

Christ-Centered Community
Matthew 4:12 – 23; 1 Corinthians 1:10 – 18
Sunday, January 22, 2017

What are the communities that nourish and sustain you?

Every month I get together with a friend who I have known since seminary. We lived across the hall from each other, ate dinner together in the dining hall each night, and now he lives around here with his family. We pick out a book to read together (theology, fiction, whatever) and meet for lunch each month to talk about it; talk about life, ministry, our families. It is a community of *two*, but it is a community that nourishes and sustains me.

I have three other larger groups of pastors that I meet with once a month for lunch. One of them is a group of three other men in our presbytery. One of them is a group of young pastors in our presbytery. The other is a group of pastors from all different denominations in this area. We share ideas with each other, help each other with problems, support each other, pray for each other. These are communities from which I draw strength and encouragement and support and love.

What are the communities that nourish and sustain *you*? Maybe it's a lunch group. A small group. A Bible study. Maybe it's *this* community. The Women's Bible Study or Sunday morning book group. The men's Bible study on Friday mornings. The sewing group on Mondays. Maybe it's a mom's group or some kind of exercise group. For some people it's

groups like AA or AlAnon, a support group. There are all these different communities where we find the love and support that we need to be *whole*. What is it for you?

We were *created* to be in community. We see it in the very beginning with Adam. God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone. I will give him a partner.” God creates Eve and says to them, “Be fruitful and multiply.” Create community.

We see it in the very nature of God, the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – three living together as one.

We see it in Jesus when he says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

We were *created* for *community*, to live life together.

Bryant Kirkland was the pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, and one of the themes that he preached on over and over again (he became known for it) was this idea that “you can’t go it alone in New York.”¹ He said, “One of the most dynamic principles of life is that we must maintain our vital relationships to God, each other, to benefit for ourselves. All of nature is based on vital relationships. No human being can go it alone. We find our meaningfulness in other people. We *bring* meaningfulness to other people.”

¹ <http://www.fapc.org/worship/sermons/bryant-m.-kirkland-you-cant-go-it-alone>

And he repeats again and again this line that Jesus says in John's gospel, "Except the branch abide in the vine it withers and cannot bear much fruit." "You can't go it alone in New York," he says. But of course that's not unique to New York. You can't go it alone in Devon, in Philadelphia, in *life*.

We *try* to go it alone sometimes. Kirkland says in that sermon, "We are being raised in a society that says 'Look out for number one,' and the chief end of man is the bottom line." There is this myth among us that we have to be independent, self-sufficient, pick yourself up by your bootstraps and don't burden anyone else with your problems. But we were created for community, to live life together, to share our joys and our fears, our success and our struggles, to bear one another's burdens, as Paul says to the Galatians.

Look at what Jesus is doing in this story from Matthew. Jesus hears that John the Baptist has been arrested, and it says he left Nazareth and withdrew to Galilee. We don't know exactly *why* he did that. Maybe he didn't feel *safe* where he was because he was associated with John. Maybe he went there to carry on John's ministry. Maybe he just needed to go somewhere new, to *do* something new. For whatever reason Jesus left home, the community that raised him and nourished and sustained him, and he went to this new place to begin his ministry.

But what he quickly realized was, you can't go it alone. He immediately begins to surround himself with people who will support him. He calls Peter and Andrew to come with him, and they do. He sees James and John sitting in a boat with their father, mending the nets that they use to fish, and he calls them to join him, and they do. Jesus is creating community. And Peter,

Andrew, James, and John leave everything behind to become a part of this Christ-centered community because they recognize something here that is life-giving and nourishing and sustaining.

Once this community comes together, it is then that Jesus goes around Galilee teaching and proclaiming the good news and healing every disease and sickness among the people. He doesn't *do* that until he has a community around him. He doesn't go it alone. He calls them into Christ-centered community, and that makes healing possible.

That initial community grows, eventually turns into 12, and later becomes all these churches, one of which is the church in Corinth that Paul is writing to. The Corinthians are having all kinds of problems. They are divided into all these little groups, each proclaiming loyalty to a different leader. Some say, "I'm with Paul. He's the one who *started* this church." Some say, "I'm with Apollos. He *helped* Paul start this church, and then kept it going after Paul left." Others say, "I'm with *Peter*. Peter was an actual *disciple* of Jesus. Paul *wasn't*, so I'm with Peter." And what Paul says to them is, "You need to come together around Christ. You need to lay aside all these other affiliations and be united in the same mind and the same purpose." He is calling them to Christ-centered community that will heal their divisions.

Paul uses a word there when he says to be *united* in the same mind and the same purpose. It's the Greek word *katartizo*, and here's why it's important. It is the same word that Matthew uses when he says that James and John were in the boat with their father *mending* their nets. That word *mending* is *katartizo*. It means, "to mend, to repair, to unite, to make complete, to restore."

It is about bringing something that has been *separated* back *together*. There is something about the call to Christ-centered community that mends, unites, restores the ways that we are divided, tattered, broken, and torn.

It's not just any community, because there are plenty of communities you can go be a part of that don't nourish and sustain and heal. Some are just social, and some actually serve to divide people further. So it's not *just* community, and it's not *just* Christ, like you can go be a Christian all by yourself and be nourished and sustained and healed. Christ calls us to *follow him together*. Community that is truly centered around Christ can nourish and sustain and make healing possible.

As individuals, as a country, as a world, we are divided, broken, and torn in so many ways; over race, gender, sexuality, class, politics. And like the Corinthians, we're all proclaiming loyalty to our various groups. "I'm with the conservatives." "Well, I'm with the liberals." "I'm with Black Lives Matter." "Well, I'm with Blue Lives Matter." So many other ways that we separate ourselves from each other every day. We categorize ourselves and each other with these labels or these surface identifiers that only serve to *distance* ourselves from each other – mentally, emotionally, and physically.

But *we* are called to lay those identities aside for the *new* identity that we receive in Christ. It's like Paul says to the Galatians, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Now, of course, the Galatians didn't *stop* being Jew or Greek. They didn't *stop* being male or female. We aren't going to *stop* being black or white or

Asian or Latino. But they were called to stop defining themselves by those terms in a way that separated them from each other. Paul was saying, “Yes, you have differences, but you have something *greater* in common. You have this connection in Christ that makes you brothers and sisters, children of God. And your identity as a child of God, *that* is what defines you.”

So yes, we have people here who are liberal and conservative, with different political beliefs. We have people here of different races and ethnicities. We have people here from different socioeconomic backgrounds. No one is asking you to stop being who you are. But in Christ we are called to look *beyond* it; to center our lives around something *greater*. We do not *define* ourselves or others in terms of race or gender or sexuality or politics or economics. We define ourselves as children of God, one family in Christ.

And as a Christ-centered community, we are called to mend the ways that we are divided and broken and torn and bring *healing* to the world. To show the world that it is possible for people of different races and genders and classes and nationalities and sexualities and political affiliations to love each other and respect each other, to listen to each other, to forgive each other, to sing together and eat together and pray together and learn and grow together; to support each other and take care of each other. That it is possible for us to *live life together*, even *with* our differences. Because there is something – *someone* – greater that unites us. We’re not looking for uniformity; we’re striving for *unity* in the midst of our differences.

But here’s the thing. We have to be willing to say, “My politics and the politics of others are not as important to me as Christ. My race and the race of others is not as important to me as Christ.

My gender and the gender of others is not as important to me as Christ. My nationality and the nationality of others is not as important to me as Christ. My sexuality and the sexuality of others is not as important to me as Christ. My money and the money of others is not as important to me as Christ.” If we can’t say that, if we’re not willing to, then those things have become idols in our lives that separate us not only from each other but from God.

We center ourselves on Christ, on his teachings, on his life, death, and resurrection. We’re not always going to agree on what those teachings *mean*, how we *understand* them. But the important thing is that we keep *talking* about it. We keep listening to each other. We keep singing and eating and praying with each other. We keep loving and forgiving each other. We keep working it out together, respectful of the differences that inform us, but not allowing them to define us.

We center ourselves around Christ and find the healing that *we* need, and then we go out to share what we have learned and help mend the world.