

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

October 9, 2022

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Sermon manuscript

Following Jesus Into Community

(Selected passages from Matthew's Gospel; the life of Jesus)

Introduction: A hunger to know, to be known...

I enjoy eating breakfast at the taqueria in our neighborhood. The coffee is nothing to write home about. The tacos are good, but generic.

Bu my taqueria has one thing going for it that others don't. The waitresses recognize me and greet me when I walk in. I've been there often enough that they know me - and it's good to be known.

To be honest, I'm rarely known.

In part because I don't shop much, I am never greeted by name by salespeople in stores. I have never banked at a place where I have been known.

As an aside, some people are simply more recognizable.

When our son, Zach, was still living at home and during his high school days, he would walk into the lobby of the local bank we used and the tellers would shout out, "Hey, Zach!" (I was so jealous.)

Like I say, some people stand out more than others and are more likely to be recognized than others of us.

But buried deep within us all is a longing to be seen, to know and to be known, to love and to be loved, to connect and to find community.

But we find ourselves in a difficult moment because while there is a desperate need for community, there is also a dearth of it.

As we are all aware, the pandemic did great damage to the cause of community.

There is no doubt that Covid killed lots of people. There is also no question but that the two years of the pandemic shut down a lot of the priceless interconnectedness that holds a society together. That has been a great loss.

And then there are screens that also work against forging and maintaining community.

Whether in the form of a phone, laptop, or a big screen TV, we have learned to retreat to screens to communicate and to relate, and also to escape. As important as our screens are, screens are barriers.

- We can talk to each other through the phone and even see each other. But it's always a step away from *presence*.
- We enter the stories of people in shows we enjoy, but that's observation, not participation.
- The Internet provides connection that is virtual, as opposed to actual. It doesn't give us the sense of community we long for.

Our longings in 2022 are what they have always been: To know each other's stories and for them to know ours. Not through a screen. Not with a click. Face-to-face, in person, up close and personal.

Into this world filled with people who long for connection, God has placed the church, the Body of Christ.

We're surrounded by high-tech, low-touch interaction. The church is uniquely equipped by God to provide the life-changing, genuine relational depth that we are hungry for.

This morning, we're going to explore the theme of biblical community, the kind of community in which we know and are known, love and are loved.¹

What I'm going to do for the next few minutes won't be heavy-duty, in-depth, exegetical Bible study. We often do that on Sundays, but that's not what we're going to do today.

Instead, I'm going to start us off by simply reading passages from Matthew's Gospel, where the meaning of the Lord's comments about how we are to feed community is refreshingly plain.

The details of Jesus' teaching and of His life paint compelling pictures of the crucial role community plays for those who would grow as Jesus' disciples.

We find the first of three identifying marks of community building in the Sermon on the Mount.

Listen as the Lord tells us how important it is that we each take initiative to pursue each other in love.

Community: Marks Of Christ-Following Relating

Initiative-Taking Love (Matthew 5:21-24)

When you are tempted to spew anger at someone (vv. 21-22)

[Mathew 5:21] "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT MURDER,' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be answerable to the court.' [22] But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be answerable to the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be

¹ Author and psychologist Larry Crabb threw down the gauntlet to churches when he wrote a forward to Randy Frazee's book, The Connecting Church: *"The future of the church depends on whether it develops true community. We can get by for a while on size, skilled communication, and programs. But unless we sense that we belong to each other, with masks off, the vibrant church of today will become the powerless church of tomorrow."*

answerable to the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell."

It is clear that Jesus is raising the bar when it comes to how we who follow Him are to treat each other. It's several notches above the standard that was required under the Old Covenant of Moses.

There, the simple negative, ***"You shall not murder"*** was enough. Here, Jesus says that the absence of murder or murderous intent is not enough.

He extends the requirement to *attitudes* you might have against a brother or a sister for a wrong you have suffered, and to *words* ("***Raca***" = fool) you fling at someone who has offended you.

We aren't to do that with each other. We take the first step to let go of our own anger. We don't let our anger fester. We release it.

Jesus requires that we not deal with each other in anger, don't do each other harm, don't call each other names.

Then, Jesus imagines the reverse situation, where you have been the offender, and a brother or a sister has something against you.

In that case, you are to take the initiative to restore relationship with the one who is angry with you.

When someone is angry with you (vv. 23-24)

[23] "Therefore, if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you, [24] leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present you offering."

You realize what a dangerous thing it is to remain angry with someone (vv. 21-22) and you can clearly see that someone is angry with you.

In that case, you are to be so concerned for that angry person's welfare that you take the initiative to try and reconcile with them to protect them.

You don't have the right to let them stew in their anger toward you. You approach them and seek to make things right.

So, in either case - whether we are *offended* OR we are the *offender* - Jesus gives us the responsibility to take the first step toward the other person in reconciliation and love.

This is a crucial part of living in Christian community.

Later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke about another crucial element of community building.

Introspective Non-Judgmentalism (Matthew 7:1-5)

[1] "Do not judge, so that you will not be judged. [2] For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. [3] Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? [4] Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and look, the log is in your own eye? [5] You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye!"

I'm going to apply these words of Jesus to the reality that we who follow Him will have different ways of looking at lots of things.

We have different perspectives on issues as wide-ranging as food, dress, mode of baptism, movies, music style in worship services, Bible translation preference, ministry philosophy, parenting, and more.²

² Please note: These differences will not extend to the rejection of clear, biblical commands. The Bible is obviously "black and white" about some issues of truth and morality. My point here is to say that there are also large areas of grey.

In recent years, we have seen this in lots of ways, including at least the issues of how we have chosen to deal with the covid risk, how we view certain political issues, and what we think of societal trends.

When we become aware of these differences between us, we may be tempted to think, "*What is he thinking?*"

Those are words of judgment. Jesus tells us, "*Don't go there.*"

Instead of jumping into judgment, I am to first look to myself and my own opinions and behavior. I am to make sure that the convictions I hold to and my own actions align with what the Bible clearly says.

If I find, on reflection, that I'm out of alignment, I have to be willing to change. I will need to examine Scripture to see if there are other legitimate ways to land on this or that issue.

But then, and only then - after I have looked to myself! - will I be able to talk with my brother or my sister about their own life choices in love.

We've got to take the initiative to love each other. We've got to learn to not judge each other.

There is one other passage in Matthew that speaks to the issue of how we are to live "in community."

Redemptive Accountability (Matthew 18:15-17)

[15] "Now if your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have gained your brother. [16] But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that ON THE TESTIMONY OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY MATTER MAY BE CONFIRMED.

[17] And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, he is to be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

We are correct to associate this passage with the theme of *church discipline*.

And what we mean by this term is that when a disciple of Jesus speaks or acts in ways that are clearly prohibited by the Bible, that person's fellow disciples have a responsibility to engage him or her for the purpose of restoring them to a God-honoring life.

The purpose of this engagement is not to "lord it over" or to "boss around" fellow Christ-followers. The idea is not to be spiritual policemen. The point of the engagement is redemptive love.

We believe that the best life a Christian can possibly lead is one within the guidelines set out by Scripture. Therefore, the most loving we can do is to seek to turn back someone who has strayed outside the (biblical) lines.

Whether the misbehavior at issue has to do with sexual sin, doctrinal error, ethics, gossip, or substance abuse, we owe it to each other to go to each other - in love - and to talk.

Stage One of this discipline will usually take the form of a serious conversation. We'll be kind and we'll be honest about wrong living or wrong thinking. And, as Jesus says, if, after this conversation, our brother repents, we have "won" him.

If, however, he does not repent, the process moves on to Stage Two, an expansion to a wider group of people who know the situation and are willing to have a "frank and earnest" talk. Again, if at this stage, the brother turns back to the Lord, great. Life reverts back to normal.

But if there is still no repentance, the discipline process moves to Stage Three. The whole congregation is informed of what is going on.

And if this doesn't prompt repentance, the result is removal of the rebellious believer from the church - yet even this is for the purpose of eventually winning back the wayward disciple. (And by the way, just because this passage can be read quickly doesn't mean that the process must work out quickly. Moving through these various stages can easily take weeks or months.)

All of this - initiative-taking love, introspective non-judgmentalism, redemptive accountability - is *some* of what we mean when we talk about building *community*.

It is relationship that goes beyond pleasantries, it involves loving honesty, it involves risk.

In these passages from Matthew - and in other passages from Mark, Luke, and John - Jesus spoke like an authority on community. Like He knew what He was talking about. And of course He did.

For one thing, He was God. He had spent eternity past in rich community with the Father and the Spirit. He had experienced the only perfect relationship there has ever been.

For another thing, Jesus knew Scripture, which through story (narrative history) and precept (Proverbs; Ecclesiastes, prophets), points the way to community.

And Jesus knew community because of the life He led in Palestine.³

Community: The Mark Of Christ-Following Living

Jesus' Life - A Model for Community

Timestamp of Jesus' life

Jesus was raised in the northern part of Palestine, a portion of real estate known as Galilee, because it was close to the Sea of Galilee.

He was born during the reign of the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus. Closer to home, Jesus' earthly life began at about the same time that the life of Herod the Great, the King of Israel, came to an end.

So, let's consider Herod.

The life and times of Herod the Great

³ Much of the following material is taken from Eugene Peterson's lectures, "Follow the Leader," given at Regent College, British Columbia, Canada, 2002.

This Herod was the most conspicuous ruler over Israel of Jesus' time. He was an exceptionally impressive ruler. His reign over a diverse population of Jews, Romans, and Greeks lasted thirty-four years.

Over and over again, he successfully manipulated Rome to get what he wanted. He had tremendous political skill.

He built seven palaces strategically located throughout the land of Palestine. Each of them was bigger than anything built by the Caesars in Rome.

He oversaw the construction of amphitheaters, shrines, forums, military fortifications, and, of course, the rebuild of the temple in Jerusalem.

Yes, he led the Jewish people. But Herod was an aggressive proponent of the best-known aspects of Greek and Roman culture.

Herod lived large.⁴ He successfully established his reign and ruled as sovereign over his kingdom. In the years right before Jesus, no one did this "kingdom thing" better than Herod.

The life and times of Jesus

And Jesus, who also intended to bring about a kingdom, ignored Herod's every accomplishment. He spent His entire life walking through villages and major cities shaped by Herod's architecture, politics, energy, and influence.

He never made even a passing comment about any of it.

Far from imitating Herod's leadership or lifestyle, Jesus chose a way of living that was as different from Herod's as night and day.

The places Jesus DID and DID NOT go

⁴ And badly. He was ruthless and progressively paranoid as he grew older. Due to the number of family members Herod had murdered, Augustus once remarked that he would rather be Herod's pig than his son.

As we know, the circumstances of Jesus' birth were unusual starting points for a future king.

He was born a few miles away from the capitol city of Jerusalem in the village of Bethlehem in a place where there was an animal's feeding trough / manger.⁵

At an early age, His parents took Him north to Galilee to raise Him in the city of Nazareth. He spent His childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood in Nazareth, which was just a small city on the plains.

Shortly after He began His three-year public ministry, though, Jesus moved from Nazareth, but not to a bigger town. He chose as His ministry base of operations the small town of Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee.

He spent most of His time in Capernaum, and in two other villages, Chorazin and Bethsaida.

It was in these three towns that Jesus spent most of His time between His baptism and crucifixion. (Bible students refer to these three towns as "the evangelical triangle.")

These were small villages, of no economic or political value. But they weren't the only population centers Jesus could have chosen for His home base.

Five miles northwest of Nazareth was the city of Sepphoris, a strongly fortified city. It was large and influential, a cultural and political center of activity for the region.

Then there was Tiberias, a town located on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, less than ten miles away from Capernaum.

Tiberias (which was named after the Emperor who was ruling at the time of Jesus' ministry) was a newly built city.

⁵ We usually, therefore, assume that He was born in a stable.

Tiberias enjoyed great natural beauty and was a favorite play spot for the rich and famous, boasting hot springs that made for a natural spa.

Sepphoris and Tiberias were very important cities, politically, economically, socially, and culturally. Neither one of them are even mentioned in the Gospels. Evidently, Jesus spent no significant amount of time there.

Again, He spent most of His time in Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Chorazin. What were these towns like?

The character of the places in which Jesus spent time

They were small, intimate places where everyone knew each other. Everything in the village took place in the context of personal relationship.

These were villages comprised of a few hundred people, at most. Meals, weddings, funerals, celebrations, marketing, business were all done in community. Nothing was impersonal.

In the villages of Capernaum and Chorazin and Bethsaida, there were two prominent architectural features.

First, houses were joined together.

The housing arrangement was known as “the insula” from which we get our words *insular* and *insulated*. This adjoining house format provided a protective community.⁶ They would be very much like our apartments, townhomes, or duplexes.

And these small villages each had a central “square” around which all the housing was arranged. In such an arrangement, shared life was unavoidable.

Second, at the center of the village was the most prominent building of all, the synagogue. Worship of God was at the center of the life of these communities.

These smaller towns were not like the larger ones, only smaller.

In the more influential cities, you could see the fingerprints of Herod everywhere. In Sepphoris and Tiberias the buildings were for the purpose of attracting crowds. Amphitheaters. Coliseums. Public baths. Government buildings.

Everything was designed to be un-personal, on purpose. But again, in the world in which Jesus trafficked, the priority was the personal and the God-centered.

I am suggesting that Jesus did not work in the small, intensely personal world of the “evangelical triangle” because He didn’t know any better.

He knew all about Tiberius and Sepphoris. He knew all about Herod’s leadership style.

He **CHOSE** to invest Himself in the relationally interconnected world of Capernaum because He knew that disciples are best formed in intensely relational communities.

I am further suggesting that when Jesus invites us to “follow” He is doing more than challenging us to live for Him or to believe in Him or to be committed to Him.

He is challenging us to **imitate** His lifestyle choice.

To you and me today, He says, “*Follow Me - live the way I lived. Follow Me into a web of personal relationships. Follow Me into the worship of God. Follow Me into a world of community where you can know and be known, love and be loved, serve and be served.*”

The twelve apostles certainly experienced this community with Jesus on the way to being formed into thoroughly committed disciples.

⁶ As families grew, young married couples did not move away to build or occupy a separate house. Established houses were added on to.

The Disciples' Lives - Learning in Community

Remember that when Jesus called the Twelve, He called them to relationship. In his Gospel, Mark puts it this way: ***“And He appointed twelve, so that they would be WITH HIM”*** (Mark 3:14)

And for three years, they were with Him. When He and they were not in the three-village triangle at the north end of the Sea of Galilee, they were traipsing around, together, on the roads of ancient Palestine.

They retreated TOGETHER to the mountainous area of Tyre and Sidon (Matthew 15:22). They went TOGETHER to the southeast of Galilee, the region of Dalmanutha (Matthew 15:39). They went to the city of Caesarea Philippi TOGETHER (Matthew 16:13).

And at nearly every significant ministry juncture, the Twelve were with Him. Here are some of the times Matthew records.

- They were with Him when He healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law in Peter's home. (Matthew 8:14-17)
- The first eleven were with Him when He called a tax-collector named Matthew / Levi, to be the apostolic 12th man.
- Then they all followed Him to Matthew's house for a party with unseemly guests. (Matthew 9:9-13)
- They were with Him when He healed a woman who had been sick for twelve years and then raised a twelve-year-old little girl from the dead. (Matthew 9:18-26)
- They were with Him when He gave sight to two blind beggars just outside Jericho. (Matthew 9:27-31)
- They were with Him when the Pharisees accused Him of violating Sabbath law - and then listened as He turned the tables on them. (Matthew 12:1-8)
- They were with Him when He was relaxing in the home of Simon the leper. And they watched as a woman approached him and anointed Him with costly perfume. (Matthew 26:6-13)
- During the last week of His life, Jesus hardly ever let them out of His sight. They were with Him...

...as He entered Jerusalem, hailed as the King.

...when He threw out the buyers and sellers from the temple.
 ...throughout the last days of confrontation, preparation, and conversation.
 ...right up until the arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane.⁷

They walked, visited, sailed and fished, prayed and worshipped together. Having called His followers, Jesus made it a practice to be WITH His followers.

The training methods of the ancient Jewish scribes mostly revolved around classroom instruction. Jesus offered association. He was the curriculum.

This same Jesus calls us, today, to a life of following Him, too. If what we have seen today tells us anything, it tells us that following Him means that we follow Him, together, with each other.

Today's message has been, to this point, mostly centered on the biographies of Jesus and His disciples. I'm going to conclude with autobiography.

Conclusion: Making room for community

For most of my life as a Jesus-follower, I have been a part of a small group of people with whom I meet regularly.

For the last several years, Kathy and I have been a part of a Care Group that meets on Tuesday evenings. We're involved because we need personal involvement. We need community.

I have found the community to be helpful in at least these three ways. Here's one way.

This past week, Josiah Gerhardt and I went to a Church Health Clinic put on the Texas / Oklahoma District. It was a good and helpful clinic. If you want to know about it, ask me or Josiah.

⁷ Contrary to what one might expect, as the ministry of Christ lengthened into the second and third years, He gave increasingly more time to the disciples, not less. Jesus knew that there was no substitute to spending time with His disciples if He was to train them sufficiently for the time when He was gone.

It was an overnigher, so Josiah was assigned to one room with two other guys, and I was assigned to another three-person room.

Before turning in for the night, my two roomies apologized in advance for being snorers. I thought to myself, *"Oh great. I'll have to endure a night of snoring."*

I said something like, *"No problem, but I don't think I'll be a snoring problem for you."*

The next morning, both of my roommates congratulated me on the depth and masculine tone of my snoring during the night.

Just like discovering that I had contributed my third to a room's snoriness, being a part of a small group has put me in a setting where the group's members have very often held up a mirror for me to see myself for who I am.

Either during the course of a meeting or after, I have been corrected and reprovved, given direction and counsel.

Getting input about my weaknesses and blind spots, my sin, my misunderstandings and miscommunications - along with big doses of affirmations and encouragements! - has been invaluable to me.

Another way in which the group has been helpful has been in its "centering" of my life.

Our group usually takes off one week per month, so we meet 40+ times a year. Not all those meetings are A+ experiences. Sometimes we miss meetings, and sometimes we miss each other in the meetings.

But, if you put a bunch of those types of meetings together where the focus is on care, prayer, and Scripture, food and service, you start to develop what the Bible calls "community." That community has played a big role in my life of centering me on things that count for eternity. It has shaped my life's priorities.

Plus, over the course of our time being involved with this group, I have gained friends.

I have added people to my life whose stories I know and who know my stories. We have supported each other in hard times, pointed each other to Jesus in confusing times, prayed for each other, laughed and cried together.

I'm a big fan of community because Jesus taught it and modeled it, and because I've benefited from it over the course of a lifetime.

If you want to grow in your experience of community here at Northwest, please don't hesitate to be in touch with me. I'll be thrilled to help you find a connecting point here where you can grow in Jesus with others.