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...to make and mature more followers of Christ

Community Life is God's Plan from the Beginning

Genesis 1 & 2; John 17:20–23

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August 30, 2015

Community Life Sunday

George Gallup of the Gallup Polling Company reported that Americans are known to be the most lonely people on earth. While in Honduras this summer it was impossible not to notice the poverty, the lack of opportunity, the lack of stuff, the lack of what we consider to be basic necessities. I found myself feeling sorry for them. But then someone told me, "They may lack a lot down here, but one thing they don't lack is community. Everyone lives together—families are big, there are always tons of relatives and neighbors around to talk to and hang out with. Hondurans don't understand what it means to be lonely the way Americans feel lonely." I realized my heartache was misdirected. I began to feel sorry for me, for us.

So how could we as Americans, with all the advantages we have and the resources available to us, be labeled the most lonely people on earth? Sociologists tell us that this loneliness is something called "Crowded Loneliness." There is an overexposure to people, but with no deep connections with anyone.

Consider how we do life. We go from one circle of people to another. We have our family circle, we have our work circle, our school circle, our church circle, our neighborhood circle, our parents of our childrens' friends circle. We are likely exposed to 10, 20 maybe more circles. And we jump from one circle to the next so quickly we don't land long enough to know the people well enough in **any** of these circles. If we really studied our own circles, we might be alarmed to learn that in each circle we have fallen into a pattern of playing a different character. Not only do I not know the others in my circles well, but they don't know the real me either.

When we think about the term "Community Life" our minds go a variety of places. For some of us we think of small towns, small churches, or small bars where everyone knows your name! Some of us think of barn raisings (I'm really dating myself!). Some of us think of being civic minded and putting back into a community as a way of expressing community life.

I think that community life is expressed to certain degrees in all of these environments. But if I had to come up with a definition of Successful Community it would be this: Community Life is a group of people doing life together in such a meaningful way that their community experience actually improves the quality of their lives.

We crave meaningful relationships. I recently watched a biography on Howard Schultz, CEO of Starbucks. It said Starbucks

has little cards that display career opportunities at Starbucks. The card reads, "Create Community. Make a difference in Someone's Day. When you work at Starbucks, you can make a difference in someone's day by creating an environment where neighbors and friends can get together and reconnect while enjoying a great coffee experience." We crave meaningful relationships. It seems to me that if Starbucks gets this and social media moguls get this, we had better get what the Bible says about meaningful relationships and Community Life.

Let's start at the beginning. Genesis chapter 1 gives us creation. This is where God first reveals to us how he planned for us to do life. This is an amazing reminder of God's endless capacities. With incredible creativity, God speaks into existence the heavens and the earth and everything in it. In the midst of his creating the very same phrase reoccurs six times.

"God saw that the light was good..." (v. 3)

"And God saw that it was good..." (v. 10)

"And God saw that it was good..." (v. 12)

"And God saw that it was good..." (v. 18)

"And God saw that it was good..." (v. 21)

"And God saw that it was good..." (v. 25)

"And God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." (v. 31)

All of creation, all good. Then God looks at it and says, "It wasn't just good, it was **very** good." Mission accomplished, right? Adam has every animal, plant, a perfect place to live, work and play. What more could he want? Then the unexpected happens.

"The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone'" (Genesis 2:18).

God says something is not right. We tend to broad brush verse 18 and only use it at weddings in the context of marriage, but at its core, this verse describes that we are meant to do life together. Adam was meant to have Eve. I can imagine Adam looking around and seeing stars in the sky, lions, lambs, figs, kittens, salmon, mangos. "Hey God, all this other stuff? It's good, but this Eve? This is very good."

I wonder if some of us maybe caught something that we hadn't seen before in this familiar story. Did you notice that the fall from grace in the Garden had not yet occurred? There is no sin, no disobedience, nothing happened yet to destroy the perfect relationship between God and man. Adam is in a perfect state of

intimacy with God. Each word they share is intimate and joyful; Adam walks with God, he is known and loved to the core by his creator, yet the word God uses to describe him is "alone." And God says aloneness is not good. But apparently from reading this passage, God creates inside man a kind of human-shaped void that God himself chooses not to fill.

When we are not in community we suffer the consequences of isolation. May we never forget as believers in Christ that we are in a battle. We have a very real enemy who has a way too successful strategy of isolating us so he can attack. Sheep are not nearly as likely to be attacked by wolves when they stay together as they are when they become isolated from the rest of the flock.

I read a study that tracked the lives of 7,000 people over nine years. Researchers found that the most isolated people were three times more likely to die than those with strong relationship connections. People who had bad health habits such as smoking, obesity, or excessive alcohol use but strong social ties lived significantly longer than people who had great health habits but were isolated. In other words, better to eat brats and beer with friends than to eat kale alone!

Where can we find the best example of community that ever was? I think the undisputed best example is the Trinity. The Trinity is a description of God. God is One, but the one true God exists in three persons in the Bible: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Or one might say, "The Divine Community."

"And God said, 'Let us make man in our image'"
(Gen. 1:26).

The truth is we were all created in the image and likeness of God and God is a relational being. God made us like himself as a relational being. The Word for God in Genesis 1:26 is *Eloheim*. It's a plural noun with a singular meaning. The plural three persons, the divine community—Father, Son, and Spirit—were actively engaged in the singular action of making man in God's image. Throughout the Scriptures there are these beautiful pictures of community that surface as we study the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In Matthew 3:17 we read this when Jesus was baptized, "***And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'***" As Jesus was stepping out into the challenges of his ministry, his father stepped up to affirm him not just publicly, but in a spectacular way.

In John 14:25 we read, "***Jesus told his disciples about what would happen after he would leave them, 'But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.'***" There was a perfect complementation of roles going on between the members of the trinity.

In Mark 9:7 we read about Jesus being transfigured on the mountain into brilliant white, and Elijah and Moses were talking with Jesus, "***Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: 'This is my Son whom I love. Listen to him!'***" What do we see here?

In John 17:1 in Jesus' last hours on earth, he prayed to his father,

"He looked toward heaven and he prayed: 'Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.'"

Jesus and his Father perfectly revealing unity of heart and unity of purpose. If you're getting the picture that the Trinity is an on-going mutual admiration society, you're right. Then when we take this further. We see that Jesus offered a specific prayer for us who were created in his image, for all who would come to believe in Jesus would experience Community Life. His prayer is an invitation for us to enter into Community Life, the kind of community that makes our hearts come alive, the kind of community that satisfies our cravings, the kind that can only come from God himself.

Jesus' prayer for us was offered in the last hours of his life on earth. It was his last recorded public prayer and it reveals to us Jesus' heart. He bares his soul to his heavenly Father and invites us into Community Life.

"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, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (John 17:20-21a).

Jesus' prayer tells us that an essential mark of the church is Christian unity. Not unity as an ecclesiastical organization with a really good flow chart. Nor does Jesus mean unity as in conformity, such as everyone worshipping exactly the same.

What Jesus means by unity is what lies in our common Christian experience. Sharing our essential doctrines and beliefs, God's Word as our final authority is an expression of unity. Sharing our salvation experience is an expression of unity. We express unity when we proclaim that we are saved by Christ alone, by Grace alone, through Faith alone. What Jesus means by unity is recorded by Paul in Ephesians 4:4-6: "***There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.***"

For us to understand Community Life as God intends, we must understand that there is no Community Life without the unity that comes from "sharing in" the common Christian experience that comes when we believe in Christ and are brought into this place of one faith, one baptism, one body and one spirit that Paul describes in Ephesians 4:4-6.

Another way to understand this is through the term "fellowship." The Greek word for fellowship is *koinonia*. Fellowship simply and

literally means to participate and share. To not only “share in” a common Christian experience, but to “share out” as a community, actually sharing our thoughts and lives and love with each other. Working out our oneness to help us grow spiritually by teaching one another, praying for one another, encouraging one another, caring for one another, serving one another, and spurring one another on toward love and good deeds all for our own benefit.

Jesus' prayer was that all his followers would experience the kind of meaningful relationships with each other that the three persons of the Trinity have always experienced. But the benefits and even the purpose of community go beyond the benefits to us. For better or for worse, our expression of community life influences a watching world. Jesus' concluding words in verse 21 were:

“Jesus continued, ‘May they also believe in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.’”

Do you feel the weight of that statement? Jesus continues:

“I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:22-23).

What Jesus is saying there is a direct correlation between the degree that his church lives in community and the degree to which the world believes. What the world believes and our community life are somehow connected. So Jesus is praying that our community life is strong not just for our benefit, but for his own credibility that unbelievers would observe our community life and believe in him.

I remember long ago reading Francis Schaeffer's writings on John 17 in his book, *The Mark of a Christian*. “Christian Community is the final apologetic.” Apologetic is a fancy word that means “to defend.” Schaeffer views Christian Community as the best way we can defend the truth and nature of our Christian faith. For all of us to be in Christian Community at CPC? That would be the best sermon we could ever write or preach to the watching unbeliever.

We thought it important to put as many of our Community Life ministries together at one time in one place and call it Community Life Sunday. Take some time today to linger on the patio and check out the places for Community at CPC. This means figuring out how to make time to connect with others. For some of us, we don't even think about it anymore. It's second nature. Your group is your sanctuary, as someone told me last week. Who, by the way, agreed to step out of that sanctuary and lead a new group this year because they wanted to provide additional connection points for people who are not yet experiencing the community he has experienced.

It takes commitment and some creativity for us to carve out a night a week or every other week for community life. Why? Why should I listen to what our pastors and leaders are telling us about community life? Because getting involved in a healthy community at CPC satisfies our need to grow. And according to John 17:20-23 it satisfies our need to belong, and it satisfies our need to make a difference in the world Christ died to save.

This is a picture of me and my friend Marv. Both of us had just turned 50, and we and our wives and some others were in a community group together. Marv and I were close. I married his kids off. I dedicated his grandbabies. He always had an encouraging word or a squeeze on my arm after a Sunday Service. Marv and I wanted to learn something new so we decided we were going to learn how to water ski together. We were getting tired of just pulling our kids around the lake; we were turning 50; it was our time. Marv's son kindly agreed to drive the boat. We tried and tried. Time after time, we would wipe out. We leaned forward, we fell forward. We leaned backward and we fell backward. It was frustrating. Why couldn't we just pop up out of the water like these teenagers? A few times I even got upright before I would lose my balance. His son Brett said we looked more like manatees lurching around in the water! Finally after 10 tries I made it up and stayed up. I was elated. I was skiing! Look Marv, I'm skiing! You can see that eventually both of us not only made it up but we got to ski together.

Marv and I also learned a lot about community life in that season of our lives. We aligned what we learned to learning to water ski. Our first lesson was, “We can't learn to water ski alone.” I can't learn, I can't practice, I can't get the feel of rocking forward and standing up, of dropping a ski and then finding it again without others around me. I couldn't grow as a skier without others. I can grow as a jogger alone, but I can't ski alone. It's the same with community life. This may be a new concept for some of us who like solo Christianity. Community life is a team sport. We cannot grow in the Christian life without “sharing in” and “sharing out” our faith in a real and relevant and safe place.

Our second lesson was, “Waterskiing takes lot of work.” There is getting the boat to the lake. Launching, parking the truck, the boat hopefully starts, life jackets, sunscreen, right weather, crowds, some might say a real hassle. And then when you are warm and comfortable in the boat on a beautiful lake, and it's your turn to ski, no matter how warm the air temperature, that water always feels cold at first. As we wrestle with whether or not community life is right for us, understand the status quo is always easier. It takes effort to experience community life, and when you finally get there it will likely feel cold at first. But eventually that cold will dissipate and it will be replaced by feeling refreshed. Your initial fear of jumping in is real. But jump in

anyway. It may take your breath away at first, but stick with it. It is worth it. Let us work creatively to help you and your family find community.

The third lesson was, "We learned was it's easy to ski in the wake but even that will eventually become boring." When you ski directly behind the boat you are skiing inside the wake. You are skiing over the churned up water from the propeller. It's actually a pretty smooth ride right behind the boat. We could ski in that same place in the same way hour after hour. But looking around we soon noticed other skiers doing other cool things. We saw skiers leaving the wake and going out wide to the side of the boat. Leaving the wake was scary at first, but we got addicted to learning new things. And to continue to grow we had to get out of the wake. We had to take risks. When we left the wake it was sometimes choppy and rough. Other times it was glassy and smooth. Both were exhilarating. We tried dropping a ski and skiing on one ski—a whole new feeling. And on one ski I managed to wipe out in new ways too! We tried skiing with 3, 4, 5 people at the same time. That got messy. We spent a lot of time untangling ropes. If you are here today and just kind of yawn when we talk about community life, you need to get out of the wake. You need to wipe out spectacularly. You need to get involved in community even if it is just to help someone else untangle their ropes.

Our final lesson was, "There is a reason we need others to ski." There are dangers out there, and we have blind spots. There are hazards that are hard to see while skiing. It takes drivers and spotters to steer clear of shallow rocky areas, other boats and other skiers sharing the same water. You can't ski without a spotter. If the boat patrol sees someone skiing with out a spotter, you get a

big fine. I think some of us just don't think we need others in our lives. We are doing just fine, thank you very much. Some of us can be very pleased with ourselves. But every one of us has blind spots. Every one of us needs spotters. To think we don't need a spotter is something Jesus calls self-righteousness. Don't think you will ever be beyond someone speaking honestly into your life. Community Life is where we find our spotters, someone to spot for you, and for you to spot for someone else.

I think it was four years ago when I went to visit my friend Marv in the hospital after his latest surgery for a very aggressive cancer that had grown in his diaphragm. I held his hand and he whispered, "My goal is to lick this thing and water ski with you next summer." And that next summer in between his treatments, we skied one last time. I can only imagine the energy it must have taken for him to pull himself up out of that water while fighting his disease.

Our church and our community group prayed and supported Marv and his family. The last time I saw Marv he was 80 pounds, but he still stood up and gave me a hug when I walked in the room. Two months ago cancer took Marv's life and he went to be with his Lord. Experiencing Community Life with Marv was a joy. And then seeing our church support him and his family was a privilege.

As I think about Community Life, Marv was God's reminder to me to remind others of the gift of community God has given us to help us through the most difficult things this life can throw at us.

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

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Catalog No. 1416-FC