

Experiencing God in Community

Theme

God created us to be in community, yet we may not know or even recognize many of the people we see each day. This gathering explores the idea of community and how simple day-to-day interactions with others can bring us a sense of community in surprising ways.

Life Issue
Where do we
experience
community?

Community Building & Opening Question

- Where did you grow up? How is this place similar to or different from where you live now?
- What do you like to do for fun?

Opening Prayer

Lord, you called your followers together in Christian community when you walked the earth. Gather us together today, so that we may grow closer to each other and closer to you. Be present with us, as we are present to one another. Guide us and renew us with your love and grace. Amen.

What does the Bible say?

Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

What do others say?

Surprised by community. What on earth does that mean? How can I be surprised by something like community? Isn't community something that is very difficult to find, something that just takes so much energy to make happen, something that often takes more work than it's worth?

Research shows that people in general are significantly less connected, less involved, less active in groups today than they were 25 years ago. As a society, we belong to fewer organizations, know our neighbors less, and don't hang out with friends as much. It does seem that we don't take the time to build community into our lives. In our competitive, technological society, we

seem to have very little practice in what it takes to build meaningful relationships with others. Despite all the opportunities to connect through social media, many people would say that these interactions are not as rich as they could be person-to-person. The connections that lead to long-lasting, deep relationships do not naturally occur at the rate they used to.

And yet all of us, in one way or another, seek significant and real community, a place to be connected, a place to belong, and a place to call home. We know at a deep level that our own healing, our own wholeness, is bound up with the healing of others. We know that the journey toward wholeness is not only personal but also communal. Community is what each of us needs in order to experience well-being, care, and support. Community is what each of us needs to experience the abundant life Jesus has promised us.

One of the surprising things about community is that it really isn't that difficult to create. It's really more about recognizing the fact that as humans, we are more alike than we are different. It's about taking the time to listen and find the connections that we have with others. It's about realizing that although we are each unique individuals we do have much in common. Our stories are tied to the stories of others. As we take the time to intentionally listen to those stories, community will happen.

If you want to be surprised by community, start by asking people you come in contact with any number of simple questions, listen, and build from there. Questions like, "What's your name?" "Where did you grow up?" "What do you like to do for fun?" "Where do you live?" "Where do you, did you, work?" are easy to ask and to answer. If we start asking simple questions and listening wherever we find ourselves, we will make connections and become healthier, more whole people.

We need to connect with others. That's the way God created us—to be people in community. Jesus showed us this in his encounters with people. "When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.'" Jesus didn't need to stay with Zacchaeus. He didn't need to spend time with a social outsider like Zacchaeus. He did it intentionally and changed Zacchaeus' life. Read the stories of Jesus' encounters with people in the Bible and see how he connects with them. Jesus didn't need to touch the leper, talk with the woman at the well, stop and heal the blind man, or take the time and energy to get involved in the lives of any of the people we read about in the Bible. But he did eat with people, he paid attention to them, he visited with them, he asked them about their lives, he connected with them, he built community, he restored wholeness.

In a society that is becoming increasingly disjointed, the church needs to be about connecting. The church needs to be a place where community happens, where people are connected, where people care about others and are cared about by others, where every person matters, a place where God's grace, God's undeserved love, is not only talked about, but lived as we connect with others.

As we learn to listen and connect with others we will be surprised by the community that develops. We will be surprised by the wholeness we experience. Surprised by community? I hope so.

Think About...

- How did the encounter with Jesus effect Zacchaeus' life? What lessons do you take from this story about how we are to build community as we go about our daily lives?
- What can a sense of community add to our busy lives?
- What are some of the experiences or opportunities that can draw us into community with others?
- What are some of the barriers that keep us from finding meaningful connections with others in our day-to-day life? What are some ways that we can recognize and overcome those barriers?
- Who are some of the people you see/interact with on a typical day? Which ones would you like to know more about? What are some questions you might ask them?

What's my response? *Select one or more ideas...*

- As you go about your daily routine, make a point of greeting those you meet by making eye contact and simply saying "Hi." If you are in a store and the clerk is wearing a nametag, greet him or her by name.
- Take time to get to know one of your coworkers or neighbors in a new way.
- Read some Bible stories that illustrate how Jesus made connections with people. Examples include: Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42), healing the blind man (John 9), calling the tax collector (Matthew 9:9-13, Mark 2:13-17, Luke 5:27-32). Notice what Jesus does to connect with others and think about how you might translate this into making connections in your own life.
- Send a card or an e-mail to someone who has made a difference in your life and with whom you haven't connected in a while.
- Thank God for your small group and pray that you and the other members of your group will be open to developing a deeper sense of community in the months ahead.

Closing Prayer

Thank you, God, for creating us to be in relationship with you and with each other. Thank you for all of the opportunities for experiencing life together that you provide each day. Open our eyes to see new opportunities to connect with others during the course of our daily activities. As you call us each by name, help us to also greet and open ourselves to others on a daily basis. Thank you for the fellowship you provide through this small group. We pray in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Reflection written by Gary Medin

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