

Every Living Things Need Community

Romans 12:2, 9-21
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd Freeman
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Vacation Church School this past week, which concludes with this service of worship, was both meaningful and fun! A big shout out to the moderator of our Christian Education ministry team and VCS director, Betsy Guyer. She coordinated the entire program, using curriculum from Illustrated Ministry, called **Compassion Camp**, and put together a great team of leaders to help provide dinner, lead crafts, lead recreation, and lined up community speakers.

As we just reviewed during the Time With the Children, we focused on **compassion and how it was defined as "I see your hurt, I feel your hurt, I help ease your hurt."** We explored what it means that every living thing needs shelter, food, water, air, and today's focus, **community**. We talked about not only appreciating all those things in our own lives, but also helping others in their needs for housing, food, clean water and air.

I'm glad that the topic of the need for community was the last of the five lessons, thus becoming our focus today as we have gathered together as a *community* of faith. Just over a month ago, in my sermon upon the return from my sabbatical, I mentioned that I read a book by **John O'Donohue** entitled, "**Eternal Echoes, Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong.**" I mentioned how O'Donohue reflects upon the increasing number of people who feel no sense of belonging and community. He writes:

To be human is to belong...The longing within us always draws us towards belonging and again towards new forms of belonging when we have outgrown the old ones... Deep within us, we long to come in from separation and be at home again in the embrace of a larger belonging.

For many of us, **that's where a community of faith comes in by providing for that need of belonging together in community.** The curriculum summarizes the need for community this way.

Nothing in creation is wholly alone. We are designed to live in communities alongside people who love and support us, as well as within communities of other creatures—such as plants and animals—which we respect, love, care for, and rely on for sustenance. Through this lesson, we will understand that kinship means many different members and neighbors are needed for all to thrive and flourish.

An important lesson is that **a community is not just people we like. A human community is a diverse, interconnected, mutually dependent neighborhood that welcomes newcomers.** [At least that's how it is supposed to work.]

All human communities are in relationship with the land community that includes and exceeds us.

Let us not forget, therefore, that we are all living on Native American land.

I really like that they use the word *kinship* in the description of community. It puts the emphasis on relationships. In Genesis 2, we see that God provides animal, plant, and human community to God's creation. There are many biblical references, especially in the Book of Psalms, that describes how **all of creation is one great community – rather than separate beings – constantly interacting with different parts and interdependent on one another**. As stated in the curriculum, “All of creation gives us insight into the nature and love of God, just as each of our voices and experiences as a group provide a rich and diverse portrait of a loving, generous God.” **They then extend that by referring to what is mentioned in scripture as the kingdom of God as the kin-dom of God.**

The coining of the word “**kin-dom**” as an alternative to kingdom is attributed to Ada María Isasi-Díaz, a Cuban-American professor and theologian. She sees the **people of God not as subjects in a royal hierarchy, but as family, as partners**. She describes kin-dom as the “interconnected community, seeing God's movement emerge from la familia, the family God makes.”

When we think of community with God and all of creation, we can go a step further from kinship, into an understanding of “kin-dom.” That's why we have replaced the word kingdom in the Lord's Prayer with kin-dom. And this is reflected in what **Martin Luther King Jr.**'s described as **the beloved community**.

Community, then, including this one, must reflect the sense of belonging and inclusion in how we treat one another. And how we treat one another was among the primary teachings found in both the Old and New Testaments. **Our Old Testament reading from Leviticus provides several guidelines.** That includes instructions to farmers at harvest time to leave part of their fields or vineyards for the poor or non-Hebrew people to eat. Other instructions about living together in community sound like they should be part of the Ten Commandments.

“You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another...you shall not defraud your neighbor...you shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind...you shall not render an unjust judgement...you shall not go around as a slanderer among your people...you shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin...you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people” (Lev. 19:11-18).

And this list concludes and summarizes it all this way, “...but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This is how Jesus summarized how to live together in community, as well.

And the apostle **Paul**, in the various letters he sent out to the communities of faith he founded, being a person who liked things done decently and in order, provides additional lists of helpful instructions. **Our Epistle Reading from Romans 12**, provides an excellent example. I have included this as a bulletin insert, which you may want to take home and put on your refrigerator.

These verses serve almost as a **“To Do” list in how to live together as an authentic beloved community**. These verses serve as crucial traits, attitudes, and actions that we are to exhibit as Christians, as followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus. What it provides is **a window into what life in Christ looks like in community, what the true kin-dom of God is like when lived out on a daily basis**. Therefore, we can use it as a kind of

measuring stick to see how well we are doing, as individuals and as the College Hill community of faith.

As we look at this list, two major themes emerge: first, the ways we are to manifest and embody genuine love (vv. 10-13), and second, the obligations we have towards others, including strangers and enemies (vv. 14-20). The list begins with the directive, "**Let your love be genuine**" (v. 9). When you think about it, that hints that love can somehow be expressed in ways that are ungentle, which of course isn't really love at all, but something masquerading as love. **In the Greek, the word for "genuine" literally means without hypocrisy. Therefore, genuine love means love without pretense, without play-acting, without ulterior motives.**

Not surprisingly, love stands at the very top of the list. It provides, in fact, the context for Paul's other exhortations, which flesh-out an understanding of what love entails. **So, what does love look like in community?** One of the ways mentioned is with mutual affection. The word affection, in this context, means **true and honest caring for the well-being of one another**. It's about **the ability to empathize** with the condition in which others find themselves, thus forming the very basis for pastoral and congregational care. This is a responsibility of everyone within the community. Paul expresses this as the ability to rejoice with others who are rejoicing, and weep with those who weep. We are also instructed to outdo one another in showing honor. **How do you show honor and respect to those with whom you interact on a daily basis, and yes, that includes family members?**

Next, Paul tells us: "Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer" (vv. 11-12). A life of faith, then, is marked by energy, dedication, hopefulness, patience, and perseverance in spiritual disciplines. That certainly includes prayer and however else that works for you. There's an entire sermon, of course, in each and every one of these instructions. And there are several other exhortations in this 'to do' list of living together in community: extending hospitality to strangers, bless those who curse you, associate with the lowly, be humble, and overcome evil with good. Again, all these are an outgrowth of living in genuine love for one another.

Concerning the imperative to **extend hospitality to strangers**, I will close with a short reflection from renowned author on Christian spirituality, **Henri Nouwen**. In a discussion of the movement "From Hostility to Hospitality," Nouwen writes the following in his 1975 classic book, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*. I commend it to your reading!

Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. . .

Hospitality creates a friendly and safe space where **strangers can enter and discover themselves** as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations.

As a community of faith, then, let us remember and live out ways to fulfill the need of every living thing for community.

Amen.