

Aspire (Week 2) - Community  
**Yesterday's Sermon Summary**



1. Yesterday's sermon changed form and content over the past week in light of the newest round of political violence in our country. We began yesterday with a ream of statistics on the various personal/social crises that face our nation, such as the rise of suicide rates, mental health and addiction struggles, hopelessness, etc. All of these find a common root in the loneliness epidemic facing adult Americans. David Brooks in his book *How to Know of Person* connects the dots this way: "Sadness, lack of recognition, and loneliness turn into bitterness. Loneliness thus leads to meanness. As the saying goes, pain that is not transformed gets transmitted."
2. This sharp rise in social isolation and friendlessness is related to a phenomenon that sociologists call "The Big Sort." Over the last three decades, most Americans have "sorted" themselves into tribes of people just like themselves; this can be according to socioeconomic class, level of education, race, locale (suburban vs. urban vs. rural), and political. Many churches are no different. Not only are we alone, but we are alone only with people like ourselves.
3. This chronic relational isolation and sorting has led to a massive downturn in trust: two generations ago, 60% of American adults agreed that "most people are trustworthy," but now it's less than 30% (and for adults under the age of 30, it's 20%). Again, let's hear from David Brooks in his most recent book: "The social breakdown manifests as a crisis of distrust...Distrust sows distrust. It creates a feeling that the only person you can count on is yourself. Distrustful people assume that others are out to get them, they exaggerate threats, they fall for conspiracy theories that explain the danger they feel. They soon think – 'We, the children of light, are facing off against them, the children of darkness. I am on the barricades with the other members of my tribe.'"
4. In light of all that's been said above (and even more in the sermon), read our church's 2nd core value:  
***"Core Value #2 - Community – 'We are Family'***  
We are a community following Jesus together, so that we may know, love and honor Him. Together we learn and grow, supporting and sustaining each other through life's joys and challenges.  
  
We recognize our spiritual duty to take responsibility for every aspect of our church community, which includes our people, our facilities, church grounds, and of all God's gifts in our own lives, such as our time, talents, and resources.  
  
We endeavor to be a "big tent" church where all are appreciated and all can grow. This includes building and protecting a diverse community in which we don't always agree but are committed to respecting and learning from one another. We find our unity in Christ, His teachings, and the gracious, open-minded principles of the Presbyterian Church of the USA (PCUSA), one of which is that "God alone is the Lord of the conscience."
5. Though we often mistakenly think of Christian "community" and "mission/outreach/witness" as two separate endeavors, historically that's never been the case. In fact, one of the key contributing factors to the rapid growth of the earliest church was the countercultural character and quality of their community. Here's how N. T. scholar Michael Green describes that: "The first Christians made the grace of God credible through their little

society of love and mutual care which astonished the pagans and was recognized as something entirely new. It lent persuasiveness to the Christian claim that the New Age of God had dawned in Christ...What attracted ordinary Greco-Roman people to Christianity? Undoubtedly the love of Christians had a lot to do with it, so did the moral qualities they displayed, the warmth of their fellowship, their manifest enthusiasm, and the universal applicability of their message."

6. Thus, churches in America today have a choice to make: we can either offer distinctive Christian community as an antidote to the loneliness, sorting, and distrust that is poisoning America, or sadly we can be an accelerant of those afflictions.

7. German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his small book *Life Together* does a wonderful job of sketching out the distinctives of Christian community: "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ...Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this: we belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ...Without Christ we should not know God. Without Christ, we also could not know our brothers and sisters, nor could we come to them. The way is blocked by our own ego...I am a brother or sister to another person through what Jesus Christ did for me and to me; the other person has become a brother or sister to me through what Jesus Christ did for them. Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us...The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more everything else between us will recede...When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful with our brothers and sisters. When we received forgiveness instead of judgment, we too were made ready to forgive our brothers and sisters. What God did to us, we then owed to others. The more we received, the more we were able to give, and the more meager our brotherly love, the less were we living by God's mercy and love."

8. Bonhoeffer, agreeing with the N. T. letters, points out that church community is held together - and only held together - because of Christ. The Jesus we hold in common is greater than any other difference that would threaten to separate us elsewhere; the Jesus who holds us together is stronger than any of the potential divisiveness in any of those differences (see [Galatians 3.28](#), for example). We should feel this in a real way on occasion: we should sense that the wide diversity of people who call KirkWood home would not for any other reason be together in our culture at large.

9. Moreover, Bonhoeffer reiterates that we can only give others what we ourselves have received from God, we can only do for and to others what has been done for us. The New Testament paints the same picture: we love because we are first loved, we give mercy because God's shows us mercy, and we forgive readily because God forgives readily. It is only when we consistently connect to God and receive from God that we can then offer one another those attitudes and actions that are prerequisites for genuine, distinctive Christian community. We can trust and be open with each other because we're seeking to treat each other as Christ treats us.

10. Last, consider what writer Jan Johnson tells us about the spiritual practice of community: "Attending a local church does not necessarily mean that you practice community. For community to occur, we must be intentional about it. The spiritual discipline of community is about committing ourselves to people and sticking it out." So we need to treat spiritual community as vital a spiritual habit as prayer, Bible study, reflection, or service. Real community doesn't happen without intentionality.

## Explore Community More This Week

- On Sunday, 9/28, on 11am, we'll have a one-time class in which you can find ways to connect to community here at KW. If you want to work on creating community, this would be an ideal session for you to attend.
- Let's spend the week together praying through our 2nd core value, asking God to help all of us and each of us to become more like what's stated. In short, let's ask God to help us become the community we aspire to be.
- Here are two key New Testament texts about distinctive Christian community, and the behaviors/attitudes that drive it (the first of which we used as a responsive reading to start yesterday's service): [Romans 12.3-21 NRSVUE](#) and [1 Cor 12 NRSVUE](#)
- Do a little reading about Christian community this week: [Real Community - James Bryan Smith](#) and [Availability and Vulnerability - Northumbria Community](#) and [Getting Along in Community - Thérèse of Lisieux](#)
- Want to read a little Bonhoeffer on Christian community?: [Christ in Community - Dietrich Bonhoeffer](#)