

10/06/08

Reaching Across – A Community in Christ

In previous weeks, we looked at the priority of *Reaching Up*. The need to reach up to God with a life of worship, to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength is our highest calling. Jesus is clear, however, that reaching up should result in *Reaching Across* – loving others as Christ loved us. While these devotions are about our personal relationships with Christ, the outworking of that relationship is seen in our relationships with one another. For the next month we will take a closer look at our relationships with our Community in Christ, From fellowship to friendships, may these devotions help you be a part of a healthy, growing community. –Pastor Mike

Day 1: Reaching Across – Devoted to Sharing

What are some truths you learned from last Sunday's message? How can it make a difference this week?

Day 2: Our Common Bond in Christ

Communities are built on common ground. Those within any community share something in common. Whenever you bring dog owners, golfers, or computer programmers, etc. into one room, immediately a bond is formed. Commonality draws people together and can profoundly affect lives. Part of the reason any community is effective is because their commonality builds a bridge into one another's lives.

Read Ephesians 4:1-6; 13-16. Gal. 3:26-29

In the passage today, Paul begins by telling his readers how to live. In v. 3 he ties these behaviors and attitudes into something we already have: the unity of the Spirit. We all share a common bond in Christ. And there is no greater bond we can have with other people. But that bond can be damaged when we place other things ahead of our commonality. Gal. 3:26-29 tells us that we are all children of God (*sons of God*) who are baptized into Christ. No ethnic, status, or gender differences should come ahead of our common bond in Christ. But that is not always a reality in this world. Sometimes that unity or commonality can be disturbed when we treat one another in ways that are unbecoming of Christ. Humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance – lose these qualities and the unity we have in Christ can be threatened. That is why Paul says, "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit" (Eph. 4:3). That is why Paul says we are to all work together to "reach unity in the faith" (Eph. 4:13).

Personal thought:

There are far too many passages to consider in the area of unity to cover here. Turn to nearly any page in the New Testament and you will find some aspect of how we should live that in turn can either build up a community or break it down. Eph. 5:29 says, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that is may benefit those who listen." Any time we put ourselves above others or God, we threaten unity. We are to be working together toward a common purpose – to reach maturity in Christ. This is a community effort, not a lone attempt. Unity, then, is not an option. We must "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." It is a profound thing to consider that Christ has built a bridge for us to step into the lives of others and make an impact. The bridge is already there, and I have a choice to either walk across it to help others, or simply ignore it.

To consider:

When, if ever, have you damaged unity with a fellow believer? How does knowing "we are all in this together" help in your treatment of a fellow believer? Pray today that when there are opportunities to damage unity that you will have the wisdom and humility to "walk across the bridge" and "keep the unity of the Spirit."

Day 3: Loving One Another

Read John 15:12-17.

This passage opens and closes with the same command: Love each other! The command is reflected in a sacrificial commitment to lay down our lives for others (i.e. “for his friends”). That sacrifice is not easy, but is made easier by the friendship. (Note, however, that the love of Christ goes beyond dying for friends, but for His enemies as well – Rom. 5:7-10.)

Forgive me for being blunt, but let me ask: How good a friend are you? When it comes to building a healthy, biblical community, Jesus set the standard by showing us what love looks like. It is a commitment to death. That is a high standard! We may not be called to die for someone (I doubt many of us will), but to the extent that we act sacrificially toward others shows the extent of our love. And as we show love toward others, we bear fruit – fruit that will last and is pleasing to God.

To consider:

As you move through your day, look for opportunities to show sacrificial love by going the extra mile as you are able.

Note also that Jesus initiated the love (“You did not choose me, but I chose you...”). His love was unconditional – yet another high standard! Love flows from what is inside, not what is outside. So, even if on the outside we are encountering great struggles or perhaps not getting along with someone, God has given us the ability to initiate love (Note: *initiate*, not merely *respond*) as God’s love works within us.

To consider:

God calls us not to merely respond in love, but to initiate love as well. Is there a relationship in which you need to initiate an act of love? Recognizing that this could be difficult in some situations, ask others to pray for you – for courage, humility, sensitivity, and wisdom.

Day 4: Accepting One Another

Read Matthew 18:5-6; John 5:1-9

Children. They were the lowest class in Jesus’ day. They had no rights. They were given little attention. They were less than second class citizens. And yet Jesus valued them to the point that He warned people of severe consequences if they were mistreated and misguided.

An invalid for 38 years. Overlooked and overrun day in and day out. A man simply trying to get better. Jesus saw something more in him, and He healed him. Later Jesus would announce that “whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Matt. 25:40)

Jesus accepted and valued the lowly ones of this world. And then He called us to follow Him.

That same heart is to be found as we *reach across* our Family of Faith. The Body of Christ should be a place where all are valued. Are you valued in the Body of Christ? Can you be yourself, warts and all? Can you bring the worst of yourself and not be rejected? Can you admit your failings and struggles and have them met with grace? Are you valued enough to be encouraged to grow?

We are all valuable to God. But perhaps more important than me being valued is me valuing others. God wants us reach across to the lowly ones, the less prominent, the “less presentable” ones (1 Cor. 12:23) and value them as

Jesus would. Paul says in 1Cor. 1:27-28 that God chose the foolish and the weak, the lowly and despised things of this world to do His work. Surely, we ought to have that same attitude!

To consider:

Do you feel valued in the Family of Faith? Why or why not? Do you fear people might reject you?

How can you show value to those in our Family of Faith? Is there someone whom God has placed on your heart to show that you value them?

Day 5: Time with One Another

Read Acts 2:46; 5:42.

Nothing builds community like spending time together. Whether it be a family vacation or a weekend retreat, time is one of the most important aspects of building a strong community. For the early church, today's passages say they met daily. For the most part people lived in small villages or towns. Meeting with others was a walk away. It was also cultural. People had time to "hang out". Not so for many people today. Meeting with others means scheduling far in advance and driving long distances. Add to that the desire to meet with so many different people, we might meet someone this month, someone else the next month or week, and before we know it we are playing "catch up" in so many relationships. Consistent and frequent contact with others is a crucial part of community. Jesus met consistently and frequently with His disciples. The early church met daily in houses and larger group gatherings. The greatest impact on people's lives occurs in the context of consistent and frequent contact.

Heb. 10:24 says, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing..."

Realistically, we cannot meet daily with the church. But that's not really the point; it is the principle. The more a group meets together, the stronger the community will be. Consequently, some people experience more community at work or in sports leagues than in the Body of Christ. Of course, it takes more than just meeting together to build a healthy community, as we will see in the coming days. For the Christian community, the centrality of Christ unites us more than any secular, common purpose.

To consider:

Who are you building community with? Who are you meeting with consistently and frequently? Is it enough? How do you know? Are there ways you can stay in community with others?

Consider your schedule for a moment - -the things you do in a given week. Many things compete for the time needed to build community – even noble things. We can get so busy doing our individual activities. Are there ways to include others in your activities in order to build community? Rather than competing against community, can your activities be used to improve community?

Note: The church gathers together weekly (Sunday), and this helps address this need for consistent and frequent contact. But Sunday's miss certain elements that are needed to build effective community because Sunday worship focuses more on contact with God rather than with one another.

Day 6: Review

Look over your notes from the past week. What one or two things did God impress upon you this week?

Home Group Questions

Week of October 6, 2008

*If time is short, be sure to ask these questions.

Opening: How have you seen God work this week?

1. We all share a common bond in Christ. There is no greater bond we can have with other people. But that bond can be damaged when we place other things ahead of our commonality. Sometimes that unity or commonality can be disturbed when we treat one another in ways that are unbecoming of Christ. How does knowing “we are all in this together” help in your treatment of a fellow believer?
2. When it comes to building a healthy, biblical community, Jesus set the standard by showing us what love looks like. It is a commitment to death. That is a high standard! We may not be called to die for someone (I doubt many of us will), but to the extent that we act sacrificially toward others shows the extent of our love. Over the past week, how were you challenged to go the “extra mile” to show sacrificial love?
3. God calls us not to merely respond in love, but to initiate love as well. Are there relationships in your life that need that kind of initiative? How can the group pray for you in this area? Have you ever been the recipient (outside of Christ) of an initiating kind of love? If so, what effect did it have on you and your relationship with the other person?
4. Jesus accepted and valued the lowly ones of this world. And then He called us to follow Him. Who are the lowly ones in your world? What are ways you can reach across to them?
5. *The Body of Christ should be a place where you feel valued. We should be able to be ourselves, even bring the worst of ourselves and not be rejected. It should be a place we can admit our failings and struggles and have them met with grace and support. What makes it difficult for people to live completely “inside-out”? Do you feel your Home Group is a place where you can admit your failings and struggles? Take some time to discuss this very important matter. If applicable, why might you be afraid to be vulnerable in this group?
6. Nothing builds community like spending time together. The early church met daily in houses and larger group gatherings. The greatest impact on people’s lives occurs in the context of consistent and frequent contact. How have you seen this to be true in your life? Have you seen the opposite to be true as well (i.e. that community is difficult without contact)? Take a look at your schedule – do you meet often enough with others to build a healthy community? If you are serious about community, what might need to change?

As you go into your prayer time, consider the following questions:

- How have you struggled this week?
- How can the others in the group help you?