

“Why Community?”

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Acts 2:41-47

We live in a time that has people more connected than ever. Geographically, we have super fast planes and highways with reliable cars that can get us anywhere in the world that we desire very quickly.

Technologically, we have cell phones, tablets, computers, and watches that are connected to the interweb that allow us to communicate by voice and often video with anyone anywhere in the world any time we want.

During my 25-year college reunion last year, I was connected with friends of mine with whom I lived in a house on campus. There were seven of us connected by Facebook video chat from Japan, Taiwan, New Jersey and Michigan for a couple of hours. It was great!

We are also connected to unlimited facts and information. Qwynn just got a Google Home Mini. Do any of you have one of those? For \$25 you can have this little speaker box sitting in your home that you speak to asking questions or giving commands.

In addition to doing things like controlling the air conditioning in your house, and playing music, it will connect you through a simple verbal command to a flood of information on the interweb. You have access not only to weather, sports scores, and recipes, but translation of words and phrases in other languages, answers to a huge array of questions, and even a joke when you are bored.

Many of you have been using Siri on your iPhone or iPad to do similar things for several years.

We are more connected to anything and anybody we desire more immediately than ever before.

However, with all these connections we are strangely more lonely and disconnected from one another.

A 2018 report from Cigna, the global health services company, revealed that about half of the American population feels lonely. This is consistent among different generations including younger generations whose loneliness is progressively increasing. They reported that Generation Z (18-22 year olds, who are perhaps the most technologically fluent) are actually the loneliest generation.

Interestingly they did not find a correlation between those who regularly use social media and those who are lonely. Technology certainly is wonderful, but it doesn't bring people together in the most meaningful and important kinds of ways.

This study also found one in four rarely feel that other people understand them.

Two in five say their relationships are not meaningful and they feel isolated from others.

One in five feels as though they don't have anyone they can talk to and rarely feel close to people.

What is the solution to loneliness? The same research study offered a few answers. They found that people who have regular meaningful in-person interactions with others are not as lonely.

They also found that getting a good balance between sleep, social interaction, exercise, and "me time" helps to shoo away the loneliness bug.

Does the Church have an answer for loneliness? Among its many other valuable traits, yes it does. It's called the power of community!

I want to read for you part of a story in a book called Acts about the very beginning of the Church, right after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Just prior to the section I am going to read, God powerfully came onto a group of Jesus' followers in the form of a rush of wind or what was sometimes referred to as a "breath of God" that they called the Holy Spirit. A bunch of them started speaking languages that they didn't know before. It was crazy, exciting, and confusing.

This experience empowered and inspired that group of people to begin building what we now call the Church.

When I say "build the Church" I'm not talking about buildings, cathedrals, and temples of worship. The Church is not a building but has always been the group of people who come together with the common intention to follow Jesus' example as a community.

After this strange experience with the Holy Spirit, a leader among the group named Peter got up to talk with everyone about what had happened. He talked about their ancient holy writings to explain how what they experienced was

part of God's plan from the very beginning.

Peter referred to a prophet from hundreds of years prior named Joel and talked about King David, the greatest of their kings of old. He pieced together history to show how everything from Jewish ancient times was pointing toward Jesus fulfilling God's plan to bring goodness to all humanity.

As he spoke, thousands of people were convicted and said that they also wanted to follow in the way of Jesus.

It was a huge celebration! It was a crazy and amazing day! This is where we pick up the story.

READ ACTS 2:41-47

When the people declared their intent to follow in the way of Jesus, that meant that the former way they had lived would need to change. They were taking on new patterns, new rituals, and even more importantly they were creating new relationships with new people and living as a new family around the life and teaching of a man named Jesus.

This meant that they had to sort out how to be together as a new family. They needed to create for themselves a brand new

community with brand new expectations of themselves and each other.

They needed a new pattern for life together, and this story lists the driving values that formed their new community.

It says they committed themselves to the teaching of community leaders who learned directly from Jesus.

They also committed themselves to "fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer."

Prayer times together throughout the day was very central for them.

Breaking bread together referred to the common meals that they ate each day. They lived and ate together as a big extended family.

This also referred to re-enacting the Last Supper that Jesus had with his disciples. It was important for them to continually recall as a community that their very sustenance for life came from God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

I want to give a bit more time to the other word mentioned here. It says that they were devoted to "fellowship" together.

“Fellowship” has become a churchy word, except when you are talking about a fellowship program where a person is given a short-term of leadership or professional development opportunity in an organization.

You don’t hear people outside the church talking about getting together to fellowship with their friends. Inside the church though fellowship refers to social get togethers or parties where people talk with one another, and most importantly eat together.

There is something about followers of Jesus getting together to eat!

When this building was built in 1928, the room we are in now underneath the Sanctuary (which, by the way originally and until the 1960s was called the Auditorium) — this room here was called the Banquet Hall, and later renamed the Dining Hall and then the Fellowship Hall. All of those terms imply that people gather here to eat.

But fellowship is much more than eating. Fellowship is a term that gets at the heart of what God intended for people in community. It is about actively being part of one another in this journey of life — having a common life together centered in Jesus.

Let’s flesh this out a bit.

Community means being supportive over the long haul for others when they are let go from their job, or go through a divorce, or receive a cancer diagnosis.

It means being mutually encouraging and building each other up, like when someone is being demeaned by a boss or co-worker, or struggling with a spouse who has Alzheimers.

Author John Joseph Powell described the power of this kind of presence with one another. He wrote...

“It is an absolute human certainty that no one can know his own beauty or perceive a sense of his own worth until it has been reflected back to him in the mirror of another loving, caring human being.”

Being a community also means challenging one another to be their best.

It means giving each other good examples to follow.

It means sharing wisdom and experience freely.

It also means giving the gift of your presence when there are no words.

One of my favorite authors is a man named Parker Palmer. Parker has faced depression for a good chunk of his life. During some of his darker days many of his friends wanted to come over to give him advice or cheer him up. All of their efforts were not so helpful and often left him feeling worse.

This was true of all but one friend who came over to visit him almost every day for months. This friend would sit with Parker and rub his feet. He scarcely said a word, but he was fully present.

This friend of Parker's was living out what it means to have true fellowship — to truly be invested as community, to be part of one another.

Very often the biggest gift we offer to others in community is our undivided attention, our presence.

Our presence communicates that others are valued and matter.

Our presence is a vehicle for healing and restoration.

Our presence is the strongest action that communicates love. And where there is love, there is no fear. With love all things are possible!

Our presence is the anchor of community.

As people who are committed to following Jesus, we need to physically be with one another to gain the benefits of presence. There can be a sense of community through technology, but there is no substitute for being physically present with another.

This is why the people of the early church lived together, met together daily in their homes and sanctuaries. Each day they ate together, shared together, laughed together, and through their presence, they were community together.

Of course they had conflict. Of course there were fights. But, where love and genuine presence are the foundation of community, there are strong bonds of love that are not easily broken.

Do you think that sharing this kind of healing and nurturing presence might be attractive for people today who are lonely and looking for meaningful connections?