

COMMON UNITY SERMON SERIES

We're All in This Together – Acts 2:42-47

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I have a group of people in my life who are very special to me – 186 people, to be exact. We meet almost daily to talk about things very important to us. Not everyone makes it every day, but each person is still considered part of the group. We laugh a lot, tease each other, talk about the future, and, most importantly, commiserate over our favorite baseball team, the Cincinnati Reds. And yet, aside from a couple, I've never met any of them in person? It's true, because this group for Reds fans exists only on Facebook.

Here's my question: Does this count as a community? The dictionary defines a community as "a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals." That certainly applies to this group, although our common attitude as Reds fans is not a particularly good one. So based on that definition, we're a community. But let me say again: We've never met in person! Is that a criteria for community these days? Or has our Zoom-driven world changed so much in the last few years that we need to redefine what a community is?

We're starting a new sermon series today called "Common Unity." Unity is a big theme in the Bible and in our denomination. In fact, one of our founding tenets is "Unity is our polar star," so please ignore the fact that our denomination has had two major splits in its history. Hey, unity is hard! For the new few weeks, we're going to explore what it means to be united in community in a world where you can find friends on Facebook and worship God on Youtube.

Building community was hard enough before the pandemic, especially in churches, where the passion of belief often fuels the fire of division. Almost every church can tell the story about a rift in the congregation's history, when Pastor So-and-So decided the church should have blue carpet instead of red carpet or should use Hawaiian bread instead of an Italian loaf for communion, and before you know it half the congregation has left to start a new church up the road. It happened to my home church in Jeffersonville. Thankfully, Crestwood doesn't have such a chapter in its history but we are in the minority.

The church's propensity for divisiveness is completely antithetical to what we read in today's passage. This snapshot of the early church doesn't tell us about sternly worded emails to the pastor or contentious board meetings. Instead, it's a picture of harmony, as early Christians devoted themselves to being the people God called them to be. They learned together, fellowshiped together, shared stuff together, broke bread together, prayed together, praised God together and grew together. Those early believers really knew how to be church, didn't they?

But don't be fooled, folks. This was a church, after all, so there's no way everyone got along. What Acts 2 doesn't tell you is that the first time the early church held a board meeting, there was a huge argument over what color carpeting to put in the sanctuary and what kind of bread to use at communion, and before you know it Apostle So-and-So moved half the congregation to the next village to start his own flock. The apostle Paul, writing about his disagreement with Peter, says, "When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face." Can't you just see Peter and Paul finger-pointing and chest-bumping in the church parking lot? "I say the carpet color shall be fusia!" "Well I say God wants it to be aqua!" "Thou deserves a good smiting!" Can we admit that the church doesn't always do community well?

When you look at all of the disagreements down through church history, many of them center on one fundamental question, and it's the same question that is used to define our communities today: who's in and who's out? That was at the core of the disagreement between Paul and Peter over circumcision, it was at the core of many of Martin Luther's charges against the Catholic Church, and it is at the core of some of our biggest religious arguments today. Who's in and who's out?

The problem is the Bible's not real clear on this. Are divorced people in or out? Are uncircumcised Gentiles in or out? Are gays and lesbians in or out? Are sinners and tax collectors in or out? You could make valid arguments on both sides of the issue based on scripture, and that's not helpful. We want clarity so we know where to draw the lines. In our communities, we want to know who's in and who's out.

When I lived in Indiana, I used to golf at a course that was right next to a farm. I don't think the farmer was a golf fan, because posted along the fence line separating the course from the farm was a series of signs that simply said, "Private Property" and then showed a picture of a shotgun. Now that's a clear message. I can't tell you how many golf balls I hit across that fence line, but I can tell you how many of them I retrieved. Zero! The farmer made it very clear who was allowed in and who wasn't.

That's the kind of definitive clarity we seek in the Bible. These people are in and these people are out. Wouldn't it be easier if Jesus gave us some guidance on this? How else are you supposed to define your community if you don't know who to exclude? Instead, Jesus says really frustratingly vague things like, "Love your enemies" and "Blessed are the peacemakers" and then leaves us to work out the details in community with each other. And we're not always so good at that. Spend only a few minutes on Facebook and you'll find plenty of people who hate and exclude. And you'll probably find some people you want to hate and exclude.

Maybe we're going about this all wrong. Maybe we're using the wrong criteria to define who's in and who's out of our community. I read a story recently about how ranchers in Australia control their flocks. Because the size of land they own is so huge, building fences is too impractical and costly, and there would be no way to monitor them. So instead of building a fence, they dig down into the earth and build a well, providing precious water in the dusty Outback. Animals won't stray too far from their water source, so instead of fencing in the borders, the ranchers draw their flocks to the center.

Rather than building fences, maybe we should be digging wells. Instead of guarding our boundaries, maybe we should be inviting people into the center. Instead of trying to decide who's in and who's out of our communities, maybe we should set a table, extend an invitation, and see who shows up. The early church didn't draw lines; they shared what they had with each other, and everyone was invited to the fellowship picnics, and everyone was invited to Sunday School, and everyone was invited to the table.

That may be the one thing we've continued to get right as Disciples of Christ. Everyone is welcome at the table. No criteria. No entrance exams. No determination of spiritual fitness. It's a "y'all come" invitation, a lavish extension of radical hospitality where everyone is in and no one is out, like Edwin Markham's poem, "He drew a circle that shut me out —Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But Love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle that took him in." Christ has drawn a circle and we are all within it.

The table, which is at the center of our worship space, is our well, drawing people to the center of our faith, which is Jesus Christ. The only people Jesus was hesitant to invite in – the Pharisees and the religious leaders – were those who thought they knew where to draw the

boundary on God's behalf. To those who wanted to exclude others, Jesus said that prostitutes would enter the kingdom of Heaven before they did.

That doesn't mean we have to agree with everyone who comes into our circle. In fact, I think our community is made stronger by the diversity of beliefs contained within it. The beauty of who we are – or at least who we are striving to be – is that there is room for every voice here. We don't have to all believe the same things or vote the same way to be part of this family. We are included by virtue of the one who drew the circle, the one whose love, like a circle, has no beginning and no end, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Online, you can choose who's in and who's out of your communities. But what about in real life? What about in the communities to which God calls us? Who's in? Everybody is in. That person who thinks differently than you? In. That person who forwards you every single email with pictures of cute kittens? In. That person whose political perspective is both wrong and obnoxious? In. That jerk on Facebook? In. That person who roots for a rival sports team? Sigh. In.

We may have strong opinions about who we believe should be in and who should be out. And that's OK. We're human, so we're not going to like everybody. In fact, there's probably one person – maybe more than one – who thinks YOU shouldn't be in the circle. How about that for a kick in the rear? It's a good thing God's drawing the circle and not them, isn't it? Because when God draws the circle, there's room. Room for me. Room for you. Room for everyone. Everyone. How big are the circles we draw? Is there room for everyone? This world has enough people who want to build fences; may God give us the grace to be people who dig wells.