

INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, February 24, 2013

Community does not just happen.

Do you know what happens? ENTROPY happens. Disorder happens. Things decline and fall apart.

Entropy is defined as: the degradation of the matter and energy in the universe to an ultimate state of inert uniformity.

“Inert uniformity.” That sounds to me like a dead church.

We don’t want “inert” and we don’t want “uniformity.” We celebrate movement, change, growth, Kingdom come. We celebrate diversity—of ages, of genders, of ethnicities, of gifts.

But living churches are messy. Because life is messy. People don’t arrive on time. People don’t arrive prepared. People don’t come often. People don’t stay long. People sing out of tune. Conflicts arise. Feelings get hurt. Tempers flare. Words sting.

In contrast to this, we have the lyrics of the psalmist (Psalm 133 (NLT)—A song for pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem). If you are ascending today—that is, if you value your spiritual life and are drawing closer to the Lord—then listen closely, because David was singing about your future!

¹ *How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony!*

² *For harmony is as precious as the anointing oil that was poured over Aaron’s head, that ran down his beard and onto the border of his robe.*

³ *Harmony is as refreshing as the dew from Mount Hermon that falls on the mountains of Zion. And there the Lord has pronounced his blessing, even life everlasting.*

Today I’m speaking to you about intentional community. If we want to build the community of Christ—if we want to see His Kingdom come and His will be done on earth, as it is in heaven—then we must be intentional about it.

We must plan for it thoughtfully.

We must prepare for it deliberately.

We must pursue it diligently.

We must preserve it vigorously.

Let’s see, now, what each of these steps really means.

Plan for it thoughtfully

Paul unveils God's eternal plan, revealing things formerly hidden from sight, but now openly presented to the world through Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 1 (NIV)

⁸ *With all wisdom and understanding,* ⁹ *[God] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ,* ¹⁰ *to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.*

These verses express the:

- *Source of the plan:* God's wisdom and understanding and pleasure
- *Means of the plan:* Jesus Christ
- *Timing of the plan:* when the times reach their fulfillment
- *Aim of the plan:* to unite everything under Christ's headship

Community is the aim. This is what God is ultimately after. His ultimate goal is not your individual happiness, nor wealth, nor prestige—in fact, not your individual anything. His goal is community; the incorporation of all of our individual gifts, talents, and skills into one massive, global, eternal, healthy, loving, functioning body, of which Jesus Christ is the head.

1 Corinthians 12 (NJB)

¹² *For as with the human body which is a unity although it has many parts—all the parts of the body, though many, still making up one single body—so it is with Christ.*

That's God's plan. But is it *your* plan? Because if it is not also your plan, there's going to be some friction between you and God.

To align with God's plan requires a lot of thought.

Do you know that as you share God's loving plan with others, it will take some thought on their part to get on board. One study indicates that a person must hear the Gospel challenge clearly presented about six times (on average) before they will make up their mind to follow Jesus. Six times! Since that's an average, some will need fewer, but some will need more! So keep at it; it's working its way into their hearts.

I suppose that same statistic applies to embracing each new fold of God's plan for your own life. Don't be afraid to ask sincere questions and think hard about Christ's claims and your own doubts. Doubt is not your enemy, unless it becomes resistance to hearing the truth.

The community of Christ is a GIANT plan—embracing people from every ethnicity and culture, from the past, present, and future—bringing the church together under Christ’s loving leadership for all eternity in heaven’s space. It’s far easier to define than to live out.

How does one plan for such breadth? How does one adjust to such diversity? How does one embrace such variety? How does one love such perpetual change?

God will show you how. He will point out your personal stumbling points and help you to adjust, if only you are willing. And the reward, as you line up with what God is doing, will be great joy and beauty.

God has told us this is His plan. Now, we must prepare for it.

Prepare for it deliberately

The revival of Christian community requires separation.

Having just emphasized the unity of Christ’s body, that may sound like I have forgotten what the goal is. I have not.

We cannot embrace the new thing God has for us until we relinquish the old things to which we naturally cling. This is what Jesus meant when He told the story of a man who found a pearl of great value. Once he had found it, that man went and sold everything else he possessed, so that he could buy that superior pearl. This is a recurrent principle in God’s Word. For instance, Jesus said:

Mark 10 (MSG)

⁷ *Because of this, a man leaves father and mother, and in marriage⁸ he becomes one flesh with a woman—no longer two individuals, but forming a new unity.*

In order to form a new family unit—a new unity—a man and woman must first separate themselves from their natural families. Only by first letting go of the *old dependencies* can you properly establish a new one.

Old wine, new wine. Old wineskins, new wineskins. These are a few of the ways the Scriptures describe the need for separating from our past associations.

So, to become part of God’s Kingdom—part of the community of Christ—each one of us must separate from those people and elements that defined our community *apart* from Christ.

The longer you cling to those former elements, the longer it will take for you to become established in Christ. The Bible calls that “wavering.” We call it “fence sitting” or having one foot in each world.

Sometimes wholeness requires the surgical removal of things that endanger good health.

The revival of Christian community may require the removal of something in your life—something that cannot be changed, but can only be exchanged.

The prophet Ezekiel was instructed in this way:

Ezekiel 11 (CJB)

¹⁷ Therefore, say that Adonai Elohim says this: ‘ “I will gather you from the peoples and collect you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give the land of Isra’el to you.” ¹⁸ Then they will go there and remove all its loathsome things and disgusting practices, ¹⁹ and I will give them unity of heart. “I will put a new spirit among you.” I will remove from their bodies the hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh; ²⁰ so that they will live by my regulations, obey my rulings and act by them. Then they will be my people, and I will be their God.

I told you two weeks ago that Hezekiah led a national revival in Israel by first cleansing the Temple in Jerusalem, removing all the “loathsome things and disgusting practices” that had filled the place that belonged to the worship of Jehovah.

Everyone worships something. We give ourselves to it—we think about it frequently, we spend our money on it, we give it priority over other things, we brag about it with others. We may not call it worship, but we regard it with a similar attitude. It’s what we’re devoted to.

It could be making money. It could be spending money. It could be a career. It could be a hobby. It could be sports. It could be exercise. It could be books. It could be TV. It could be nature. It could be pets. It could be your recovery. It could be your health.

All the things I have just mentioned may well be viewed as good things, which would make it difficult to think about them in terms of “loathsome” or “disgusting.” But if they are stealing time or thought or energy from your devotion to Jesus, if they have become a replacement for your communion with God, then they are the idols that must first be removed.

How can I know if such things have taken the place of an idol in my life? Simple. If God asks you to drop it—do you ignore Him, do you argue, do you justify disobeying, do you pout? Then you have an idol that needs to be removed... if you are serious about following Jesus.

If you are going to be intentional about developing Christian community, you must plan for it thoughtfully, you must prepare for it deliberately, *and* you must pursue it diligently.

Pursue it diligently

Pursuing community requires serving—a lot of serving. Jesus said of His own life and ministry: *“The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Matthew 20:28; NET).

Giving yourself away in the service of others is what makes community grow.

Mark 12 (NLT)

⁴¹ *Jesus sat down near the collection box in the Temple and watched as the crowds dropped in their money. Many rich people put in large amounts.* ⁴² *Then a poor widow came and dropped in two small coins.*

⁴³ *Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has given more than all the others who are making contributions.*

⁴⁴ *For they gave a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she had to live on.”*

What impressed Jesus was that this woman ignored her own poverty in order to be generous. She gained His eternal commendation because she gave what she had to honor the Lord her God. This is what makes community grow—giving what you have, in Jesus’ name.

Sometimes we think, “If I only had _____, then I could really serve the Lord.” How would you fill in that blank? What would it take? More time, more money, more confidence, more training, more experience?

What if, instead, you quit putting off your service to God, and just gave or used what you *already* have? Maybe you think people wouldn’t be impressed by that. Who cares? We’ve already seen that Jesus *would* be impressed, so what more do you need?

What’s that in your hand? Would you give it to God and see what He will do with it?

One of the ways we commonly serve one another in the community of Christ is by forgiving one another. The more community there is, the more likely that your toes will be stepped on. So, learn to forgive—readily, frequently, patiently, and generously.

Romans 15 (NIV84)

¹ *We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.*

² *Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.* ³ *For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.”*

⁴ *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

⁵ *May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus,*
⁶ *so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
⁷ *Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*

What “loathsome and disgusting” attitudes will you have to get rid of in order to become generously accepting and forgiving of the diverse group of people that make up the community of Christ? You should be making a list this morning.

Paul wrote to the church in Colosse about ultra-religious leaders among them who were leading them astray, because their brand of religion didn't give pre-eminence to Jesus. Perhaps those leaders preferred His teachings to His presence, or His attributes to His person.

Colossians 2:19 (GWT)

¹⁹ *[Such a pious individual] doesn't hold on to [Christ,] the head. Christ makes the whole body grow as God wants it to, through support and unity given by the joints and ligaments.*

Holding onto Christ as the Head of the church, the Head of the body, is vital. It is not just theologically correct, it is spiritually absolutely essential. He is the Source of the body's growth—your growth. Without Him you will shrivel, and we will collapse.

Joints are points of contact in the structure of your body. Similarly, they are points of contact in the body of Christ, the Christian community—points or opportunities where two people, two members of the community of Christ, work together to achieve movement, to accomplish progress, to serve.

But the joints of your body would be useless—would fall apart—were it not for the ligaments that bind the two parts of each joint together. Joints work properly because ligaments hold the parts together. There are many “ligaments” that bind the community of Christ together—commitment, interest, acceptance, and forgiveness (to name just a few)—but the essence of all of these, the single most effective bond is love. And not just any love, but the love of Jesus moving through us.

Colossians 3 (GWT)

¹² *As holy people whom God has chosen and loved, be sympathetic, kind, humble, gentle, and patient.* ¹³ *Put up with each other, and forgive each other if anyone has a complaint. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.* ¹⁴ *Above all, be loving. This ties everything together perfectly (in unity).*

If you are going to be intentional about developing Christian community, you must plan for it thoughtfully, you must prepare for it deliberately, you must pursue it diligently, *and* you must preserve it vigorously.

Preserve it vigorously

Complacency is an enemy of the church; for the sake of the community, be intentional.

A healthy church—a living church, a life-giving church—will attract new people, and will accept new people. But the dynamics of our church’s fellowship will shift with each new participant. As a result, some people don’t really *want* the church to grow. But a church that does not grow is not healthy.

Our unity will be assaulted, repeatedly. That’s the growing edge, where even deeper unity is achieved.

When forgiveness is withheld, unity is compromised. When service is withheld, unity is weakened. When love is withheld, community is abandoned.

A great deal of patience is required to overcome these challenges. Fortunately, patience is a characteristic of God Himself, which we can expect Him to provide as we look to Him for it.

Ephesians 4 (NLT)

³*Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.*

One translation says, “*Bend every effort...*” That’s work, don’t you know? All that bending... Our bodies get less flexible as we age, but our spirits should get *more* flexible as we grow in Christ.

Christians must put up with each other’s faults and idiosyncrasies, knowing that each of us has his or her own. Each of us.

Therefore, The Message says we are to be “*quick at mending fences.*” How long can *you* hold a grudge? No matter how or why you were offended, your grudge is an enemy of the community of Christ.

Wow! No wonder Paul said “effort”!

To be faithfully serving and freely forgiving and lovingly accepting is hard work, even in a nice church!

But this is your calling, this is your task—to be a peacemaker and a peacekeeper. Peace is the “ligament” that binds together any two Christians in spiritual effectiveness.

Conclusion

To be intentional about building Christian community, you will have to take advantage of the available opportunities to actually meet with other Christians—in Sunday worship services, mid-week Bible studies, prayer groups or prayer partners, and service opportunities, like workdays.

Community cannot happen apart from getting together, so you may also have to create new opportunities to do so—dinners, coffee shops, sports events, hikes, fishing trips, bike rides, and so many more.

Whatever your hobby or skill or interest, you can turn it into a community-building opportunity, if you include at least one other Christian! Then, just take the time to listen to each other and encourage one another.

Paul described a revived community of Christians like this:

Ephesians 4 (NLT)

¹¹ Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the teaching pastors. ¹² Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. ¹³ This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

On the broad scale of building the church, the apostles are the community planners, the prophets are the community preparers, the evangelists are the community pursuers, and the teaching pastors are the community preservers.

Yet there is a little of their spirit and gifting in each of us, for it takes planning, preparation, pursuit, and preservation for each of us to find our niche in the community of Christ. And it takes all of us working at it together to make community actually happen.

We don't want just our name to say, "We're a community." We want our every day, and every week, and every year fellowship to say, "WE'RE A COMMUNITY! A COMMUNITY OF CHRIST!"

We want people who enter these doors and sit among us in worship to say, "See how these people love one another!" We want them to say, "I feel Jesus here! I see Jesus here!"

Would you say, "Amen!" to that?