

The Problem with Community

We're continuing our series, *Revive*, as we talk about Community. There is a problem with community. You probably have experienced this problem this week. You may be experiencing this problem right now. Here's the problem with community: people! As much as we desire to be near people, they annoy, bother, and pester us. For example, Thanksgiving is just a few months away. You'll have loving thoughts of perfectly behaved children and in-laws gathered in one room. But the day after, you'll be exhausted from the chaos of conflicts. You see this dynamic at work. You interact with a new customer or team, and you're excited about the potential. A few weeks in, and you can't fathom someone could be as difficult to work with as them. Or, if you're married, think back to your wedding day. You had a moment when you thought to yourself, "I can't believe I married you!" A year into marriage, you're thinking, "I can't believe I married you!"

We feel the pull for community, but we live with the reality of people. People are messy—they think, feel, and act differently than we do. People also can be hurtful. We all have stories of people who have hurt us—and we all have stories of how we have hurt others. We long to be in community, but we're not sure how to deal with people. What if something new could happen in your interactions with people? What if there was something that you could do to change the narrative about community?

The writer of Hebrews has an interesting perspective on community. Because of what Jesus has done for us, community is the place, which you are there for someone else. By acting in ways, which are for each other, we can create a new type of community.

Hebrews 10:24–25

Verses 19–25 are one sentence in Greek. The writer says Jesus restored people to God the Father. Because of that, the writer gives the audience three, "Let us" statements: *let us draw near to God assured He has made a way* (v.22), *let us hold unwaveringly to hope because God is trustworthy* (v.23), and the third "let us" statement occurs in our passage.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, (Hebrews 10:24)

The Greek word for "spur" is the word from which we get the English, "provocation."

The word can have a negative connotation. For example, in Acts 15:39, Paul and Barnabas get into an argument about leadership values and philosophy. The word used to describe their argument

is the same word in our passage. But "spur" can also have a positive connotation, meaning, "to inspire." That is how the word is used in the context of our passage. The writer calls the audience to spur one another to "love and good deeds." To put it another way, be the means by which someone would live in a better way.

There is an essential implication behind "spur" we need to highlight. To spur someone on—to inspire another person—implies you are for that person. You want their good, and work in ways, which helps them experience something better. You can see this idea, for example, in movies. I recently watched *Dead Poets Society* again. Though the storyline is multi-layered, at the center is a teacher striving for his students to see the world from a new perspective. It culminates in the famous scene of students standing on their desks, shouting, "O captain, my captain." Or perhaps you remember *Braveheart* and it's famous scene with the line, "They may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom!"

To spur someone forward means to be for them, to believe in them, support them, and empower them to be better. With this in mind, we could define community in this way: Community is the gathering of people for the good of one another. When my wife and I were engaged, a friend gave us this marriage advice—seek to out-serve each other. In other words, make it your aim to be for the good of the other person.

But here's the interesting thing, the piece on which our passage turns can't happen if you keep people at a distance. This occurs in community. That's what the author talks about next.

not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:25)

Don't give up meeting together. Meeting together was a common practice of Jesus' followers, but some stopped meeting. We are not told why—perhaps they rejected their faith or perhaps the persecution of Rome was too great a threat. Whatever the cause, they created a habit of keeping people at a distance. Specifically, they ceased to meet as a church—community centered on the way of Jesus.

We need to say a word about church attendance in our current day. Before I do, it's important that I share my experience, so you understand my background. My dad has been in church ministry since before I was born. Growing up, we attended church twice a week no matter what. At the same time, my parents were intentional to not burn us out on church (which I appreciate).

As I became an adult, I discovered the experience of making my own choice of faith. I found some church communities that were life-changing and shaped how I think and operate today. They felt like heaven on earth. And I discovered some church experiences that were the opposite. What was interesting about going from childhood (where church attendance was decided for me) to adulthood was that I made a conscious choice to be present in a church community.

We all make a choice to be present with the church community. For some of us, it is an easy choice. This is home. You couldn't imagine being anywhere else. For others of us, it is a harder choice. You have questions (and maybe, objections) about God and how the world works. You're not sure how the community of church could have anything to say about those questions. I understand both of those choices. I've been in both of those places. That's why I—or someone on stage—will often say something like, "Thanks for being here." We are attempting to acknowledge the choice you made, and we hope to encourage you to make the choice again to be present.

I believe that we should gather as a church. I think that's part of what this passage teaches. But the writer's reason for being in community is not so that you can get a perfect attendance certificate, nor because of a perceived social pressure. Instead, the writer is calling his audience—and us—to make a choice to be engaged and present with a church community. If not, we will miss out on the encouragement, which can only happen in community. It's as if the writer is saying, "We need each other. Our culture pushes us toward isolation, but we're designed to be known and to belong." Ignatius, a church leader from the end of the first century put it this way, "When you meet with frequency, Satan's powers are overthrown and his destructiveness is undone by the unanimity of your faith."

The Day

The urgency for Jesus followers to be together is highlighted by this term, "The Day," which is a time when everything God has put in motion will come to fulfillment. It is the time when the hope we're spurring one another towards will become a reality. To look at it from another angle, when you spur someone forward, you are connecting him or her to God's future. But this is possible only together with people.

Jesus talked about the power of community. He told His disciples their identity as Jesus followers would best be declared by the way in which they practiced acts of love—labor, strive for the good of another person (John 13:35). In other words, Jesus believed community could set a new standard in the world—not because people are less messy or less annoying because they follow Jesus, but instead; Jesus followers choose grace. They choose to work for the good of each other.

Grace is how Jesus acted toward us. Jesus died and offered the gift of new life to you and me even though we didn't deserve this gift (Romans 5:6). The grace of God toward us made us alive so we could act in grace-drenched ways toward one another.

So, how can we cat to spur—inspire—each other? Two ideas for you to try: (1) listen to learn, and (2) act to build up.

First, as you talk with people, listen with the aim to learn about them, rather than to say what you want to say. People will open windows to their story as they speak. Listen to repeated phrases, places, and people they name. Ask questions. Have a posture of being interested. Many of you excel in this. You know that interested people are interesting people. People want to tell their stories, but there aren't many spaces in our culture for listening. Maybe the best way that you can spur someone forward—to be for them—is by being interested in them.

Second, as you listen, figure out how to act in a way that will build them up. Maybe they are telling you a need in their life, and you find a way to meet that need quietly. Maybe they share with you a struggle, and you walk away praying for them. We tend to think the best thing that we can offer is our advice. There are times for that, but those times are probably fewer than we believe. The writer, Henry David Thoreau, once said, "The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought and attended to my answer." How can you act in ways that build up someone around you?

Why does this matter? There is no one on the planet who doesn't need to be encouraged. You will never meet someone who is over-encouraged. You'll never ask someone, "How are you today?" And their response is, "Oh, I'm so exhausted from all of the encouragement I received this week from my spouse, boss, kids, or parents. I need a break from all of the people who are acting in ways that benefit me." We need each other.

What would be different if we acted in these ways as a community of faith? I love seeing the conversations and connections here on Sundays. Can you imagine, what would be different six months from now if we excelled in spurring on each other? My guess is no one would want to miss out on that experience.

One Last Thing

Maybe you're listening and realize the person who needs to be spurred on today is you. Maybe you're in a season in which life seems dark, and you can't see how things will get better. Being with people seems like the last thing that you want to do. If that's you, here's what I think the writer of Hebrews would say to you: take a risk. Or, as the Biblical writers call it in other places, take a step of faith and choose community. Find someone to talk with, find someone to be around. Yes, it's frightening to take that risk. But maybe the thing you fear is the place where God will bring healing.

In Luke 15, Jesus tells perhaps His most famous parable about a father and two sons (often referred to as the Prodigal Son). It is a layered story about the religious dynamics of Jesus' day, and what people think God is like. At the end of the story, is a scene in which the older son declares to the father he has felt alone, excluded, and rejected by the father. The father's response is one of the most profound statements in the entire Bible. The father says to his hurting son, ***"You are always with me. Everything I have is yours."*** (Luke 15:31). Jesus gives a picture of God, who moves toward people who are hurting. God's answer isn't abstract ideas, but community.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2018 Central Peninsula Church South, Redwood City, CA
Catalog No. 1438-12S

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, August 19, 2018 at Central Peninsula Church South.

www.cpc.org