

Be Loved Faith Study

Session 3: Be Loved Community, Be Loving



God reminds us that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves – we are part of God's beloved community. Our identity as God's beloved children and our relationships with others are part of a larger context. For those who are isolated and alone in the pandemic, who or what brings a sense of community? During a time of discord, what does community look like? What gifts has God given you to bless others? How is God active and alive in community?

Opening Questions (select 1 or 2 questions)

- What is something you've been told by others that you are good at?
- Tell about a group where you've felt the bonds of community – perhaps in a group of friends or coworkers, on a team or in a neighborhood?
- What has built or sustained a sense of community for you during the pandemic?
- What does “community” mean to you?

Opening Prayer

Loving God, thank you for creating each of us with unique gifts, talents, and passions. Thank you for the people in our lives who have encouraged, nurtured and advised us. Help us to use our gifts to do the same for others. We are grateful for the blessings of this community and for the way that your love for us shines through each of us. Be with us today as we love and care for each other. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

What Does the Bible Say?

The Apostle Paul describes the unity of believers in terms of the human body. The seemingly diverse parts of our bodies work together to make a whole person. In Christian community we have companions and work together to bless others. At the start of his ministry, Jesus defines the work of Christian community. And, as followers, called by his Spirit, we also are to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and to proclaim God's love wherever we go.

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not

belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Luke 4:16-21

When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Think About... *(optional, depending on time)*

- What word or phrase jumps out at you from the texts today?
- What connections do you see between these two Bible passages?
- Paul compares the body of Christ to a human body. Can you think of another analogy that might speak to readers today?
- How are the words of the prophet Isaiah, spoken by Jesus, relevant today? How do we continue to live into and fulfill these words?

**Life in Community
Illumination**

*(optional - use as a group or
individually)*

Explore the theme, *Beloved Community*, by reflecting on Acts 4: 32-36 and viewing an illumination (artwork) of the Acts text from *The Saint John's Bible*.

View the Illumination and walk through the questions guide available at:
www.incarnationmn.org/beloved/

What Do Others Say?

If you're familiar with CliftonStrengths, you know it's based on the belief that all of us have natural talents or strengths. When these strengths are used well, goodness can come to one's own life as well as to the life of the community of which we are a part. I appreciate being reminded that my collection of strengths makes me uniquely me and with that assurance comes a measure of confidence, while also relieving the pressure of trying to live into strengths that are not mine. NFL football analyst, activist and author, Emmanuel Acho said it this way recently, "We've become so obsessed with being like other people that we've abandoned our own uniqueness. You weren't created to do everything someone else can do. You were created to do everything they can't do."

I've taken the CliftonStrengths assessment three times and each time, four of my five top strengths have been the same. One of those recurring strengths is Connectedness. From *StrengthsFinder 2.0* by Tom Rath, on Connectedness, "...in your soul you know that we are all connected. Yes, we are individuals, responsible for our own judgments and in possession of our own free will, but nonetheless we are part of something larger...you gain confidence from knowing that we are not isolated from one another or from the earth and the life on it..."¹

This strength of Connectedness makes sense to me as I consider how much I value community. It's hard for me to see individuals outside their collection in a community. It's probably also why I so appreciate Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, and his description of the Body of Christ and its many members. For me, there are two themes that particularly resonate with me:

- We each have been by God given various, different, important gifts (just as CliftonStrengths teaches) and when members of the Body are not using their strengths, the Body is not complete.
- If one member of the Body suffers, the entire Body suffers; if one member rejoices, all rejoice.

How do we create community where people feel a sense of belonging, especially in a strange time such as this, during the continued pandemic when many are isolated out of concern for safety? This is a tall order.

I offer this example which I witnessed in its fullness recently: Debbie Nelson, a long-time member of Incarnation, loves to write cards to people. I have been the recipient of Debbie's cards and honestly, just seeing an envelope in my mailbox addressed to me by human handwriting, fills my heart with joy. It's so rare. Debbie has taken seriously her sense of calling to write cards on behalf of the Incarnation community to communicate to others that they are seen, they are loved, they are a part of this community, and we care about them. I was reminded of this when I saw Debbie with a huge stack of notes to be stamped the other week. I thought, wow, that's a lot of effort and time on

Debbie's part and I thought to myself, this is a labor of love for Debbie. When asked why this card-writing is so important to her, Debbie replied, *"Making cards and writing notes is important to me because I want people to feel loved and know that someone cares. My grandma and mom passed the tradition down to me, and I have fond memories of them sending letters and cards. I just want everyone to have some joy to brighten their day!"*

Creating a sense of beloved community is not so easy when there is discord, however. In my way of thinking, it's worth the effort even if it comes with some uncomfortable or painful moments. When striving to engage well in beloved community when there has been friction or conflict, I look to skilled, grace-filled teacher Emmanuel Acho and his *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man* online videos (www.uncomfortableconvos.com).²

In each of the videos posted, Acho invites individuals, couples and families, who are mostly white, to engage in uncomfortable conversations with him about the challenges of being black in the United States. The videos are high quality, and I've gained a lot that can be applied to situations both related and unrelated to race. Acho demonstrates this beautifully, pressing in with curiosity, love, compassion, empathy and belonging - especially when discomfort is a certainty - which is better than upholding comfort as a higher value. It takes practice and it doesn't always go as well as the videos portray.

Here's a story of an uncomfortable exchange I had last spring after witnessing a friend tell a racially insensitive joke, in a gathered group of people. At the time, I thought it best not to speak of it so that the evening ahead and the rest of the community would not be disrupted. But the situation continued to bother me. I eventually mustered up the courage to reach out to my friend over an email (between just the two of us) with the goal of being gentle, compassionate, loving and focused on a behavior vs. his character.

However, my feedback came too long after the offense, my method for providing feedback wasn't ideal and I believe my friend felt personally attacked by my feedback. Many months later, I still detect some dissonance in our relationship, and it may be a while (if ever) before things return to the place where our relationship was before this incident. As I reflect on my approach, I can absolutely see ways I can improve based on the "Uncomfortable Conversations" videos I've watched, should I be faced with a similar situation. Here are some considerations I will try to keep in mind for next time:

- Timeliness. Enter the uncomfortable conversation as soon as possible following whatever was the catalyst, for the sake of all parties involved. Remember that real learning often occurs when there has been discomfort.

- Give feedback privately. Email is ok but voice to voice is better with face to face often the best option. Body language adds so much that mere words cannot.
- Focus on the behavior. No one should feel as though their character is being attacked when being given feedback.
- Share why the situation is important to you or others with whom you are in a relationship.
- Give the other person the benefit of the doubt that ill was not intended or that there has been a misunderstanding. Imagine the most gracious story possible of the other person and be willing and open to have your mind changed.
- Above all, pray for God's wisdom in the midst of the uncomfortable exchange.

As hard as all this was, I am still glad I took these steps to be true to myself, my values, my care for my friend, to the community we share and to the community of those who were the target of the joke. Hopefully my friend and I have learned some things about what it means to be in community together from this uncomfortable interaction. I read recently in an Instagram post "We are humans. We are going to make mistakes." Wow, isn't that the truth? For me, to be God's beloved community means to keep a high value of welcome, safety and belonging at the forefront, and working toward that kind of community as best we can.

--Becky Benson

Think About (select one or more questions)

Gifts and Strengths in Community

- When have you seen someone living out one of their gifts in a way that benefits others or the community?
- What makes it challenging for us to name our gifts and use them in ways that make a difference for others? When have you hesitated to use one of your gifts?
- What helps you to let go of the gifts that belong to someone else, but maybe are not one of your own gifts? What prompts us to compare ourselves with others? What happens when we let go of comparisons?
- How could you use one of your gifts or strengths more fully?

Growth in Community

- What do you value in a community? What is something that you bring to others in a community?
- What is something you've done to create community for others?
- How is discomfort connected to our growth as Christians?
- What or who has guided you when you've faced an uncomfortable circumstance or conversation? What values are important to you in this?
- What have you learned about handling uncomfortable conversations or situations? What would you add to the list of considerations in this reflection?
- Re-read the last sentence in the reflection. What are some ways you can work toward these values in your life? How can we live this out at Incarnation?
- What other ideas spoke to you in this writing? What do you wonder about?

Connecting Faith with Daily Life (for individual reflection & action)

- Take some time in the next week to pray for the members of this small group. If you're comfortable, share a prayer request with the group.
- Look back at the list of "considerations" near the end of the reflection. How might you use one of these in your life?
- Think of something practical you can do for someone in your community. It might be as simple as sending a card or an email or shoveling a driveway. It shows them that they are known and part of a larger community.

Closing Prayer from Psalm 46

One: As we leave this time together, let's quiet ourselves as we dwell in God's presence. Simply rest in God's unending forgiveness and steadfast love.

Silence

One: Let's read Psalm 46 responsively.

One: Be still and know that I am God.

All: Be still and know that I am God. *Silence*

One: Be still and know.

All: Be still and know. *Silence*

One: Be still.

All: Be still. *Silence*

One: Be.

All: Be. Amen.

¹Rath, Tom. *StrengthsFinder 2.0*. Gallup Press, 2007.

www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/home.aspx

²Acho, Emmanuel. *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man*. 2021,

www.uncomfortableconvos.com.

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www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/.

Thank you to all from the Incarnation community who wrote reflections, questions, prayers, and suggestions for connecting faith and daily life, including former Pastor Lynda Thompson for her Bible text introductions and many other contributions.