

“Community”

Selected Texts

~ Delivered at DHBC on January 4, 2015 (Soli Deo Gloria)

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Someone once said, *“I love the church, it’s just all the people that I can’t stand.”* When I hear that quote I have two responses:
 - First, I want to say, *“What do you think the church is?”* The church is people. It is people whom Jesus loved so much that He gave his very life to rescue them.
 - If you can’t stand the church it means you cannot stand Jesus’ bride. It’s like saying to a man, *“I love you but I cannot stand your wife.”*
- But my second response is that I can understand why someone would say that. People are difficult. Relationships are messy. Community is hard.
 - In her book, *Quitting Church – Why the faithful are fleeing and what to do about it*, author Julia Duin writes, *“One of the top reasons people give for leaving the church is loneliness: the feeling – especially in large congregations - that no one knows or cares whether they are there.”*¹
 - So I understand and agree that it is easy to become disillusioned with church community and to want to move away from people.
- This morning I want to address this issue of community life and its difficulties. But I am not going to approach it head on. In fact, I am hardly even going to speak about the difficulties. I have a different approach. By God’s grace I want to lift us up and out of the difficulties of community in order to gain the big picture perspective of what community is.
 - To do this I want to trace this theme of community throughout the Bible. I want to trace it from the time before there was time, to the beginning of time, to the fullness of time, and then to a time when time will be no more.
- As we stand above all the difficulties of community and consider it from God’s perspective, I am praying that you would see everything from a new perspective.
 - Then as we descend back into real life I am praying that you would demonstrate true community in concrete actions. Actions like being committed to each other, forgiving each other, and being patient with each other.
 - To that end I want to make four points about community and then close with some quick points of application.

COMMUNITY IS AT THE CENTRE OF GOD’S GODNESS

- First then, let’s begin by looking at community in the time before there was time. My first point is this: **(SHOW SLIDE)** community is at the centre of God’s Godness.
 - When I use that phrase “God’s Godness” I am referring to what makes God, God. And I am saying that at the very centre of God’s being, at the very centre of the Godness of God, is community.

¹ Julia Duin, *Quitting Church – Why the faithful are fleeing and what to do about it*, pg 50.

- I want to do something now that I try to do every so often at DHBC and that is to quickly walk through the Bible's teaching on Trinitarian nature of God. To explain this I want to show you, on the PP, what Christians have called the ***"Shield of the Trinity."***
- First of all the Bible plainly and unequivocally teaches that **(SHOW SLIDE)** there is only one God. Turn with me to Deuteronomy 6.
 - **READ 4.** ***"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."*** So unlike Hinduism or Greek mythology that believe in many gods, the Bible teaches that there is only one God.
- In the second place the Bible also teaches that this one God exists in three persons who are all the one God.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** There is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three are all the one God. The Father *is* God. The Son *is* as much God as the Father is. And the Holy Spirit *is* as much God as the Father and the Son are.
 - One is not more God than the other. They are all equal. So the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all the one God.
- But in the third place we must add that although the three are equally the one God they are not the same as each other. Each one is a unique person from the others.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** Although the Father is God, He is a unique person and *is not* the Son or the Spirit. Although the Son is God, He is a unique person and *is not* the Father or the Spirit. And although the Holy Spirit is God, He is a unique person and *is not* the Father or the Son.
 - So although all members of the Godhead are equal to each other they are not the same as each other. This is shown in that, although equal, they function in different roles from each other.
 - For instance, the Father planned our salvation, the Son accomplished our salvation, and the Holy Spirit applies salvation to us. We could say it like this: ***"The Father acts through the Son, by the agency of the Spirit."***
 - The threeness of God makes Christianity distinct from Islam or Judaism which affirms the oneness of God but denies the threeness of God.
- So to summarize then God is diversity in unity. He is plurality in oneness. He is three in one. Christians have coined the term "Trinity" as a shorthand way of describing the totality of the Bible's teaching on this.
 - If you find all of this difficult to understand, do not worry. As one man has said, ***"Deny the doctrine of the Trinity and you'll lose your salvation; try to comprehend it, and you'll lose your mind."***²
 - So today at least comprehend that God is three distinct persons but He is one.

WHAT DID GOD DO FOR ALL ETNERITY?

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Now let's take this a step further. Think back to the time before there was time. Think way back before the pyramids, before Adam and Eve, before Mars or stars filled the emptiness of space. If you can, imagine a time when all that existed was God Himself.

² Quoted in Stanely Grenz, *Created for Community*, pg 42.

- Now what was God doing for all of eternity past? In the eons before there were eons what was God doing? Before there was anyone or anything in the universe to care about, what was God doing?
- Well certainly our curiosity about what was going on then cannot take us beyond what God has revealed in scripture. But the scriptures reveal one very clear fact. It is that God has existed eternally in loving community with Himself. All three members of the Trinity lived in perfect loving community with each other.
 - The inner love of God for Himself is shown when the Father says at Jesus' baptism, ***"this is my Son, whom I love."*** Jesus says the same thing back to the Father in John 14:3, ***"the world must learn that I love the Father."***
 - And the Spirit is described in scripture as the very essence of God's love when it says that, ***"God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us."***
- And so we read in I John 4:8 and 16 simply that ***"God is love."*** C.S. Lewis argues that the words, ***"God is love"*** have no real meaning unless God contains at least two persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person then before the world was made he was not love, because he would have been alone.³ But God was not alone.
 - Before God had any love for human beings he enjoyed perfect loving community with Himself. God was never lonely because he had perfect joy in community with himself. So you see the triune God is the very definition of loving community.
 - Stanley Grenz puts it this way: ***"Through all eternity, therefore, God is the social Trinity, the community of love."***⁴

COMMUNITY IS AT THE CENTRE OF HUMANITY'S HUMANNESS

- So we have looked at community in the time before time. Let's turn now to look at community at the beginning of time. Our second point is this: **(SHOW SLIDE)** community is at the centre of humanity's humanness.
- Turn back with me to Genesis 1. **READ 27** – ***"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."***
 - When God created, He created human beings in His image. To be created in his image means that we reflect or mirror who God is.
 - Now how do we do that? It is many things but as we have seen, the very essence of God is community. God is relationship. It would follow then that if God's being is relationship then his creation would reflect this desire to be in relationship.
- Now look at 2:18. After God had created Adam he said, **READ 18** - ***"The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."***
 - The only reason that is given as to why God chose to create Eve was that Adam needed to be in community. God was not pleased with a solitary creature who would lived in isolation and not experience the oneness of relationship.

³ C.S. Lewis, "Beyond Personality", pg 21. Quoted in Daniel Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible*, pg 121.

⁴ Stanley Grenz, *Created for Community*, pg 47.

- So God gave him Eve. **READ 21-25** – *“So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.”*
 - Now here is where we see how Adam and Eve are made in the likeness of God. Like each member of the Trinity they each have their own separate consciousness. But like the Trinity they are one. They are both human, and their sexual union shows powerfully their oneness.
- God created us for community of which marriage is one form. It is part of our humanness. We have this desire for relationship and oneness with others because we are made in the likeness of God – we desire community because the Triune God is community. One author says,
 - *“Wherever community exists as a result of God’s creation, it is only a reflection of an eternal reality that is intrinsic to the being of God. Because God is eternally one, when he created in his image, he created oneness.”*⁵
- But as you know that oneness that Adam and Eve enjoyed with each other and with God was broken.
 - Adam turns on Eve blaming her for his sin. He also turns on God, blaming him for giving him such a bad wife. *“The woman you put here – she gave me some fruit.”* Eve shifts the blame to the serpent. Both Adam and Eve hide themselves from God. God casts them out of the Garden – out of community with himself.
- No longer do Adam and Eve enjoy oneness with each other – they are alienated from each other and both were alienated from God.
 - The Old Testament gives story after story of the effects of broken community. Right away Cain murders his brother Abel. We read all through the OT of stories of men oppressing women, nations attacking each other, injustice to the poor, murder, rape, divorce, and immorality. All of this is simply a picture of broken community with God and with each other.
 - Right then and there God could have said, *“These humans don’t properly reflect me anymore. I quit.”* But he didn’t. Which brings us to the third point.

COMMUNITY IS AT THE CENTRE OF CHRIST’S COMING

- We have seen community in the time before time and in the beginning of time. Now let’s look at community in the fullness of time. My third point is this: **(SHOW SLIDE)** community is at the centre of Christ’s coming.
- God did not leave us in our alienated state. In the fullness of time he sent forth his Son. At the very centre of history, standing high above all of the failed human

⁵ Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101*, pg 16.

attempts at community, stands the cross of Jesus. The cross is all about restoring what has been alienated. It is about reconciling that which has been torn apart.

- The cross is first of all about reconciling us back to God. As Romans 5:10 says, ***“when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.”***
 - The cross is also about reconciling human relationships back to each other. As we are reconciled with God we are made into a new people – the church. As the church we are to reflect the oneness that God has with himself. Let me show you an astounding passage that connects all these thoughts.
- Turn to John 17 with me. In this passage Jesus is having the last supper with his disciples. He is about to be arrested and crucified. At the close of the meal, Jesus offers a pray that he wants his disciples to hear.
- In verse 11 he prays for their protection but then he prays for something that is astounding. **READ 11** – ***“I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one.”*** Do you see what Jesus was praying for?
 - He prayed that God would enable the disciples to achieve among themselves the same kind of oneness that exists between Father and Son.
 - Jesus was not praying for mere outward unity. He was praying that in the core of who they are and in their relationships with each other they would have the kind of oneness and community that the Triune God has with Himself.
- But Jesus was not just praying for his disciples. If you are a Christian here today, did you know that Jesus prayed a prayer for you?
 - **READ 20-21a** - ***“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one.”*** Jesus’ prayer for us is that our community of believers would model the eternal oneness and community of God. That means that we are to love each other like the Father loves for the Son.
- Why did he pray this? **READ 21b, 23** – ***“Father, just as you are in me and I am in you...I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”***
 - According to Jesus’ prayer the most convincing proof of the transforming power of Jesus is a unified church. So conversely then, if our community life as a church does not reflect oneness and love for each other then the world will not believe.

COMMUNITY IS AT THE CENTRE OF ETERNAL EXISTENCE

- But there is one more thing we need to say. Let’s turn finally to look a community in the time after time – in the time when time will be no more. In the fourth place we need to say that **(SHOW SLIDE)** Community is at the centre of eternal existence.
 - You see the Triune God is moving all of history toward a restoration of community. He sent his Son to repair what was broken and to restore what was lost. And the scriptures teach that when Jesus returns God will

renew all things. Look at one last passage with me. Turn to Revelation 21. Here we have a picture of the new heavens and new earth.

- **READ 1-4** – *“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*
 - Do you see it then? Broken community has been repaired. Once again, God dwells with people and he will do it forever. What was lost between people is now restored. The mourning over broken family relationships is gone. The crying over arguments, fights, backstabbing, and lost friendships is gone. All is new. All is restored.
- So do you see how central community is? Before time, the Triune God existed in perfect community with Himself. In time, God created us in his image to enjoy this community with Him and each other. Our sin alienated us from God and from each other. But in the fullness of time God sent His Son to reconcile us back to Him and back to each other.
 - As the church of Christ we are called to reflect this oneness in our relationships with each other. And our great hope is that because of what Jesus has done a time is coming when time will be no more.
 - In that future age perfect community will exist forever as God dwells among us and we enjoy community with each other.

APPLICATION POINTS

- I pray that all of this has given you a renewed perspective on community. It’s time now to descend back into real life community. With this renewed vision of community let’s now make a few quick points of application.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** First, look at each other through new eyes.
 - When you look at those in the church, particularly those you have difficulties with, you must see them through new eyes. You must realize that the person you have difficulty with is no mere mortal. This is a person created in the image of God and redeemed at the cost of God’s own Son. This is a person who will exist eternally and who will be made like God himself. This is a person who, if a Christian, will be so transformed in their future glorified state that you could hardly recognize them like you could hardly recognize a seed when it becomes a majestic oak tree or a caterpillar when it is transformed into a dazzling butterfly.
 - Listen to this fantastic quote from C.S. Lewis: *“It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship...It is in the light of these*

overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit.”⁶

- See others through new eyes.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Second, commit yourself to building up the body of Christ.
 - If community is at the centre of God, at the centre of who we are created to be, at the centre of why Jesus came, and at the centre of our eternal existence then it follows that we ought to commit ourselves to each other.
 - That begins by committing yourself to a church. Don't buy into the individualism of our day. Commit yourself. Become a member of a church. Find at least one area where you can serve. Join a small group in order to get to know others. Let me really encourage every one of you to come to the retreat. This is planned opportunity for you to get to know others.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Third, forbear with one another.
 - Forbearance means that you put up with another's idiosyncrasies, quirks, and peculiarities, knowing that you have your own.
 - Some people talk way too much and don't listen very well. Some people don't talk enough and make things awkward. Some are too overbearing. Some rub you the wrong way.
 - Forbearance means we overlook these things. We do not make a big deal about them. Sometimes, we need to confront each other but the general tone of our community life together in the church is that we forbear with each other.
 - Prov 19:11 – *“It is to [a person's] glory to overlook an offense.”*
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Fourth, encourage one another.
 - Oh let us be an encouraging church. When you see something that someone is doing well at encourage them. Be specific and be direct. This week I challenge to pick two people in the church. Find something you appreciate about what God has done in their life and say, *“I just want to encourage you because...”* Let's start a culture of writing short emails of encouragement, a culture of phone calls, and encouragement notes.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Finally, love one another.
 - This is hardly a controversial thing to say but here is what I have seen happen over and over again. When people seek to love and then get hurt it is a natural reaction to pull away from trying to love again. People say, *“I need to protect myself so I won't really give my heart to love.”*
 - May I let C.S. Lewis speak one more time? *“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an*

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, pg 45.

animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket- safe, dark, motionless, airless--it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable."

- Yes community can be difficult. But the only way to discover love is within the messiness of relationships. Here is where we meet Christ. Here is where we learn of God's love – a love that loves the unlovable, that forgives sins, that is patient when wronged, and that is kind.
- My brothers and sisters, let us commit ourselves to community this year, living out the oneness that we are called to have with each other.