of resources, lives, and all the rest has gone the way of adding thousands to their numbers every day. They were under the influence of the out pouring of the Spirit, we might say, and now we have a better concept of how a well-regulated church ought to function in more sober times. . Church is something we now shop for much as we would a car. We want a

congregation that suits the features that we desire, the styling of worship that doesn't push us too far, a theological outlook that is nice and comfortable and handles well in the tough places, and, most importantly, people who simply do not rub us the wrong way. My spiritual life is my business, we have been told. It's about me a Jesus, and there is nothing much else about it. Church is just another social network that of folks who happen to be headed more or less the same way that I am in matters of spiritual life.

Anabaptism, though, would connect more to a communal way of thinking that what we might find elsewhere though. Christ is the centre of our faith, and Christ has invited us to follow him. We are disciples, each and every one of us, and as do discipleship together, we orient ourselves back to Christ, and in doing so, we connect ourselves within community. Because we need community in order to be the disciples that we are called to be, to ride this new life that is familiar, but trickily difficult to make work and to keep balanced. We do community because we without it we are not at our best as disciples. We extend community to those around us because we are called to go a make disciples, loving the neighbour as our selves.

So how does this community draw from the Acts 2 community? While things have cooled considerably since then, there are still some characteristics that define us. For example, we declare the bible is not best interpreted by a single person or committee, but by the body gathered. That, at its core, is why we have a response to the sermon. I love nothing more that to have someone argue with me regarding something I said. First, it lets me know they weren't entirely asleep, but secondly it demonstrates a passion to read and look for Christ in every word. With Christ as the centre of our faith, we must always ask ourselves together where Jesus might be in the passage, calling us to something new, and that is something we do best together. And while we do not have all things in common, certainly not like some of our siblings like the Hutterites, we do value the sharing of our worldly goods and our means to be an extension of our life of faith. We share of what we have been given not because it makes us good, we share because we have been given what is ours from Christ the Master, who bids us remember that all we are given is from God for the building of the kingdom, first last and always. We do the hard work of community because we need community to do the hard work of being disciples.

Here's the thing. Anyone who has spent any time in Christian community can articulate its many failures. We get it wrong all the time. This community hurts people. We miss people's loneliness. We draw the lines of who is in and who is out too narrowly. We mistake the task of discipleship as solely a journey into the self and not one of being sent out into God's world (we'll pick this one up next week). Especially historically, the church has practiced community maintenance much more with a mind toward creating barriers against the world's wickedness, and often delivered the message that our own brokenness, our own failings are then not welcome. Church is often encountered as a community of judgment more than one of embrace. This has to change, balancing a healthy call to accountability with the unconditional reality of being loved. A truly discipleship based community needs to first acknowledge that we are all disciples on the way and in the act of following after Jesus. And that means that we are broken. That means we are hurting and we are here. Our central task as community is to create a place that is safe enough for the walls to be torn down, safe enough for each of us to reveal our brokenness, safe enough for us to be precisely and wholly who we really are. We have a long way to go to this goal. But the day that our communities can welcome all that we are for who we are, will be a great day indeed.

We are centered in Christ as a focus of our faith. That focus brings us to our own need to walk alongside others, and have companionship for the journey. We are called through discipleship to the community of Christ as a way of committing ourselves to the tending not just of our own selves, our own news, our own preferences, but to look out and see that others are tended too. Our community is broken because we are broken. We cannot, and we should not pretend that it is perfect. But we cannot and should not either fail to invest ourselves in the task of making it better.

May we each be given the courage to continue the hard work of community, inside and out, building the kingdom of God.

ⁱ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/is-facebook-making-us-lonely/308930/> accessed 11-8-2017