

September 5, 2010

“The Community”

I have a confession to make to you all. I have committed, in the words of a seminary friend, an egregious error. I have been making frequent references to community, be it the faith community or the community outside of these walls. Well, I have not really defined community for you from a biblical and mission perspective. That makes it hard to grasp what we should do as we go about mission work and disciple-making. Today I plan to correct that and make sure that we are all on a better page with what it means to be a Christian community and serve our greater community outside of the church. We'll examine four scripture readings and explore and define what community can be for all of us.

With these four scriptures, I define our community, our faith community, as held together by a common faith in Jesus Christ. Our faith community is centered in the scriptures and our outreach to the outside community is given to us in scripture as well.

The first scripture comes from Acts 2:42-47. It is a section of scripture that defines how the early Christian lived together. It shows us how those that were new to the Christian faith decided to live their lives together. The reading starts, saying that (Read, Acts 2:42-47)

The community that is described is very definitely a communal one. The members of the community gave up their personal possessions and gave their proceeds to serve to the community and to build up that community. They also ate together and spent time in the temple together. They also praised God in their acts together. Then with this zeal of living together more people saw this and joined their numbers.

This passage can be tricky to understand in our modern day context. Some people state that this passage supports communism, but I think that critique is a bit extreme. For instance,

they still praised God and were actively trying to serve God. I'm not asking folks today to give up their hard earned possessions and give it all to the church. I would never ask such a thing in the first place. But the possessions are not the focus of the passage. It's the community that is the focus of the passage.

I think this passage shows us how important spending time together is. We do some of the acts described in this passage already. For example we already break bread together in several acts of the church. The first one that comes to mind is communion. We share that sacred meal together as a whole, not alone in homes in private. Sharing communion together binds us together as Christians. The acts of the community can bind us together.

Sharing in the meal dictated to us by Christ is one thing that separates us from other communities around us. As a part of the United Methodist Church, our outreach is carried through communion. We have an open table at communion, where all who seek a relationship with God and Christ are able to partake in the blessings of the Holy Spirit. Our open table brings in folks from outside of our church and allows them to receive the grace that we hold so dearly to in our lives.

The people described in this passage also were gathered in joy together. I can tell that as a community we enjoy being together. It's readily apparent in the passing of the peace, as we reach out to those around us and greet those who are new to the church. When my friends visited from Denver they said that they felt very welcomed by Faith Church. I pray that we can extend the joy of being together and the hospitality that we have to all people. We must not forget what we are doing or let that slide. The early Christian community were together with glad hearts, and that is something that we should not let go of in our community.

The next set of scripture that we will read from comes from Acts as well. It is Acts 4:32-37. The scriptures read (read scripture)

Here we have another section where the early believers shared their possessions together. They did this out of their commitment to each other and that they wanted to live together in Christ. The scripture states that they community reached out to help those who needed care. Things were distributed as needed to members in the community based upon their needs. We even have a man in the community who gave up his field so that the community could have the proceeds from the field.

This scripture shows how community can work together to meet the needs of those who are in need. Caring for each other is another mark of a faith community. Reaching out to those in the greater community who are in need is another mark of a faith community. Sharing our lives with each other is another mark of community.

The care of others is what I interpret as the main focus of this passage of scriptures. As community that wants to grow and include other people from outside our four walls, it is critical that we work to meet the needs of those who need help. By having a solid example of sharing we can be the community that Christ calls us to be, a community that can make disciples of all nations.

When I think of sharing in a community, I think of the community houses that my friends live in Denver. When I went to Denver about a week and a half ago, I got to appreciate the hospitality that my friends extended to me. The first place that I stayed is while in Denver was the Iliff community house, where I will stay during the school year. They are a group of 5 individuals that share in many parts of their lives, from common meals to going on trips together. The best way to describe the nature of the household is that they are a family away from their

family. They do share their possessions, which works out quite well for them. No need have 5 televisions in the house, so they share one between them. It makes sense to me anyway.

But they also share in their lives. At meals they check in with each other and see where they are spiritually. They ask each other how they have experienced God in their day and they discuss ways on how to share what they have with those in need. They really live out the community described in Acts with a modern twist.

I think we can follow the Iliff Community house philosophy, and in some ways we already do. We check in with each other and we pray for those in need. We share in each other lives. Yet the challenge for that is to make sure that we include new members into our community. It's easy to hang out with friends, yet it can be difficult to start sharing with a new person. Yet if we act as a community of faith we can ask the Holy Spirit to be with us as get to know a new person. God is present in our conversations and God is present in our community.

Our next reading comes from 1 Corinthians 14:26-33. It describes worship in the context of our community. It reads...(Read scripture)

Worship is another communal act that we share in as a community. In fact, communal worship is probably the single most important work of our congregation. We gather here on Sunday mornings to worship our creator. We come here to pray, we come to worship to hear the Word of God and hopefully we'll hear a good message that the lowly pastor before you works out. We do other acts of worship, such as baptism and communion before the community.

Worship culture can define our community as well. I would say that we are a traditional people at Faith Church, with the willingness to try different things. I am still learning your worship culture, as I want to be respectful of traditions that have been a part of the church. Yet, with all of this, worship culture is changing across Christianity. Some churches are engaging if

far more contemporary worship and as immigrants come into our country they bring in a new idea on what traditional worship. Traditional worship in Western Africa would definitely be different than worship here in the United States. But the simple act of worshipping together remains the same.

As we reach beyond our community of Faith church, what will we need to do to bring in new people into our community? Will we need to change our worship, will we need to adjust the time at which we worship? Will we need to venture into a new area. These are very real questions as we want to grow our community. I pray that we can find answers to these questions as we strive to make disciples in the community of Cheyenne. Yet one thing that will remain the same no matter how we reach out to our community, our worship will focus on God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit and we will still use the Bible as the core of what we are to do in our worship services.

The last reading on community from the bible comes from Galatians 3:23-29. This is a letter from Paul to the church in Galatia. The reading is (read scripture)

Paul writes that we are in one people in faith and in Christ. Paul writes how we are no longer subject to readings from the past, but that we are a new fresh people by our faith in our Redeemer in Christ. Nothing matters as to who we are, as we are united in faith.

This is a major part of this passage of scripture is how we are one body in Christ. We may come from many diverse backgrounds, we may come from diverse locations, we may come from diverse occupations. But no matter what, as we are united in Christ we are but one body.

I consider this passage of scripture to be the highest mark of what we are as a community. We are a community bound together by Christ. All of our acts of the church should be done in a way that glorifies Christ and shares Christ with the community outside of the church. It's a tough

task, but I believe with the guidance of the Holy Spirit we can do amazing things through our community of believers.

So there are the scriptural standards of what I see a community as far as its composition and as far as its mission to the world. There is a quite in the bible on community so in reality that is just a small glimpse into who we are and what we are to the rest of the world.

Yet with our scriptural and missional foundation, there are challenges that face our community. We'll face differing opinions on how things should be done. We'll face challenges outside of our four walls that will make it difficult to grow and be a faithful community in Christ. But I believe we can overcome those challenges and move forward.

During my years as a Resident Assistant at my undergraduate college, I was charged with the task of building community within the dorms. For those of you not familiar with a Resident Assistant position, it was a job where I was in charge of a portion of the dorm floor and made sure that my residents had a pleasant residential experience while they were students at McPherson College. I had to have different roles ranging from someone that they could bring their problems to or making sure that college rules were being followed in the dorms. The position shares some traits with working in the ministry, because you never know what will happen next. It kept the work exciting, yet it was easy to wear down if you didn't keep on top of self-care.

My community building experience was rooted that I needed to connect people from diverse backgrounds into one group that wanted to hang out with each other or at least respect the other person for who they are. There was one year that this was a great challenge, because I had to reach across societal boundaries to be with my residents.

This came about as my senior year of college as I was the head resident assistant for the all-male dorm. The school administration gave me a challenging group of students to work with. This group of students, were freshman football players. Now, I want you to imagine this situation in your mind. I was a choir, band, and theater geek and nerd throughout my whole college experience. I never played sports in high school or college. I was never a part of that crowd. Of all the RAs I probably had the quietest demeanor and did my job simply. So now I was put in a situation where I was to work with a group of individuals that didn't understand that I was a total nerd. These were a bunch of hyper, energy filled athletes who were in college for the first time.

There was a great expanse between me and my residents. I struggled like none other. I wasn't the most popular RA as in order to keep control on the floor I had to really enforce the rules. Yet by the grace of God by the end of the school year I was able to connect with these guys. I had to learn about football, I had to learn about the things they were interested in. Did I learn a lot that year. Oh yeah! Today I still keep in contact with a few of those residents. I thank God for letting me work with those guys, and I pray that I made a positive impact in the lives. I pray that I was able to create a community, amidst the chaos of a bunch of rowdy, and fun guys.

That's my experience with working with a different group of people. As we develop community and as we grow it we will meet new challenges. We will meet people who have been turned away from the church in the past. We'll meet people that may not come from the same background that we come from. They may be rich, they may be poor. They may be drug addicts, they may be lost. What matters to God is that we welcome them all and share Christ with them. I pray that we can work together and forge a future that is inclusive of all people from all walks of life. We have a great story in our community of Faith Church to share with the world. All that we

need to do, is to be ready to meet the community outside of these four walls and be prepared for the amazing things that God can do in the lives of people.

Today I ask for your prayers as we envision a new community, a community that works for Christ. Today, walk away prepared for amazing experiences. Will the journey to grow our community be difficult? It will be. But we know, through our scriptures and through our faith in Christ Jesus that we are one body, ready for Christ to change lives and include new people and experiences into the story of Faith Church. Amen.