**The why and how of community – John 13:31-38**

**Intro**

*What would you do if I sang out of tune? Would you stand up and walk out on me? Lend me your ears and I’ll sing you a song, I will try not to sing out of key. I get by with a little help from my friends. I get high with a little help from my friends. I’m gonna try with a little help from my friends.*

This is of course, the famous song written by the Beatles, “With a little help from my friends.” And, whatever else that song may be about, one of the clear messages throughout is: **we can’t make it on our own. We need each other** to “get by”, to “try”, and even to “get high” (by which I’m *sure* the Beatles meant getting up high enough to overcome the obstacles we face in life …) Bottom line is: we need each other in this life.

And if you’ve even been to summer camp on a lake and been canoeing before, you already know this to be true. Canoeing by yourself – regardless of the personal freedom it provides - is really a difficult task b/c – for one thing – you’re constantly having to switch the side you are paddling on to keep the canoe going in a straight line. And if there is even a hint of wind, the length and design of a canoe make it like this gigantic sail in front of you that just pushes the canoe whichever way it’s blowing no matter how hard you paddle; you might as well just go to shore and pull the thing like a 10’ puppy around the lake. But // if you have another person to paddle in front, or better yet, 2 or three other people to paddle on either side – while still challenging – you can actually have a very good chance of reaching your destination; even in windy conditions.

Of course, a whole level way above canoeing at summer camp, are rowing teams like we see at the Olympics. Those guys, through much effort and personal sacrifice to train every day, cut through the water like a well-oiled machine. /// But if you really think about it, what distinguishes them as a team that is fit to represent their country, or their university, is not the matching, tight-fitting outfits, or even their individual athletic abilities. It’s actually their ability to work together as a team; to strive with a common effort towards a common goal.

Think about it: just imagine what you’d think if a bunch of dudes showed up to the Olympics in team Canada jerseys, but then got into the boat facing whatever direction they wanted! Not only could they not even make it to the starting line, they would be an embarrassment to the country they’d been chosen to represent.

Well, in the same way, we’re going to see in our passage this morning that Jesus – knowing He’s about demonstrate His love for us most supremely in His death on the cross; Jesus now wants His disciples that he’d chosen for Himself, as well as all those who would follow Him after them, to know how to best represent Him in this world. And the means by which He said we would accomplish this was by building a community of sacrificial love ***for one another***; for those *within* the family of God.

And this is *so* important for us today b/c, Jesus commanded us to live this way as His representatives b/c He knew (x2) that, for the disciples then as well as for us today, **the default nature of the sinful human heart is selfishness and self-interest.** And Jesus wanted all of us to know that if we continue to live that way in the family of God, we won’t just be ineffective; we will also be embarrassing representatives of Him to a watching world. To bring it home even more, we could say that – according to our passage today - if we as a church live selfishly with one another – hoarding our time, talents, and treasure for ourselves - it would mean that our *real* purpose statement would become, “*DHBC exists to* ***confuse*** *our city and world by demonstrating and declaring the* ***utter meaninglessness*** *of the gospel*.”///

The remedy, however; the antidote; the solution that Jesus gives for the redeemed people of God from continuing to live according to that selfish, sinful nature however, is the gospel: lived out in loving, self-sacrificing community with each other. That’s it! So then, like a rowing team, we strive together by the strength God gives us to sacrificially love one another, with the common goal of repping Jesus well.

And so, if you leave this morning remembering only one thing, I want it to be this: *we need each other.* **And if we ever want to be effective ministers outside the church, we first need to be a loving, self-sacrificing community inside the church.** The first is *inextricably* dependent on the second. And so, all I want us to do for the next little bit is just look at our passage and see how Jesus is going to show us **the ‘why’ of community** and **the ‘how’ of community.**

So turn back with me in your bibles to John chapter 13 and we’ll get after this together.

1. **The why of community**

I wanted us to look at the ‘why’ of/rationale for community first b/c I think it sets the table well for us to talk later about the ‘how’ of community/how we do community. And also b/c I want to silence all of our inner 4-year-olds.

If any of you have kids, or ever were kids at one time, (and I’m trusting that that includes all of you) you know that no matter what a kid is told to do, the immediate question that always follows is, “Why?” But, if I start out / answering the ‘why’ question by saying something like, “You know, brushing your teeth is really important for keeping your teeth and mouth healthy *and* for not having to get scary needles and painful drills put in your mouth.” Then when I say, “Now go brush your teeth kids!” there is very little pushback at all!

And beyond that, my own experience growing up in the church was that God’s good rules were often presented well, but the ‘why’ behind them was very often not presented, either well, or sometimes at all.

So I wanna begin with the ‘why’ of community. And I think in our passage here, we see three things that help explain why it is that community is so important, and why – particularly in the family of God – we need each other so much.

1. **Our design – vs. 33, 36**

This idea of our design here is actually more implicit, than explicit in the text. Look with me as vs. 33 and then 36 **(READ vs. 33 and 36)**. Jesus is just about to go to the cross, and here, when He talks about where He is “going”, He is clearly referring to His return to heaven. But what I want us to see here is that, all through the gospels; multiple times before this moment as well as after it, Jesus refers again and again to His deep, intimate, con-substantial relationship He has with the Father and the with the Holy Spirit.

You see – as Christians – we worship a Trinitarian God; One God, existing eternally in three distinct Persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus assumes this relationship implicitly and explicitly all through His ministry. And the clear teaching of the bible is that this perfect, loving, eternally existing community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit / created mankind in His image. In Genesis 1:26 this triune-God says, “*Let us make man in our image, in our likeness ….”* And then in the next verse (27) we read, “*So God made man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created* *them.”*

There’s no way I have time to unpack either the trinity or the fullness of what being made in the image of God means. But, for our purposes this morning, one clear implication we can draw from our image bearing of God, is that loving, self-giving community is not just something that we figured out was beneficial over time; it is actually woven into the very nature of who we are as human beings made in the image of the triune God.

Now, this is not the main point Jesus wants to communicate in our passage, but it is *definitely* underlying everything that He teaches here, and so I think it’s a fitting place to begin. So the first ‘why’ of community is that we are designed for it.

1. **Our command – vs. 34**

Which leads us to the second why in vs. 34. Look at it with me. Jesus says, **(READ vs. 34a)**. So now, out of the understanding that He designed us for community, Jesus now gives a specific command to His disciples and to all who would follow Him after them: love one another.

Two things to note here quickly:

1. Jesus is making a specific command to Christians here. We know this b/c, first of all, He is talking to His disciples when He says this; secondly, we know He’s talking specifically to Christians b/c of what He says in vs. 35. Look at vs. 35 **(READ vs. 35).** So Jesus is telling all Christians that obedience to this command will testify to the truth that we are His disciples. So we know He couldn’t be addressing everyone with this command.
2. Jesus is not telling Christians just to love other Christians and not anyone else. No, in fact, that is what is actually “new” and unique about this command. For Jesus already summed up the OT law of God in two ways: complete love for God *and* loving our neighbour as ourselves. So we are to love all people as Christians. But what makes this command “new” now is the specific command to love “one another” – those in the family of God – and additionally now “*as I have loved you*” **not** simply as we love ourselves. //

So now we have the direct command of Jesus - as Christians anyways - to have the same kind of sacrificial, self-giving love for one another, that Jesus demonstrated for us while He was on earth.

And I don’t know why it is as Christians that so we often read things like this where Jesus is commanding us to do something, and somehow what we hear instead is “we *should*” or “we *ought to”* do whatever it is He just said. You know, if it’s convenient in for you. Or we see some kind of magical asterisk/footnotes by the commands in the bible that say, “*unless your name is Wesley*” or “*unless it’s a different epoch in history, or it’s culture where people don’t think like this anymore. Then … then fuhgedaboudit.*” It’s crazy to me! If we believe this bible is the very word of God to us for all times and all generations, we don’t/ get/ to read it that way. We just don’t.

And b/c Jesus knows He designed us for this type of community, His command is actually no more oppressive or burdensome to us than commanding a coffee maker to make coffee.

1. **Our identification**

So we need each other b/c we were designed to need each other, and we are to live in this loving, self-giving community b/c Jesus commanded it. Thirdly, we need this type of community b/c Jesus tells us we will be known by the watching world as those who follow Him when we live this way. Look again at vs. 35. Jesus says here, **(READ vs. 35).**

One thing to notice there is what Jesus does *not* say. He doesn’t say, “*By this all me will know that you are my disciples, if you do everything you can to not look like those sinners.*” No, he says that the primary way people will know that we are followers of Jesus, is if we love each other well; if we love each other in sacrificial, self-giving ways like He loved us. So what? Are we now not supposed to live in this world with a different understanding of morality and personal holiness as Christians? Of course we are! But if you grew up in church, I can almost guarantee that, at some point, you were taught that the way we show people we’re followers of Jesus is by not drinking beer or going to rated-R movies or listening to rock music. And Jesus says here, no no no: people will see the beauty of who I am and be attracted to Me, when the people who claim to follow me love one another; when they give of themselves in sacrificial love to one another. That’s how we rep Jesus well in this world. And if you look at the history of the early church in particular, that is exactly how Christians were identified; by this same loving community Jesus commanded them to have

None of this, either, is meant to imply that we somehow have more of the image of God when we become Christians, necessarily. But it *is* to say that, if we are truly followers of Jesus, we are to look more and more like Him – that’s what Rom. 8:29 tells us. And if *that’s* true then we become, *at the very least,* more *responsible* to reflect the image of God to the world, even if physically we don’t bear any more of the image of God than anyone other person.

**APP**

So what does that mean for us today? Well, if nothing else, I pray that by, first of all, understanding the ‘why’ of community/‘why’ we need each other so much as the family of God; that it will begin to help you take stock of your own life if you’re a Christian here today. And hear me carefully: I said “your *own* life.” B/c there are a lot of ways we are already doing community like this as a church; absolutely we are. And it would be super easy for us to walk out of here today, being like “check! Got that one covered at least!”

But I’ll tell you what: I sang in a lot of choirs growing up. And, if they were smart, every now and again the choir director would stop the rehearsal. and they would either put us in quartets to sing the song we were working on, or – worse yet – have us sing our part all by ourselves without the rest of the choir singing around us. And when I was learning the music and carrying my own weight, that was never a problem. // But when I hadn’t done the work or wasn’t singing my own part right, w/o the cover of the group around me, it was now *easy* to see that, actually, I had no part in the beautiful music the rest of the choir was making; I had no part of it.

So, now that you see why community is so important, don’t take stock of how the church is doing; take stock of how you are doing. The bible just told us that we were designed for this kind of self-giving community; Jesus just commanded us all to live in, and love one another according to, how He designed us in that kind of community; and He even promised us that the better we obey that command, the more those outside that community will see the beauty of who He is and the beauty of His church, and want to become a part of it.

Understanding the ‘why’ of community then, should lead us to ask ourselves: “What do people know about Jesus and how He loved me, based on the way they see me living in community with other Christians?” “Does the way I live in community with other Christians demonstrate and declare the transforming power of the gospel?”

Well, I think in order to get an accurate picture of how we are doing individually, we need to spend a minute talking about what this kind of community actually looks like. So secondly, I want us look at:

1. **The ‘how’ of community**

Now the funny thing about this is that the answer to “how should Christians do community?” is both incredibly obvious/ and/ also looks humanly impossible to do. Look again at vs. 34 with me; Jesus lays it out for us plain as day. He says, **(READ vs. 34)** So … there it is for us. Just love others in the family of God like Jesus loved us … we got any takers? /// No, I guarantee if you’ve read your bible well and know what you’d actually be signing up for we don’t.

B/c how did Jesus love those He redeemed? What’s the model Jesus gives that we’re supposed to follow? Well, just dipping a measuring cup in the ocean of God’s infinitely deep and wide love for us, let me offer just a few big examples:

* giving up all the riches and glory of heaven to take on human flesh and be born in the humblest of dwellings; a manger
* just before our passage this morning, the creator of all things stripping down to a servants garment and washing the feet of his followers, even the one who was about to betray Him
* then directly after our passage, giving up His very life in the most horrific and humiliating of ways on the cross to secure the redemption of the very people who had rebelled against His good reign
* then conquering sin and death, rising again from the dead and returning to heaven to, then, prepare a place for us to live with Him for all eternity as co-heirs and vice-regents with Him.

Anyone? Anyone in here down for even a fraction of that list?

Well, surely Jesus knew then, and knows now, that we could never live up to that command. So what’s Jesus talking about? Well maybe what we need to do is to look more deeply at what Jesus meant by His command to “love one another.” Throughout these verses, the Greek word Jesus uses for love is *agape.* Now for English speakers, it’s hard for us to wrap our minds around a language that has all these different words and definitions for, what seems to us, like basically the same word.

I mean, in English, I can tell you how much I love my wife and kids in one breath, and how much I love Mexican food in the next, and no one in the Western world is batting an eyelash.

But in the Greek language, the word for love *agape –* broadly - carries with it the meaning of unconditional love, and more narrowly, it could be defined as love: “**especially characterized by a willing forfeiture of rights and privileges in another person’s behalf.”**

And along with the way Jesus uses this word for love to describe both His own love for us, as well as how we are to love one another; what is also significant is that this is also the same word/concept for love contextually Jesus uses in vs. 37 and 38. Look there for a moment. Peter, understanding Jesus usage and meaning of *agape* says in vs. 37 **(READ vs. 37).** So Peter gets that Jesus is talking about a kind of sacrificial love for each other. But then look at Jesus’ response in vs. 38. He says **(READ vs. 38).** And you know, if you’ve read the gospel accounts of Peter, you know that he does deny Jesus three times. And what is both ironic and instructive for us since that day, is Jesus’ interaction with Peter after His resurrection from the dead. Keep your finger here and turn a few pages ahead for a moment to John 21:15. Three times in these verse Jesus asks Peter, “Do you truly love me more than these?” and each time Peter says, “Yes Lord, you know I love you.” And we can skim over that and say, “*Oh, Jesus is asking Peter if he loves Him three times b/c he denied Jesus three times.”* And I think that’s right. But I think, beyond that, Jesus is drawing Peter back to that interaction in our passage, where He asks Peter in vs. 38, “Will you really lay down your life for me?” And the reason I know that is because here in John 21:15 ff. Jesus uses the exact same Greek word *agape* to interrogate Peter by the fire. “Simon do you truly agape me? After all that’s happened over these past days, do you truly love Me in a way that denies yourself for the benefit of another?” And each time, Peter says, “Yes Lord, you know I love you!”

And there’s been many sermons give over the years that say, b/c Peter uses a different word for love than Jesus – Phileo - he’s admitting he doesn’t love Jesus as much as he had said; much of that has actually been abandoned now that we understand more of the way John likes to use word pairs in his writing.

The point is this: Peter has been humbled now and all he can do is bow his head in shame before Jesus and say, “Lord, You know I love you … even if my actions have shown anything but that.

But look again at Jesus reply to Peter in John 21 after each time Peter answers Jesus’ questions. What does Jesus command Peter to do each time? “Feed my lambs/sheep.” And *this* is yet another tie for Peter (and for us) back to our passage this morning in John 13. For *once again* here, Jesus defines and describes love for Him, and the demonstration of that love to a watching world, as love and care for His sheep; for those within the fold of God. Jesus is saying, “*Your actions will show the same love for Me as your words, when you love My sheep in the same self-giving way you’ve just seen Me love them.*”

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Well now maybe you say, “Oh I see; so the command Jesus gives us really is humanly impossible… awesome! Thanks for helping us out with that this morning bro! This has been time really well spent!”

Well, before the inner Pharisee in you Type A’s goes into overdrive and the rest of us melt into a puddle of defeat, let me unburden our minds quickly. Look again back at our passage in vs. 34 and look carefully at the beginning of the verse. Jesus says, “As I have loved you …” or some translations will say “Just as I have loved you … so you must love one another.” “Just as”; “like”; “in the same way;” these words can certainly have a literal meaning. But this is one of those times where it is helpful to ask the question: is Jesus’ command here prescriptive or descriptive? **Prescriptive** – that is, like a doctor giving a prescription for medicine. You take what they prescribe, as they have prescribed it for as long as they have prescribed it. Period. But **descriptive** of course means that it is simply describing how something should be done.

So if I take my daughters to the gym and show them how to do a bench press, when I tell them to try it themselves “just as” they saw me do it, I’m not asking them to get on the bench and press the same weight I just used. Instead, I’m telling them to follow the example they have just seen me give with a weight that is appropriate for their strength and ability. So my command then is descriptive, not prescriptive.

And I believe that Jesus’ command to us here is also descriptive. If He were commanding us to love one another in the exact same ways He did, we could never be obedient to His command. But, if His command is describing the manner/way in which He wants us to love one another, well then the command suddenly becomes attainable again. Not easy; but attainable for us to carry out now w/ His help.

Understanding all this then, means that being obedient to Jesus’ command to love one another, actually has less to do with what things we do individually to love one another, and *much* more to do with *how/in what way* we love one another. That’s why this message isn’t called “10 steps to doing community better.” The word Jesus used to describe ‘how’ to love one another was *agape*; a selfless, sacrificial, self-giving love that forfeits its own rights and privileges for the benefit of another. So what does that look like for you? For that is absolutely the example Jesus lived out in front of his disciples. And in the same way that Jesus’ example of loving others in that *agape* way, showed those around Him that He truly was the Son of God; Jesus says that when we follow His example and sacrificially love those in the family of God, that’s how those outside that community will see that we are truly children of His and be drawn to Him.

**Conclusion**

We need each other. Do you see it now? Do you see why community in the family of Gos is so important; and how it is that Jesus wants us to carry it out?

But maybe for some of you this morning, you feel like Peter. Maybe you see for the first time clearly why community is so important. But as we talk about the ‘how’ of community /you see for yourself that - like Peter – while maybe your words speak love for Jesus; the *way* you give of yourself to His sheep shows anything but love for Jesus to the outside world.

Where do you go from here? Well the very last thing to say is that you’ll never be able to carry out Jesus’ command if you’re not willing to know and be known by other people. B/c how could you *ever* realistically sacrificially love the people of God around you, when you don’t know them or their needs? How could you *ever* grow in deep community with people you see for 1.5 hours a week, and actually speak to for maybe 3-4 minutes after a service? You can’t! You can not do it.

And so, I’ll tell you, one of the very simplest ways you **begin** (and, again, I said “begin” so this is not everything) to be obedient to what Jesus is describing in our passage today, is to look at your calendar: yes! Look at your calendar and ask yourself: *What time am I sacrificially giving in a week to grow in this type of community with other Christians?”* And don’t immediately think church either. When someone looks at your marriage; how you love your kids; how you sacrifice for your room mates, do they see the beauty of Jesus? And then, sure, at a church level, an easy way to begin is to join a home group; or maybe you speak to Kajle after the service about joining a GROW pod. And, seriously – look at me - this is not promotional; I’m not trying to sell you anything. All this is about is simply making use of the avenues already available to you within this largely surface level community, to really begin to see and experience the powerful witness Jesus says our deep, sacrificial love for one another is to the watching world around us. And we can only experience that by really knowing people and being known by them in community. Let’s pray.