

God grows us in community

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, August 12, 2018

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(2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51)

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 (NRSV): Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Today's readings, like last week's readings, all beg comment! I wrote about the ongoing story of David in my email to the parish this past week, and we will hear more about Jesus and the bread of life in the weeks to come. But today I would like to talk about Paul's letter and about vegetable gardens.

Summertime is a great time for vegetable gardens. Years ago, I first tried a vegetable garden. I worked very hard to get good soil and to lay out the garden well. I had some spectacular disasters and some horrifying successes. That was the year we were swimming in spinach. A healthy and productive garden takes good soil, the right water, the right sun, and careful, daily care.

One thing I've noticed about gardens is that I've never seen a garden where only one seed was planted. Nor have I seen a garden consisting of only one plant. Nor a garden where the plants are planted ten feet apart. There is something about a garden that keeps the plants together. Most healthy gardens have a variety of plants, and when you rotate where you place the plants from year to year, the garden is even healthier. The plants work together to maintain the health of the whole garden.

I thought of this image of a garden as an image of community and vitality in our life together. When we are at our best, we are not isolated from each other, but rather living together, and building up each other by our variety. The blessings of being a community are special gifts that God gives us. Indeed, God grows us in community.

These days, the word "community" is used as a sort of theoretical label held in common by individuals who may not have any relationship with each other at all. There is "the hiking community" or "the art community," or "the philosophy community." There may not be any real community at all, beyond the fact that certain individuals can paste the same label on their chests. What God intends in community, however, is relational—a shared life together, with all its blessings and challenges. And the community that God most wants for us is Christian Community: relationships with Jesus at the center.

One of the most precious gifts that God gives us to tend as his stewards is the gift of each other—the gift of Christian community. Like a gardener, God grows us in community.

We've been hearing from Paul's letter to the Ephesians in recent weeks. Last week we heard one of my favorite passages¹: how God gives us the gift of many roles in the Christian community, and they are given all to build us up to the full stature of Christ. He continues that train of thought in today's reading with practical advice about relationships with each other. *"Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another."* Literally, Paul means we are body parts of one body. *"Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil."* Paul calls us to engage in relationships with each other, even when we disagree or clash with one another. He calls us to speak *"only what is useful for building up...so that [our] words may give grace to those who hear...put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you."*

So much of this seems straightforward—the sort of things you learn in Kindergarten. Kindness, encouragement, support. And yet, Paul's vision of Christian community does not seem to come naturally to us. Paul knows that loving one another as Jesus loves us is hard, whether you are in Ephesus or in metro Atlanta.

This kind of community is not easy, especially when we bring with us the values of the world. Surf the TV channels these days and "reality TV" will show you all about malice and evil and tearing down instead of building up. The news will show you bitterness and wrath and anger regardless of political party or topic of discussion. I tend to think that the picture of ourselves that TV or social media shows us is skewed toward the most sensational and provocative. And yet we drink deep of this stuff and start to imitate it in our daily lives. We see this in the social life of schools. We see it in office politics. We see it in the competition and insecurity we feel even among family and friends.

The world encourages us to prioritize ourselves as individuals, and the world's values have taken this far beyond a healthy self-awareness. When we follow only what we want as individuals, eventually we find ourselves isolated and alone. Our only communities are those public labels that we wear, but without any real relationships, what are those labels worth? We've become so individualized that we have learned to react emotionally and angrily against others who are different. Even when someone is truly unjust, we have forgotten how to give any response other than attack and rejection. We don't know how to stand up for the truth *and* love someone at the same time. Often we've forgotten that loving someone who has done wrong is a virtue. Or that pursuing virtue is a good thing.

But the end game of this kind of individualism is isolation and a spiritual drift. More and more we see the malaise and despair of people surrounded by a crowd and yet connected to no one in a meaningful way. We do not thrive as isolated individuals. We are made to be together. God grows us in community. Paul's words are not just classical virtues of kindness. Paul's virtues are the hard work that till the soil of a thriving community. Mere kindness and courtesy are important, but God calls us to deeper relationships.

God calls us to share our lives with one another. God calls us to support one another, to work together, to encourage each other beyond simple affirmation. Christian community doesn't put the self at the center of our lives, but rather we put Jesus at the center of our lives. And Jesus

¹ Ephesians 4:1-16

transforms who we are. The Holy Spirit is at work in our relationships, helping us grow in grace and mercy, bringing health and growth and vitality that we could not find on our own.

Do we thrive together simply because we have some things in common? We could have a friendly group dynamic, I suppose. But we would not live into the kind of rich and vibrant community God dreams for us if that were all we had. After all, if we bring the world's values with us, and if we bring our differences with us, and if we bring our fallibility with us, then of course we will disagree. We will fail each other. We will blunder as individuals and as a group. And we can only stand up again and grow beyond our failings with Jesus at the center. Jesus loves us with more than simple kindness. Jesus also challenges us when we are off track, calling us to a better way. Part of that better way is repentance and forgiveness and reconciliation. We are not perfect, and so we do our best to love even those who fail us.

Let me describe a snapshot of this robust kind of Christian community. One of my son's baseball coaches years ago was a man named Merv. Coach Merv also ran a local Christian youth center in the middle of the small town of Honey Brook, Pennsylvania. Merv and his wife reached out to kids in the town with a place where they could hang out, play games, and feel a different sort of community than school or neighborhood.

Merv told me about one boy who often came to the youth center. His family was a painful, broken place, and John² struggled to get along. He often lashed out at others at the youth center the way he had learned from his family and the world. Merv and other adults had to set boundaries for John, and John often rebelled against them. Eventually, Merv told him that he might have to leave the youth center for a while. But Merv told John: "look, you will always find boundaries, inside this place and outside this place. The difference is that in here, we love you. Outside of this place, people will enforce boundaries on you and they may not love you."

So John left and was away for a while. But later he returned. He had trouble with the law and others. And he learned what Coach Merv meant. So he came back to embrace a place that would hold a high standard for him *and* love him, a true community that would show him the justice and grace and mercy they received from Jesus.

This is the kind of community that God wants for the church. This is the kind of culture that we're developing in our Youth ministry here—a culture that is different from school or sports teams, a culture of commitment and forgiveness and building-up centered around the one who first loved us and forgave us that way. This is our hope for children and adults here at St. Peter & St. Paul as well. God has a vision for us as a Christian community empowered by the Holy Spirit, a culture of kindness and generosity of spirit, encouragement, and a healthy mutual challenge that helps us grow.

God grows us in community. That growth takes the soil of scripture and the water of prayer. That growth takes the commitment of time and vulnerability. That growth takes a willingness to let God change us and lift us up in relationships with Jesus at the center. If you are thirsty for this kind of community, invest in Christian relationships of depth. Connect with others here and plug in to life together. Seek God with others and seek to love the way Jesus first loved you. With Jesus at the center, watch day by day as God grows us in community.

² Merv didn't mention his name, but it helped to hear a name for him, so I've chosen "John."