

## True Community

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In the years immediately following WWII, mainline churches in America reached the highest levels of quantifiable achievement in history. The church played a significant role in shaping American culture. Then a *shift* happened (remember): somebody decided the church is a business, and mainline churches adopted corporate structures of organization and leadership and corporate standards of success, and Personnel Committees and annual performance reviews. Then, the church got stuck in that culture of the 1950s, while the world ran off and left it behind. The church has been playing catch up ever since.

But chasing the world is chasing the wrong blueprint for the church. During the 1990s Dick Hamm was General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). He tried, with marginal success, to focus Disciples on a biblical blueprint for the community of God's people. He was inspired by:

### Micah 6:8 (NRSV)

... what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

Last week we looked at "justice" as one of God's requirements. Today's requirement is "love kindness" (The KJV says, "mercy"). Jesus said it even more strongly on the night he was betrayed, when he said to his disciples—and to us:

### John 13:34-35 (NRSV)

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Later that same evening, Jesus prayed that his disciples would be one so that in their oneness the world would see Christ.

All of this adds up to nothing less than a call for God's people to be a community—Dick Hamm calls it a true community. Jesus lived in a time when true community was hard to find—so rare that if people actually saw it, they'd be drawn to it.

You know it is, if you've ever stood outside the clubhouse door, listening to the big kids having a good time inside. You're outside, forehead pressed against the door, teary eyes and runny nose, banging on the door, crying, "Let me in!"

You know the value of community if you've ever been the new kid in town—the new kid in school; if you've ever been the last one chosen to play "Red Rover;" or if you've ever played on a sports team, or played in a band or orchestra, or sang in a choir and worked together to produce something beautiful.

You know the importance of community if you've ever experienced the last day of church camp: still glowing from last night's closing worship around a

campfire; still hyper from the big dance. The last day: saying goodbyes; promising to write—or text... and then everybody goes in different directions; and there's this... emptiness: this longing to be back together.

Jesus knew that if the church manifested true community, the world would recognize Christ within it. If ever there was a generation that needed to experience true community, this is it. Our society more accurately is described as scattered cliques and isolated individuals.

In the 1950s an age-old debate re-emerged. It's two days older than dirt and emerges every two or three generations. It's never been resolved, because it presents a false dichotomy—in other words, it demands an either/or choice, when the only reasonable choice is both/and. In my lifetime the debate most clearly is represented by Ayn Rand on one side, and Spock on the other. The question debated is, "which is more important: the one or the many? the individual or society?"

On the one hand, no one ever elevated the value of individual persons more than Jesus. On the other hand, in the 50s there was an experiment with baby monkeys: two groups, each given healthy nutrition and a secure environment, but in one group the babies were isolated from most contact with other living creatures; fed on schedule by a machine. In the other group, the babies were left with their mothers and other monkeys. (It amuses me that a group of cows is called a herd; a group of birds is called a flock; a group of monkeys is called a congress.)

The isolated babies failed to thrive and were terrified at brief encounters with humans or other monkeys. Half died before they were two years old. Meanwhile, the babies in congress were healthy and secure in the society.

Like most mammals, we humans are social beings. We were created in the image of the God whose very nature is Love: created for relationship. We need the touch of a hand on our shoulder. If ever a generation needed to experience true community, this is it. And here is one description of true community:

<p>ACTS 2:42-47 (NRSV) <i>They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup>Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup>All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup>they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as</i></p>	<p><i>any had need. <sup>46</sup>Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread in each other's homes and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and <u>having the goodwill of all the people</u>. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.</i></p>
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Now, any time you deal with this text, you're gonna' hear, "Isn't that socialism?" Well, no, it's not. First, there's no government involved; it's totally voluntary. Socialism has failed, communism has failed, capitalism has failed—in America capitalism has failed and been resuscitated many times, based on who's in control.

These are human systems of organizing and administering the economy of a

nation; systems—tools—nothing more. They have no intrinsic value other than theoretical; in practice, they're no better or worse than the people who control them.

What's missing in any failed system is a very specific sense of community... a unique sense of commonly held values and goals and commitments and relationships. And the foundation of the community described in the text I just read is something not found in our culture at large; something that separates it from any human system of organization. What's missing is obedience to Jesus' "New Commandment".

Remember that shift in the middle of the last century? the shift from having a significant role in shaping American culture to becoming overly dependent upon "American" culture? In adopting the language and standards of business, mainline churches abdicated the language and concepts of faith. As a result, most people in the church forgot—or never learned—how to tell their faith story.

You see, there simply is no human system or paradigm of organization, leadership, politics, governance, or economics whose language can communicate the gospel. The gospel has its own language; its own vocabulary. And the church—when it is a "true community" of believers—stands on the gospel foundation of obedience to Jesus' "New Commandment:" Love one another.

So, when *"All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need,"* it was not because of socialism. It was because they loved one another.

Now all this can distract us from a crucial point. While the church dabbled in business models, two generations of spiritually hungry people found no food in the church; so, they looked elsewhere: Eastern Mysticism, Witchcraft and other paranormal phenomena, and neo-Pentecostalism. They were hungry for an experience that would touch their souls. They were hungry for community; but community is based on trust, and a major characteristic of millennial generations is a lack of trust in institutions. 26 years ago, Janet Bernardi wrote, "We were born in the Nixon era and have never known national trust in leadership. In fact, we have seen corrupt leadership ever since: in everything from PTL ministries to the LAPD."<sup>1</sup> In contrast is this:

*Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread in each other's homes and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.*

"What if there were a "true community" available—a community that inspired trust among those who have become conditioned to not trust organized religion?

This congregation is not unlike that. But, can it be said of us that we are *"having the goodwill of all the people"*? Do "all the people" even know about us? Is the word getting out? Or, are we one of those "best-kept-secret-in-town" churches?

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<sup>1</sup> William Mahedy & Janet Bernardi, *A Generation Alone* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsityPress, 1994), p. 18.

Are we a "true community" only inside this building?

How can our congregation demonstrate "true community" out in the community? How do we get the word out: here is "true community"—based not on people's being alike, or thinking alike. Here is "true community" based not on the good will of its members, but on the confession of our common need of God's grace—"true community" based on our common acceptance of Jesus' invitation to his table, and our common commitment to his "new commandment" to "Love one another."

Last year our Evangelism Task Force researched and discussed... ..evangelism. In the past, and in some cases today evangelism still implies the business concepts of productivity and profit, new members (read: new sources of income).

The word means, "good news;" getting the word out. Our Evangelism Task Force came up with two projects, and your response was wonderful. A "Trunk or Treat" let more than 200 kids and their families know that this congregation cared enough to provide a safe venue for them to enjoy Halloween.

And then we collected 60 cases of cereal and 12 cases protein bars so that 55 Ida Burns Elementary students would have breakfasts during the Christmas holidays. I don't know if anybody in Conway knows about that outside our church and other than the counselor and vice principal at Ida Burns. That's not the point. Word got out. In a diary entry from 1863, a Jesuit Priest named Father Strickland wrote (and it's been quoted many times by famous people, including Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan. The quote said, "A man may do an immense deal of good, if he does not care who gets the credit for it."

I've asked that Task Force to reconvene and create three or four ways we can get the word out this year.

Take a moment and write an idea on the back of your bulletin. Hand it to me following the service, and when the Evangelism Task Force gets together, we'll put them in the mill.