

Introduction

Good morning. It is a real honor and pleasure to be back with you this morning. I want you to know that I have missed you – but I can see that you have been in good hands since I left.

This morning we are going to take a one week break from your study on the book of Acts and yet not take a break from one of the over arching themes of the book - the establishing of the Church – the founding of community of believers around the Mediterranean Sea and ultimately throughout the world. This morning we are going to be looking at the Church as community.

We instinctively know that community is a good thing – something to work for – something to be found in the Church. But a lot of times our community in the church is elusive - we talk about it more than we experience it. A lot of time, our community looks like this.



"Maybe we need to define 'community.'"

Each of us doing our own thing – separately – and calling it community.

Maybe it would be good to define “community” before we get too far along. Let me define how I am using the word community this morning – because there are several ways it’s used. I am defining it

Not as place – (the community of Westfield)
Not as collective of people (on-line community)

Rather:

An experience

The interactions of an interconnected group of people

Where:

Relationships matter

Being connected to others is vital

That of course is the Ideal. Henri Nouwen has a more realistic definition of community when he says “Community is the place where the person you least want to live with - always lives.”

In the America there is so much emphasis on the individual that it’s easy to miss God’s heart for building a community of believers. We are a nation of “rugged individualists.” God made us for community. Bill Hybels captures this when he told his congregation at Willow Creek:

God made your heart to yearn for community.
You long to know and be known
To love and be loved
To serve and be served
To celebrate and be celebrated

If you are like me, you long to belong to such a community. But I struggle with the elusive nature of community. As a man – like most men – I’m not very good with relationships. – as a group let’s just say that we are relationally challenged. But I want to tell you that if you think men are relationally challenged – male engineers are even more so. We’re

Just the facts

kind of people. If you want to get into the male engineers mind set – read the comic strip Dilbert. I love the one where



I cannot tell you how many times I have spent time with someone – and when I get home Barbara asks me an obvious relational question “How are they doing?” OR “What’s going on with so and so.” – and I answer – “It didn’t come up.”

But in spite of the fact that I am relationally challenged – I believe that God has given me a heart that longs to see God’s people experience rich community life. And that heart has come from soaking in the scriptures. I believe that God’s heart for community is expressed everywhere in the special revelation of God.

But its not just men who are relationally challenged. True community in our culture is rare and getting rarer. Our nation is unraveling relationally / we’re becoming more isolated.

A 2006 study conducted by the University of Chicago:

- In 1985, the average American had three people in whom to confide matters that were important to them. In 2004, that number dropped to two.
- In 1985 10% of Americans had no close friends. When the same question was posed in 2004 - 24.6 percent reported having no close friends.

And as the church we are not immune – the statistics are better in the church – but we are long way from experiencing true community.

The stakes are high. This is extremely important for the church. Francis Schaeffer said "I am convinced that in the [21st] century people all over the world will not listen if we have the right doctrine, the right polity, but are not exhibiting community. There is no use saying you have community or love for each other if it does not get down into the tough stuff of life."ⁱ

Jesus said that world would know He is who He says He is by our love for one another - by our unity.ⁱⁱ I would paraphrase Jesus statement and say:

The world will see Jesus when they see the church as a place
To Know and be known
To Love and be loved
To Serve and be Served
To Celebrate and be celebrated

Without the church being a community of people who are loving and being loved – the world isn't going to know who Jesus is. - Let's see what insight the Holy Spirit can give us from His word today – to give us a little better understanding of God's heart in this area. Let's pray as we open God's Word.

Prayer

Scripture

I am reading this morning from the New Living Translation

1 Corinthians 12:12- 27

¹² The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. ¹³ Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit.

¹⁴ Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. ¹⁵ If the foot says, ***I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand***, that does not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear says, I am not part of the body because I am not an eye,

would that make it any less a part of the body? ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything?

¹⁸ But our bodies have many parts, and **God has put each part just where he wants it.** ¹⁹ How strange a body would be if it had only one part! ²⁰ Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. ²¹ The eye can never say to the hand, I don't need you. The head can't say to the feet, I don't need you.

²² In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary. ²³ And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect those parts that should not be seen, ²⁴ while the more honorable parts do not require this special care. So God has put the body together such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. ²⁵ This makes for harmony among the members, **so that all the members care for each other.** ²⁶ If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad.

²⁷ All of you together are Christ's body, and **each of you is a part of it.**

Paul is detailing one of the many metaphors he uses for the church – the church as the Body of Christ. We could easily do an entire series on what it means to be Christ's body. But this morning I want to look at just one small but important dimension.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church he tells the church

...we are not ignorant of [Satan's] schemes.

In our passage this morning – Paul is giving an example of one of the schemes that Satan uses that hinders us from entering into the community we long for – hinders us from becoming fully integrated members of the Body.

¹⁵ If the foot says, **I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand,** that does not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear says, I am not part of the body because I am not an eye, would that make it any less a part of the body?

Paul is identifying one of the lies that we believe about the church and one of schemes that Satan uses to separate us. Remember that he is the father of lies.

The foot is looking at the body and is expressing distance and separation – because it [the foot] is not doing the things the hand is doing. It doesn't look like the hand. The hand does all of the important stuff. The hand is closer to the head. And the foot concludes – I don't belong. Because I am different or because what I do is less important I am not part of the body.

Do we ever do that? Do we distance ourselves from the community that we all long for by believing these lies? Have you ever said:

Everyone else is such a good Christian / they don't have the problems I have / they all have their act together. I don't belong to the body.

There's the flip side to that one - Everyone here are such odd ducks. Isn't there anyone here who is normal? I don't belong to the body.

I don't fit in with them. My interests are totally different from theirs. They wouldn't be interested in what I am interested in. I don't belong to the body.

They are all so busy. They wouldn't have time for me.

I am just at a different stage in life than they are. They probably don't want to be with me. What do we have in common? I don't belong to the body.

Everyone else has friends and connected with family and friends and is not lonely like me. I don't belong to the body.

This is a very important one – it gets to the heart of what I am attempting to say. We long to belong – but we cannot connect with others – and we become lonely. Loneliness is epidemic in our culture – but no one likes to admit it. Mother Teresa said that “Loneliness is the leprosy of modern society.” “No one wants to admit that they are lonely. Loneliness is something people associate with losers.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet many of us are lonely – we long to love and be loved – to know and be known. We can even be lonely in a healthy marriage. Even though Barbara and I are happily married, we both experience periods of loneliness. And that is because marriage alone isn't intended to fulfill all of our relational needs.

As Christians – sometimes we gloss over loneliness and direct people to be completely fulfilled in God. And that is partly true. Each of us has a God shaped hole in our heart – that can only be filled by our Father. And if we try to live our lives with that hole empty we get ourselves into all kinds of hot water.

But did you know that each of us also has a human shaped hole in our heart. We were made for community. We were not meant to be alone – even when the God shaped hole is perfectly filled in.

Do you remember in the creation story – before God created Eve – what God said to Adam? ... “It's not good for man to be alone.”^{iv} This was said before the fall. God had created the entire universe and pronounced everything good. But here – in the midst of paradise – there is something “not good.” Adam had his God shaped hole filled. He walked with God in the cool of day – talking and sharing life. Yet something was “not good.” God had created Adam with a human shaped hole in his heart. This is the reason for our longing for community – longing to belong to others.

So Paul is keenly aware of lies that we fall for and is revealing one of the schemes of Satan that keep us from becoming the kind of community that we all long for. The lie that we don't belong – we don't contribute – we are worthless. But Paul also provides the remedy in our passage:

First he shows us the absurdity of the lies:

¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything?

Of course you are different from them – what would the world look like if everyone was the same.

But he goes on with an even deeper truth:

¹⁸ But our bodies have many parts, and **God has put each part just where he wants it.**

These differences that separate you – that keep you from belonging – are God given. God has made you unique. God has the big picture – He needs little toes as much as he needs the mouth. Not every part is strong. Not every part receives honor for what it does. But all are necessary.

Paul even goes so far as to completely turn the argument upside down when he says:

God made each of you different – unique

²⁵so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. (NIV)

This seems backwards to us. Isn't it our differences that separate us? Doesn't the fact that we all have different gifts separate us?

“Why can't a woman be more like a man.” Professor Henry Higgins cries in *My Fair Lady*.

God's economy is upside down to ours. In our economy the strong and the powerful are honored and our differences separate us. In God's world – the weak are the ones that are to be honored and our differences are there to bring unity. Living that truth will help us break down some of the walls that keep us from each other. God made us in such a way that we need one another. He has put in us a “longing to belong.” God alone will not fill that hole. He made us so that only in a vibrant community of others who are different from us can that hole be filled.

Maybe you are saying – Bob I disagree. I am in perfect harmony with everyone around me. I honor those who are weak around me. I don't experience loneliness or frustration

with my brothers and sisters. If you find yourself in that place – well God bless you. Maybe you can pray for the rest of us.

Or maybe you are saying – Bob I completely disagree with you. I do not have a human shaped hole in my heart. I have no need for other people. I can get along fine all by myself.

Whenever I have seen someone in this position, I find that time and history have built up a protective wall – a barrier that both protects you and keeps other people out. Sometime in your past you said “I’ll never get hurt again.” Or “I’ll never get close again.” And you built up a wall. I want to go so far and say – God wants to break that barrier down – for your sake and for our sake. We need you. We are missing your gifts. We are missing a vital part of our body. And I would encourage you to start by asking God to do that. But don’t do it alone. Get some one to walk with you in that.

Or you might be saying “Okay Bob I’m with you – I have a man shaped hole. I feel separated from my brothers and sisters here. I do not feel that I really belong here. I see that God made us as a body with many different parts and that was by design. So what can I do?”

Let me give you two steps. First there has to be a relentless rejection of the lies that separate us. Whenever they well up inside – we need to reject them immediately. Be vigilant about the self talk that you start doing. And nip it in the bud. “If people really knew me they wouldn’t love me.” “Remember when you were open with so and so and they stepped on you and you got hurt.” “Why can’t so and so be more like me?” “Why can’t I be more like so and so?”

The second step is that we need to embrace and celebrate our differences. I could give you a hundred ways you could cultivate community in your midst – but I am going to give you only one general one - start getting to know – really know one another. The church is a place to be known and to get to know. And that means spending time with one another – outside of church – outside of church meetings. But not just those who are like you.

Who is totally different from you? Get to know them outside the church. Abraham Lincoln said “I don’t like that man. I must get to know him better.”

Find out what their dreams are? What are their hopes? Hear their story.

I led a retreat one time for a small group that had been meeting together for several years. I asked them to tell me what are the hopes and dreams of the person next to you. Not one person could do that.

How about the non-family member sitting near you in the church today. Do you know their hopes and their dreams? Do you know their story?

God has placed in us a human shaped hole in our heart. He has given us a longing to belong to a community. But we have believed the lies of the father of lies – that we don't fit. And that has kept us from showing care for one another – from becoming the Body of Christ.

I want to take a few minutes in the quiet and ask God to speak to you today. How is God calling you to step out of your comfort zone – out of your aloneness and connect with someone else. Let's ask God to show us the next steps.

ⁱ *The Church at the end of the Twentieth Century*

ⁱⁱ John 17 ²⁰"I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; ²¹that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jacqueline Olds quoted in *Everyone is Normal until you get to Know Them* John Ortberg

^{iv} Genesis 2:18