

Sermon Series
HELPING THE CHURCH CONNECT
By Bob Young

CONNECTIONS SERMON SERIES: The Importance of Connections

Introduction:

Email from friends in Ecuador, began “Community Intercambios” program, now meeting in public library. Community Connections: how and where will we connect with our community? Beginning mini-series next week on the nature of authentic relationships. Authentic relationships are the foundation of community—loving, serving, celebrating, knowing, teaching.

The study of God and his person prove that God’s nature is communal. The obvious response to God’s communal nature is that he people will build community. Briefly observe three things: (1) God exists in community, (2) when God was incarnate, in Jesus Christ, his model of community and transforming relationships cannot be ignored, (3) Jesus prayed for and taught the necessity of oneness for all Christians. The genuine church must move toward that vision.

A God of community

1. While we may not understand all that is involved in God’s nature, plurality, trinity, there can be little doubt that the “community gene” is passed down to God’s creation. We thrive in connections—families, social groups, work groups, marriages, friendships....
2. The beauty of genuine community is that it transcends culture. Why do people of different cultures come together in community? Because people need other people. Imprisonment is based on the pain of being behind bars, away from relationships, away from the community of normal life.

Jesus demonstrated community in his ministry

1. God with us. He chose disciples, why? Because he also needed community.
2. Lone rangers are alone rangers. The church can never be optional. We were formed for community. The church is not a spiritual buffet bar, existing only to feed our families. One does not measure the tastiness of the entrée to determine which church to attend. Life transforming community is part of the plan.

Discipleship is about seeking oneness. That they may be one as we are one...

You may say, all of that theory (theology) is fine, but how does it work out practically? Bonhoeffer, Life Together: “*Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize, it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.*”

Let me tell you how it works out. We know who we are, we receive our identity from others. Others provide the mirrors in which we develop. We were designed for dependence, not for independence. Actually, the better concept is interdependence.

Let’s talk about four things that we find in true community.

We get STRENGTH for the storms of life.

What is the absolutely worst thing that ever happened to you? May be several possibilities, but one thing clearly stands out for me. I needed strength, and I found it in community.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 offers an insight: Two are better than one...if one falls down, his friend can help him up.” We can help one another carry loads that are unbearable. Gal. 6, carry your own burden within your power; depend on others when the burden is unbearable.

It was Thanksgiving Day, 1993. House decorated for Christmas. Bowles boys had helped—alternating light colors. A little over two years after my mother's stroke. Premonition? Come to the hospital. Barely there—all of the elders, TG afternoon. The nature of community. Family, friends, community. Not just the church, the community. How can we help? Looking for witnesses, facts. Jack and Nelson, PI. Investigators. When we wrestle with God, seek to make sense of the senseless, seek to understand the incomprehensible, reassurance and help come from the Lord, through community. In trauma we learn what it means to weep with those that weep. The body of Christ extends real, personal hands to those in pain. It is not only our story, it is the story of multiplied heroes of faith. David and Jonathan, Elijah and Elisha, Naomi and Ruth. Without Priscilla and Aquila, or Onesiphorus to encourage him, how might Paul's story have come out? The Bible tells us to invest in community. Lev. 19:18, love your neighbor as yourself, to fulfill the royal law, Jas. 2:8.

We get WISDOM for life's decisions.

Where should we go, what should we do, how shall we follow God. The answers to these questions are complex, but they are answered in the context of community, supporting, encouraging, guiding, loving. This is the uniqueness of this church. I cannot begin to tell you the richness of wisdom shared by the leaders and members of this church. You have blessed the life of Jan and me.

We pray, we ask, we seek, we converse. And God has bountifully demonstrated to us the value of decisions made in the context of community.

June 1972, visitors to services, reference by Raymond Kelcy, wonderful growth

May 1974, York College lectureship, invitation, confirmed by Maurice Hall

August 1976, community, to Lansing

June 1987, Rick Shur, to Fort Gibson (Mom's stroke and death, would not have moved....)

Summer 1995, OVU, contact from Sermon Seminar, mission involvement, new chapter

Fall 2001, we will move back to the center of the country, came to McAlester in summer 2002

My dad died, June 2005, Jan's dad died, December 2006.

Bailey McBride in fall 2005: sad, you moved back to be near your dad, now deceased, but God has confirmed the wisdom of the community in leading us.

We find ACCOUNTABILITY and ACCEPTANCE.

We need friends to hold us accountable and offer acceptance when we change.

We read the Bible to become like Christ, to gain insights, but even that strategy fails when we avoid genuine community. James 1:23-25. Friends help us remember who we are.

As iron sharpens iron, a friend sharpens a friend (Prov. 27:17). It is not always comfortable, but it is essential.

Such sharpening, a rare gift of life change, won't happen unless we are willing to get close to one another.

The beginning of conversations about spiritual things, about spiritual accountability, begins in connections, intercambios, exchanges, in life, with friends. Yes, down at the church house, but not only down at the church house. How can we explore together the purifying and enlightening power of such connections: 1 John 1:7.

Ultimately, community is the context in which lasting transformation occurs. But to really change, to let go of my past, my problems, my difficulties, I have to have acceptance and care. The church is uniquely suited, more than any other entity in this city, to offer that kind of neighbor love, in the spirit and imitation of Jesus. Does this sound like an inflated claim? Consider the world in which we live.

Talk to people about their families, and families are divided. Lots of people experience more pain than love and acceptance in their families. Divorce, abuse, overwork, financial stresses, problematic family dynamics.

Talk to people about their work, that's not where people find acceptance and care. Lifelong security in a job is a thing of the past, global competition, downsizing, workplace violence.

The neighborhoods aren't neighborhoods any more—often we don't know the folks who live next door. The loneliest people in the world live in the midst of millions. People are too busy to make friends next door. Isolation is the reality of our world, many are resigned to it, no longer expecting to find true community. Imagine their surprise, were they to walk into this building, or our homes, or our meetings, or our communities, or our connections, our exchanges, and find genuine love. John 15:12-13. Jesus really does expect us to lay down whatever we have, however we need to, whenever requested. It is the nature of the Christian community.

This month, we'll talk a lot about us. Not because we want to be self-centered or selfish, but because we have a Christ-mandated potential for community. We can't compete with other entities, perhaps even other churches, for entertainment value. Where can we best be visible for what God is calling us to be? In community. We know that all churches experience conflicts, but the church is mostly a place where most people have a reasonable promise of finding healthy, functioning, accepting relationships.

Love the Lord...

Love your neighbor as yourself. That love provides strength, wisdom, accountability and acceptance. Everyone needs connections.

CONNECTIONS SERMON SERIES: Introduction to the Five Points in the Series

Strong churches--authentic relationships. Safest Place on Earth--return to authentic spiritual community with Christ and others. Why small groups don't work: Bodies in a circle--souls turned away. Growing in community is the irreducible minimum.

There is no fast food at the community table in the church. No immediate results, no immediate gratification. Takes time. No lose 10# in 48 hrs.

Phil. 3:8-10, know Christ., vv. 10-14. Eugene Peterson: long obedience in the same direction.

Pursue growth, 2 Pet. 1:5-11

The transformed life is not something you pursue on your own. Spiritual growth occurs in the context of community. We must turn our souls to one another to become what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "brings of the message of salvation" to one another. This is essential before we can take the message to others.

Nouwen, believers become people "who know and are known, care and are cared for, forgive and are being forgiven, love and being loved."

Alter that a bit--five practices that are essential to authentic relationships.

BEING LOVED and LOVING--Care Giving, nurturing, unconditional, agape, where will we experience the nature of genuine love? koinonia

BEING CELEBRATED and CELEBRATING--Affirmation, worship, leitourgia

BEING KNOWN and KNOWING—Acceptance, authenticity; genuine concern, mutuality, reciprocity, self-disclosure, community, fellowship, koinonia

SERVING AND BEING SERVED--Humility, ministry, diakonos

TEACHING AND BEING TAUGHT—Accountability, truth-telling, kerygma, didaskalia, edification/evangelism

[NUTURING AND BEING NURTURED]

CONNECTIONS SERMON SERIES: Being Loved and Loving (1)

Larry Crabb book: *The Safest Place on Earth*, plea for development of authentic, safe, spiritual communities with Christ and other believers. Must change our way of thinking about church, thinking about spirituality, thinking about self to achieve this kind of spiritual community, connection, and change.

“We’ve got to move to another level; we arrange our bodies to focus on a common point or goal, but our souls are sitting in the pews facing away from one another.” Even in Bible classes: bodies in a circle, souls turned away.

There is no fast food at the table of community. We must learn to eat and drink deeply, to enjoy the feast, to linger over the meal. We must avoid the cultural tendency to want it all immediately, immediate gratification. Won’t happen overnight. No diet to take off 10 lbs. in 48 hours. Yet we want results without work. Eugene Peterson: a long obedience in the same direction. Phil. 3:10-14.

2 Peter 1:5-7, 10-11. This matter of developing connections, community is a progression, see the role of love. Only when we learn to turn our souls toward others can we be genuine bringers of salvation to others.

How? Henri Nouwen, become people who know and are known, care and are cared for, forgive and are being forgiven, love and are being loved. Hybels, Willow Creek, preached a series on knowing and being known, serving and being served, loving and being loved, celebrating and being celebrated.

Two concerns: the order of the items, and the internal sequence. Five concepts undergird effective community. They generally develop in a certain order in healthy relationships, they begin with personal experience and expand to include more and more people.

They are:

- Being loved and loving—strength, wisdom, acceptance, accountability in the context of community; I learn that I matter and that others matter
- Being celebrated and celebrating—celebration of self, based on self-worth, creation in God’s image, celebrating God in worship.
- Being known and knowing—self-disclosure,
- Being served and serving—self-giving,
- Being taught and teaching—accountability,

In one sense, we must know one another before we share *philia* love, we can talk about that soon. But the foundation, based on God’s developing relationship with his creation, is *agape* love, extended unconditionally. When we are loved, we can love. 1 John 4:7ff.

BEING LOVED

Building community begins with being loved. Parents love children, churches love new members, mission groups love new members...

When I am loved, I learn that I matter. I learn my value. John 15:13, no greater love.... 1 John 3:17ff. This is the bold, compassionate love of 1 Corinthians 13. When we experience this kind of love, we are empowered to love others. “He treats everyone that way.”

In church, we often ask people to love before they are loved. We have a need, you have a pulse, we have a match! Elders are first pastors-shepherds, then guides-superintendents-overseers. The elder calls: is it “Good, my caring, compassionate shepherd” or is it “I wonder what he wants now.”

Genuine community begins with love received from Christ, then shared. Evangelism is the process of loving someone enough to share with them Christ’s love. Missions is love-driven, not guilt, not demand, not law, not command.

Church is a safe place because we create an environment that invites relational integrity and safe spiritual growth and transformation. We are, in the words of Nouwen again, wounded healers.

Being loved lets me draw nurture and strength from the community, through the ever-present Christ in his community.

LOVING

When we have been loved, we can love. Many cannot love because they've never really known love. The love of God, the love of Christ, the love of others. Being loved leads to loving, and that mutuality connects us in deep, meaningful relationships. When that occurs, you have the beginnings of authentic community. To connect in any other way fosters the veneer of sociability without genuine fellowship or community.

Karen Fisher love note?

CONNECTIONS SERMON SERIES: Being Celebrated and Celebrating (2)

REVIEW

The challenge is clearly stated in a book by Larry Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*. Illustration: young lady, physically abused in adoptive family, suspicious of all, now mother, concerned about who she can leave her new baby with. How can we communicate that church is a safe place, especially in world where the news indicates that churches are not always safe places?

If the church is going to be the safest place on earth, we need a plan for developing authentic, safe, spiritual communities with Christ and other believers. We must change our way of thinking about church, self, and a genuine spiritual community characterized by connections and communion. Too many church activities are "bodies in a circle, souls turned away."

Such will not occur immediately. There is no fast food at the table of community. Eugene Peterson: a long obedience in the same direction.

Several authors: become people who know and are known, care and are cared for, forgive and are being forgiven, serve and are served, love and are being loved. I explained why I think the order is reversed: receiving love so we can give love, being served so we can serve.

Then introduced five concepts that undergird effective community.

	Expressed in...	Builds....	Lesson....
TO BE LOVED AND TO LOVE			
Care-giving [strength, wisdom, beginning of acceptance/accountability...]	love/care	self-esteem	I matter (others matter)
TO BE CELEBRATED AND TO CELEBRATE			
Affirmation [created in God's image, celebration of self, celebration of God in worship]	celebration	self-worth	I have value
TO BE KNOWN AND TO KNOW			
Acceptance-authenticity	intimate connections	self-disclosure self-confidence	I am part of a community
TO BE SERVED AND TO SERVE			
Humility	service/ministry sacrifice	self-giving self-commitment	I can contribute
TO BE NURTURED AND TO NURTURE			
Accountability	truth-telling	self-awareness	I am honest

Challenge Summarized:

- Church that cares deeply
- celebrates vibrantly
- connects intimately
- commits sacrificially
- communicates honestly

Last week we discussed the pressing need for love in the community of believers, and love in the larger communities of our world. We observed that we often ask people to care for others before they are cared for. How many of you have felt taken advantage of down at the church house? How many feel they give more than they get? How many say that church is only interested in what I can give....

The same principle applies to celebration and worship. We expect people to understand worship before they understand basic Bible truths. Three things undergird celebratory worship as described in the Bible: (1) we are created in God's image. (2) our nature as God's creation gives us dignity and worth so that we legitimately celebrate self. (3) our response to God's gracious action in our lives leads us to the celebration of God in worship.

I don't know about your religious history—I think I developed faith in churches that left the impression (perhaps didn't believe this) that the grumpier you were, the more holy you were. Lots of preachers in little church in KS, seemed to this young man to have one thing in common—not having much fun. Too much fun was the equivalent to sin in the camp. I don't see that in the same way today, but it was my impression growing up. I will give credit: this little church encouraged its young men to a high level of involvement. We led singing, led devotionals, read Scripture, and assisted in various activities. We were affirmed with encouragement, gratitude, and words of praise. That encouragement gave us hope—maybe someday, if I keep practicing, I can be a preacher. But there were always some with a less optimistic view—“remember, we're all just dirt!” Melvin Gibson, would you like some criticism? Duh? After all, too much affirmation might give us the big head. Let's not let this affirmation, confirmation, self-worth, self-value thing get out of hand.

The church that has not learned to love/celebrate will struggle to develop the kind of connections that build community. I don't know what “celebration” means to you—hands raised, amens, hearty singing, kneeling prayers, humble hearts, good words, generous thank yous, but the church that follows Jesus is about celebration.

The Bible doesn't equate gloominess with holiness. Jesus and Paul and hosts of other NT persons celebrated—at weddings, in homes, successes. Jesus taught in parables about wedding feasts... Such celebrations are reminders that God is gracious, redemption is real, and Christ is at work in us. Celebration is a biblical concept, the OT Jewish feasts were celebrations. The angels rejoiced at the birth of Jesus (Luke 2), the angels rejoice in salvation (Lk 15:10), you and I are invited to the great hallelujah wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:9). Paul urged the Philippians to rejoice, again and again.

Jesus celebrated—water to wine at a wedding, exulting with followers who discovered the kingdom of God firsthand (Lk 10:21-24). Deep joy; contagious love for people. Care-giving #1; then rejoicing #2.

Just the opposite of the joy-robbing Pharisees, full of pretension, self-righteousness, in fact they angered Jesus. Joy overflowing—that is the phrase.

Upper room words, John 15:11, 16:20-24. Paul, rejoice with those that rejoice (Rom. 12:15). Such rejoicing is a part of our singing (Col. 3:16). Why doesn't the contemporary church celebrate more?

We have not learned the way of celebrating one another, we do not know how to celebrate God. Put some members in the middle of the group, and speak words of affirmation. Take photos of what we are doing, paint pictures, write affirming letters, give gifts, sing praises. We live in an affirmation-deprived society. When was the last time you went to work on Monday and the boss said, so good to see you, I've missed you all weekend,

your contribution, caring attitude, promptness and work efforts are superb. I just can't imagine this place without you. I sat there watching football this weekend and all I could think of was how your presence brings light to everyone else. Why, you're virtually irreplaceable, it is a dark day when you are not here. Happens every Monday, right?

The church is for celebrating God's presence, God's goodness. We celebrate one another, because we see God's goodness. Gal. 1:24.

When we are celebrated, we learn how to celebrate with others. When people pray for me, I learn how to pray for others. When people surround me with love, I know how to do that for others. When people care and love and write and touch, I can do that for others.

When we are celebrated, we can celebrate. The celebration that is central in our life is our celebration of God's goodness in our life. We sing, we say thanks, we respond in love, we are generous, and most of all, we surround the table in a memorial feast he has instituted as a memorial.

Genuine community begins with love received from Christ, love shared in caregiving. Evangelism is the process of loving someone enough to share with them Christ's love.

Genuine community is built in the affirmation of celebration—we are celebrated, and we learn to celebrate with others, and to celebrate God.

Church is a safe place because we create an environment that invites safe spiritual growth and transformation. We are loved lovers, we are celebrated celebrants, we are wounded healers. We draw nurture and strength from the community, through the ever-present Christ in his community, the Christ who loves us, the Christ who celebrates our salvation with the angels.

Conclusion

To connect in any other way other than God's way fosters the veneer of sociability without genuine fellowship or community.

Only when we have been loved, we can love. Many cannot love because they've never really known love. The love of God, the love of Christ, the love of others. Being loved leads to loving, and that mutuality connects us in deep, meaningful relationships. When that occurs, you have the beginnings of authentic community.

Only when we have been celebrated can we share in the celebration of others, only then can we genuinely worship.

Here's the challenge, a step at a time. If we are interested with us in building a genuine church, we must instill authenticity in our relationships and activities.

Care giving love, affirming celebration, accepting relationships, humble service, truth-telling. I will tell you such is risky—people will take advantage, some who come will not understand, the odds are stacked against us in an unspiritual world, it's a long-shot at best. But it is the only way, take the lead in building a new kind of community, where souls face one another.

One writer says: the church is called to be "faceful." We are only faithful when we receive and reflect the face of God. We are only faithful when we face one another.

Today we conclude with a focus on celebration—we want to celebrate your victories, big and little, great and small. Write a reason for celebration, and we will pray with gratitude.

Perhaps you need to make a change in your life before you can celebrate. Come to Jesus, change direction, connect with a church family that cares and celebrates. If you are struggling with the celebration, if you need help in changing your own life into a life of celebration and positive affirmation, this church will lovingly care, and jubilantly celebrate when new life and new beginnings are unveiled.

We will circulate to pick up your celebration notes, and you are also welcome to bring them, or to come to Jesus for salvation, for washing, for newness, for renewal.

—

CONNECTIONS SERMON SERIES: Authenticity—to be known and to know (3)

Connections that Build Community

We will be a church that....

- cares deeply
- celebrates vibrantly
- connects intimately
- commits sacrificially
- communicates honestly

Five Principles

- care-giving
- affirmation
- authenticity and acceptance
- humility
- accountability

Intimate connections depend on authenticity.

Acceptance is not possible without authenticity. It will eventually disappoint.

Being known and knowing means self-disclosure.

(But if you know who I am, you might not like me anymore.)

Loneliness is an epidemic in our society. Ever felt lonely? What causes loneliness?

Lack of intimacy, lack of relationships.

Most of us want to know others deeply and be known by them. We crave relationships. Deep down, we want people to know who we are, to care about our story, our pain, our dreams, our hopes, our fears. Friends who ask questions and really listen are like water to a parched soul. But no one can achieve intimacy unless people see to know and to be known.

Julie Gorman: True community is more than being together. A person does not develop trust in others simply by being in a group where members study together, pray together, and share a common group leader. Trust involves relatedness. Relatedness is more than presence although that is the beginning. To relate, one must know, and to know one must work at being open to trust.

How great is that longing within to have meaningful, deep relationships. Do you know where that desire came from? God!

Jer. 24:7: I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their hearts.

Rom. 12:9 (Message): Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it.

God made us for heart-to-heart relationships. But it is easy to fake it.

We may wear masks for many reasons, but one reason is supreme: Fear.

Think about the masks you wear—at work, at home, with the family, with friends, down at the church house.

One fear that preachers often feel is the fear of grief experience when relationships end. Not going to be friends, because hurts too much when you leave. To build true intimacy or community requires love; to lose that love demands grief. At times we are a bit jealous of people who have just stayed in one place always, but then we are reminded that we have friends around the world. Some fear the grief.

But.... the primary reason we are not always real and authentic in our relationships is the FEAR of rejection.

Although wearing masks may help us guard against rejection, we will never experience intimate connections hiding behind masks. When I refuse to reveal my deepest identity, I don't allow others access to who I really

am. As a result, I am consumed by the impression I leave on others more than I am by developing an open relationship. We think legalistically: what should I be feeling, rather than what I am feeling. Jesus often targeted the Pharisees who appeared to be alright but were a mess on the inside (Matt. 23:27-28).
Prov. 26:23 NLT: Smooth words may hide a wicked heart, just as a pretty glaze covers a common clay pot.

We erect barriers to intimacy. Removing barriers to intimacy means rejecting self-sufficiency and disposal relationships, wanting more than a “hotel” church. We live in a society where relationships are tenaciously superficial and unrelentingly transitory.

To allow others into our lives is the greatest gift we can give. It represents trust, and hope and love. This requires self-disclosure, opening the window to the soul. We ought to get in some practice for eternity: 1 John 3:1-3.

The key to authenticity is: take off your mask. The key to being authentic in our relationships is finding the courage and strength to take off the masks and expose the real person inside. When we take off our masks, we may expose relational scars, scratches, the evidences of past battles. Taking off the masks means that we have to know God’s forgiveness, and know how to forgive ourselves, so we can be real with others.

Where is authenticity? Where is the real world? This is the real world. Being real, living in light, fully known and knowing, genuine sharing.

Genuinely care about others.
Find identity in Christ. (renewal, salvation, value)
Be authentic and sincere.

In such knowing we reweave the bonds of community in our spiritual lives, offering every person who enters these doors the gift of knowing and being known. I want to know you; I want you to know me.

CONNECTIONS SERMON SERIES: Humility—to be served and to serve (4)

Connections that Build Community

We will be a church that...

- cares deeply
- celebrates vibrantly
- connects intimately
- commits sacrificially
- communicates honestly

Five Principles

- Acceptance
- Affirmation
- Authenticity
- Humility
- Accountability

Book: “Humility and How I Achieved It”

I would love to use another word—sounds so harsh. I am to humble myself. Humiliate myself. Lower myself. We want another word.

Just like we want another word than slave—so we choose servant. But slave is really more accurate. We are slaves...to God, to Christ, to one another. We are indentured, we are committed, and we are self-giving. The needs of the master are supreme.

Service is at the heart of Christianity. Service is at the heart of Christian leadership. A Christian leader who will not serve is not fit to lead. Christian leadership comes when one is the servant of all, Luke 22:22-26.

Jesus is our example, Mark 10:45; Mt. 20:28.

We hear the words, but we fall prey to cultural or secular wisdom rather than biblical wisdom from God.

We want to be noticed. Serving is so nothing, serving so often goes unnoticed. On the opposite hand, not serving others stands out like a sore thumb.

Some have ruined their influence because they are too good to serve. “You won’t see him lift a finger when it involves anything but teaching. Remember when we needed help with those chairs; he just stood there sipping his Coke. Maybe it was below him. Maybe he just doesn’t do chairs.”

What good is a leader who just doesn’t do chairs?

What good is a Christian who just doesn’t do--period?

In a world more focused on rights than responsibilities, the church/Christian that commits sacrificially, to God and to others, is outstanding. We do not have the option of selecting only those serving options we enjoy. Illus: Herbert Davidson. You may be able to convince some with your processes of selective hearing, but selective service is not an option.

Consider our example in service, 1 Pet. 2:21-24; Jesus would do chairs. Actually, Jesus did feet. We are not very good at doing feet. Jesus put on the towel, grabbed the basin, and did feet. John 13:1, he showed the full extent of his love.

This is the foundation of what we are striving to be as church.

- o We love enough to extend care—we care deeply.
- o We love God and worship him, and we affirm one another. We celebrate joyfully.
- o We love enough to disclose self and to be authentic. We connect intimately.
- o And, the full extent of our love is shown in our humble service, sacrificial commitment. Humility that is self-sacrificing.

John 13:1 is ultimately a reference to the cross, but it includes his humble service, his supreme love.

This kind of service is not valued by our world—and to be honest, we do not see it in the mirror as often as we would like. But when a leader models servanthood, group members often follow suit.

Here is what is even harder for lots of Christians: being served. We count visits. We must learn the art of receiving. Acts 20:35. It is not easy to receive. People want to do for you. Illustration: Ed Tarrant, learn to receive, but don’t expect it as a given. Why is it so hard to be served? Because we are saying that we too are needy, we too are dependent, we too are imperfect. Our pride denies it.

Peter at first refused to let Jesus wash his feet. We put on humility like a garment, Col. 3:12. A good place to serve is to those who cannot return the favor. Call in the poor and needy from the byways. Poor, orphans, widows, strangers. POWS. These are POWS held captive by life’s tragedies and trials. Giving to them is nothing like what we normally experience or expect. It is not giving and receiving, it is all giving.

We are not good at this. Illus: I hope they’ll place membership. But if there is someone with a bunch of problems, we are not so enthusiastic. This kind of sacrificially service requires that we discover needs and then serve and love, even when someone else can’t give back.

We want to hear the words—thank you for serving. But that is not for this life. It is for another time. Well done. James says it is the essence of pure religion: 1:27.

Authentic relationships develop when we move toward loving, and celebrating, and knowing, and serving. When we learn to accept one another (Rom. 15:7), affirm one another, be authentic, and humbly serve. These are life-changing words. I will serve—no strings attached.

This sets the stage for one more thing—truth telling, accountability. This is our lesson for another time, but as we close, let me observe that we tend start at the last step and wonder why it doesn't work.

In caring and celebrating and connections and commitments, we turn our souls toward one another. We cannot not. We care, affirm, find authenticity, and find help. And when the uncomfortable matters come—accountability, nurturing, and admonitions, we cannot turn away. We are hooked. We are a part of the tapestry of God in this place.

CONNECTIONS SERMON SERIES: Accountability—to be nurtured and to nurture (5)

Connections that Build Community. We will be a church that....

- cares deeply*
- celebrates vibrantly*
- connects intimately*
- commits sacrificially*
- communicates honestly*

Five Principles

- Acceptance
- Affirmation
- Authenticity
- Humility
- Accountability

Introduction

Being a Christian is not always comfortable. Religion: comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable. The deeper we go, the harder it becomes. Caring and celebrating come easy. Connecting, committing, and communicating are harder.

Authentic relationships develop when we move toward loving, and celebrating, and knowing, and serving. When we learn to accept one another (Rom. 15:7), affirm one another, be authentic, and humbly serve. These are life-changing words. I will serve—no strings attached.

This sets the stage for today's thoughts—truth telling, accountability. We tend start here; we start at the end and wonder why it doesn't work. We haven't bothered to care, we haven't learned to celebrate, we are barely connected, hardly committed and certainly not committed sacrificially—but we expect people to hear our words.

There is no bridge across which the gospel can travel—the process we use is more like hurling hand grenades. Maybe if one explodes close enough to someone, it will get their attention. In our world today, the gospel travels across the bridges of relationship.

Illustration: Jerry Smith. New Christian moves to new community, rural, closed. He became Christian because of relationships, but there are none to sustain him now. What is occurring must be understood in the context of

our changing society, culture, communities, and world. Formerly, there was time to learn, to grow, to develop. In a mobile society, the relationships that made the initial contact possible are quickly broken and not replaced.

That is why we start with caring, celebrating, connecting, commitment, and then communication. That is why we do the same with every person who comes among us. I could have used the word teaching, preaching, telling, evangelizing—but it is nurturing. It is disciple-making. It is more than talking—it is communication, but we are using that word in its breadth, deep, intimate, communication. Soul-talk. Soul-mates.

In caring and celebrating and connections and commitments, we turn our souls toward one another. We care, affirm, find authenticity, and find help. And when the uncomfortable matters come—accountability, nurturing, and admonitions, we cannot turn away. We are hooked. We are a part of the wonderful tapestry of God in this place.

Truth-telling

Illus: But it's true!

Most of us would rather have a root canal than enter the potential chaos of admonishing. It is not easy; it is always hard. Phil. 4:2.

We have our version of truth that we want to hear and share. We don't want to hear "new" truth nor uncomfortable truth.

Examples: lost people matter to God; or a mission statement like the following: turning irreligious people into full devoted followers of Jesus.

Col. 1:28-29; 3:15-16.

When we fear conflict, we avoid truth-telling. What message have you spoken in your mind but never said aloud to a loved one. We worry about hurt and anger. We wonder if we have the right to tough talk. We wonder if it is more Christ-like to avoid conflict and disagreement. We've had all of the turmoil and toughness we can take.

So we live in an unspoken fog/cloud. Henry Cloud, book, Changes that Heal:

He writes about the unspoken rules we use to guide our lives.

- Thou shalt not let anyone get emotionally close to you. Keep your distance.
- Thou shalt not tell the truth about how you are feeling. If you are hurt, keep it a secret.
- Thou shalt always like if it will keep the peace.
- Thou shalt not talk about any family matter outside the home, or any hurt that you sustain here.
Breaking loyalty is an abomination.
- Tender feelings are an abomination.

I, as well as Dr. Cloud, will tell you that withholding truth robs people of opportunities for spiritual growth.

Truth and truth-telling, honesty and candor are the foundation of authentic relationship. We will be honest with one another. Truly trusting one another means speaking and hearing the truth together.

Without the ability to grow by hearing the truth, our spiritual life/church life is shrouded in pretense, shaped by false assumptions, and filled with unmet expectations. Emotions retreat into the background or go into hiding, pain is medicated but never relieved, and the relationships we long for are just names on a long list of acquaintances.

Authentic relationships develop when we genuinely love (accepting, caring), when we affirm and celebrate. When we authentically connect, when we humbly commit, accountability and communication occur, and we feel the warmth of Christian community spreading throughout the church. Ministry occurs, lives are touched in profound ways (not just superficially), and the church enjoys the favor of all the people (Acts 2:47). A section of Acts 2 that we have largely ignored, by the way.

This is truth-telling.

When Truth Meets Life

We are inundated with truth in the US. 400 English translations. Books, study Bibles, websites, tapes, seminars. Yet the culture, even the Christian subculture, remains biblically illiterate. "To know and not to do is not to know."

And, we have an application crisis. President James Monroe, the question to be raised in education is not what has the student learned, but what has the student become. What are we becoming? We become because we are held accountable. The flip side of communicating is accountability. Preaching is not good unless we do what is preached. Rather see a sermon...

This requires that we balance life and truth. We focus on truth, we focus on life, but we expect transformation. Where lives are changed. Truth may be learned without life change: such is a travesty.

<u>Truth-focus</u>	<u>Life-focus</u>	<u>Change-focus</u>
Know answers to questions	Know answer to problems	Know truth about God and me
Focus on info--meaning	Focus on introspection—feeling	Focus on becoming
Focus: be right	Focus: be real	Focus: be honest w/ God/others
Bld community: Agreement	Acceptance	Authenticity
Goal = well-informed	Well-understood "self"	Well-ordered heart

Common Activities or Holy Moments

Do we inadvertently usher the HS out the door rather than inviting him to stay? Can we get beyond meetings as usual, Sundays as usual, expectation, hope, desire, magnetic?

All things are possible—holy moments, spiritual transformation, genuine community.

Here's the challenge: is your Bible class 'so-so' or 'so-what'?

Is your time here your story or God's story?

Are we talking to God or listening to God?

Are we satisfying ourselves or serving others?

We are in a race, Heb. 12:1-2.

We have to decide, friends, whether we will have common meetings or holy moments. We are in a race to connect people to God, we are on a treasure hunt desiring to share the treasure with all we meet. We must lead people into encounters with God's spirit and word.

And we must run persistently against all that would destroy community—divisiveness, fear, pride, self-interest.

We will build community where truth meets life to produce transformation.

This is a race against time. How long will we have meetings instead of experiencing moments? How long before we all see the goal: spiritual growth to love God and love one another.

Mexico City Olympics, 1968. Remember Mark Spitz. But there is another, equally or more remarkable story.

John Stephen Akwari, Tanzania, entered far end of stadium, pain in every step, leg bloody and bandaged.

Winner of Olympic marathon declared over an hour earlier, stadium almost empty. Crossed finish line, small crowd was appreciative. Reporter asked him, why not retire from race with no chance of winning. "My country did not send me to Mexico City to start the race, they sent me to finish."

Too many Christian put on the uniform, go through the warm-ups, but never finish. Long trek in same direction. Building a church is like running a marathon.

A few years ago, in Tour de France, one of the leaders quit: "Rigor of the race destroyed the joy of competing." Rigorous, yes, but joyous. For the joy set before him.