

GROWING INTO COMMUNITY – Part I
(Psalm 133, Deuteronomy 8:1-5, I Cor. 12:4-13, Luke 22:24-27)

As always, it's a great privilege to be here for these last two weeks of Pastor Steve's sabbatical. Each person who volunteered to preach during this time was tasked with speaking on the theme of: "**Look Ahead: Following Christ into God's Future for Us.**" And although I haven't been here each Sunday, I've reflected on the texts the others have preached from and when available, listened to their sermons via your website. And each one of them have contributed important insights into what God is calling Valley Covenant to be in the future.

Steve Buss opened with that passage from John's gospel that focused on the need to be a praying church, followed by Bryan Kane's word from Ezekiel 2, a text that focuses on being a prophetic voice in the midst of an unbelieving world. Then Kay Strom added a vital word on the need to have a global vision, followed by Bryan again from Psalm 23 on being a church that learns to trust in God as its Good Shepherd, as well as supporting the people who are local shepherds here at Valley Covenant. Finally, last week Dawn Taloyo preached on our growing into Christ through our obedience—by walking as Jesus walked.

These are all essential markers of a healthy church, and they all give us a focus for the future. So for these final two weeks before Pastor Steve returns, I want to look at how all these things happen *together in tandem, in community*. For this week I want to ask, *What does a Christian community look like?* And then next week I want to finish with the question, *What does it **actually mean** when Christ calls us to be a community of Christian love?*

The main reason I chose the topic of community is that it's a very fragile reality in today's American culture. We live in a highly mobile, face-paced, technology-driven, and fiercely individualistic society. All the polls and surveys tell us that Americans value one thing above virtually everything else, and that is our individual liberty. Yes, we're willing to compromise this liberty to *some* extent if it's absolutely necessary, but even then we do so reluctantly, guardedly, and with a raging suspicion that someone, somewhere is going to take things too far.

And not surprisingly, this fierce individualism has shaped the American church to some extent. Americans may belong to a specific church or denomination, and they may truly care about the people they attend church with. They may even be willing to donate their money and get involved in specific aspects of their church life. But let there be no mistake, even within the walls of the typical church there is this pervasive assumption that regardless of the issue—be it theology or ethics or merely church polity—every person ought to be free to do what is right in their own eyes. For such people, religion is primarily a *personal conviction*. In the end it's primarily about "me and God."

However, there is a tragic irony in all this. The very same polls and surveys tell us that what many Americans find missing in their lives is a deep sense of community, of connection to other people. We can live in the same neighborhood for many years and not really know our neighbors. When our children move away, we suddenly discover how isolated we are. Yes, we want our freedom and individualism, and yet we long for close friends and a deeper sense of connection to all that is going on around us. And it is precisely here, I think, that a truly healthy church can speak most clearly to what makes for *authentic* community.

Now there are many texts in the New Testament that speak to different aspects of this issue, and I spent way too much time struggling with which text to use this morning. But in the end, I came back to a passage that I have taught on and preached on a lot over the years. What I like about it is that it speaks very forcibly to **both** our individuality and yet our deep connection to one another **and how that actually works out in practice.** I am referring to our epistle lesson for today from Paul's letter to the Corinthian church.

Corinth was the poster child for a church that struggled with how to build community. It was *individually* a highly gifted bunch of people. And yet it was a fractured, broken community. Corinth overly valued particular roles and gifts within the church and virtually ignored other ones. They admired charismatic teachers and were drawn to the dramatic and supernatural manifestations of the Spirit. What they lacked was even a basic grasp of what made for true *Christian* community. And so in chapter 12, beginning with verse 4, Paul goes back to square one and begins to build his case for how we all fit together.

(12:4) *There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit.*

Now this is the crucial starting point. In this little verse, Paul lays out the essential problem. On the one hand, within a typical Christian community you have a wide variety of *differences*—different people, personalities, interests, agendas, expectations, *and most importantly different spiritual gifts*. This is the “visible” side to a church's life, the side where all these differences keep bumping into one another. However, Paul immediately contrasts all these differences with *the unseen, invisible, and yet overriding reality that our gifts come from the same Spirit of God.*

Taken together, these two realities mean that God loves variety and complexity. *None* of us are identical. None of us will be used by God in the same way. But in saying there are many gifts but *one Spirit*, Paul is also reminding us that for all our differences, we are all indwelt, guided, shaped, and empowered by the one and same Spirit of God. In other words, we are essentially (at our core) *more alike than different*. This will become even more important as we move through this chapter. Now listen to verse 5:

(12:5) *There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.*

Here again we have another example of our diversity within God's unity. Not only are different gifts given *by the Spirit*, but Christ, *who is Lord of the church*, uses our gifts in *different ways*. Two people may both have the gift of teaching, but Christ may use one person to teach kids and another to teach adults. Both are badly needed by the community, but it's the Lord who directs their service. Which means the only question that should trouble us is **not**, "*Why can't I do what so-and-so does?*" but "*What am I doing **now** with the gifts and opportunities Christ has given me? Am I being faithful to that?*" Which brings us to Paul's next observation:

(12:6) There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all.

Here Paul completes his Trinitarian description of how the Father, Son, and Spirit work in and through us. Not only does the Holy Spirit give different gifts, and Christ the Lord direct the different ways of applying these gifts, but in all of this it's God who sovereignly creates different results. Some people exercise their gifts with very visible, dramatic results, while others are always behind the scenes, sowing seeds but seldom seeing big results. But this should not disturb us, for Paul is saying that in the end it's not **my** gifts or opportunities that make the difference, **but it's God who gives the increase**. God can take any effort done in faith and mushroom it over time into something significant and lasting, even if we can't see it.

What God is looking for is a willing heart that is not preoccupied with its own turf, its own gifts, its own perspective on things. Paul is trying to redirect our attention away from our individuality altogether and focus it on the one true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who calls us to serve those whom God loves. And so he writes next:

*(12:7) Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given **for the common good**. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them each one, just as he determines.*

In other words, God's gifts are not given for our sakes at all, but for the common good of everyone in the church community. What's more, the various gifts are given "*just as he (the Spirit) determines*." They are not handed out according to how much we deserve them or according to our own efforts, but according to God's own purposes. In fact, it's obvious from scripture and history that God delights in taking people who are weak in the eyes of others—people who may not be very accomplished or standouts—and empower them to do great things for God. It's another way God demonstrates that our impact is never dependent on us at all, but God.

Now underlying Paul's words here is a serious concern that our naturally fierce individualism will have an adverse impact on our Christian community. Paul knew only too well that our individual gifts can actually work against the community. People can easily become too focused on their own ministry and impact. They can become very impatient when believers with different gifts and ministries get in the way. For example, people with a heart for evangelism can sometimes become impatient and judgmental toward those believers who have nurturing gifts or administrative skills. They lose a sense of the big picture, and so Paul adds in verse 12:

*(12:12) The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form **one** body. So it is with Christ. For we were **all** baptized by **one** Spirit into **one** body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were **all** given the **one** Spirit to drink.*

Do you hear Paul's emphasis here? Not just some of us, not just the "spiritual" among us, not just those up front, but **all** of us share in this **one** Spirit of God, and regardless of our role within the community, we are **all** part of a much bigger whole. And it's that whole that we need to be absolutely zealous to maintain. In fact, *that's why the gifts were given in the first place. When all is said and done, it is our **sameness**, our **oneness**, our **spiritual unity** in Christ that is far more important and profound than all our individual gifts.* Our individuality is important, or God would not have made us as we are. But compared to our essential unity in Christ, *our distinctions are secondary.*

Now I should admit right here that this is an easy thing to preach but a difficult thing to maintain in practice. An over emphasis on unity can suppress our diversity and creativity, while an obsession for freedom and diversity can also fracture our unity. On a mundane level this often leads to two very common but unhealthy responses. The first response is to feel that because my particular contributions to the community is not highly visible or not one of the highly valued gifts, then the community can get by just fine without me. The community doesn't really *need* me. This is a common but disastrous conclusion. And so Paul continues in verse 14:

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

In short, we are all absolutely essential to everyone else. It may be you have a really low-key gift, perhaps the gift of encouragement or discernment. Yours will be the kind of gift that when you are around, everyone will benefit, *even if they can't quite figure out why*. But if you think your gifts are insignificant and allow that attitude to quench your desire to share with those around you, *everyone loses out*.

Have you ever been part of a group or team for an extended period of time (be it a group at school or work or in your neighborhood)? If there's a lot of variety within the group and everyone gets along well, it can be a wonderful experience. But should one person move away, suddenly everything changes (even though the others can't quite put their finger on why). But slowly, over time, the rest of the group begins to realize all the invisible, unappreciated contributions that one person made—quiet comments, supportive actions, all those little things add up to a *huge* difference.

Or here is another way to look at it. Think about all the immense hurt and loneliness and discouragement and ignorance and unbelief and every other human struggle that surrounds all of us *every single day*. The sheer size of ordinary human suffering we bump up against every day is enormous. But if you should ask yourself, *"In a typical day, how does God minister to all these needs? Does he rely primarily on trained clergy? Professional counselors? How does he do it?"*

Well, the answer becomes obvious. Ninety-nine percent of the time God does not do it through professional workers at all. No, he does it through very ordinary, humble people like you and me. A coffee break with a hurting acquaintance, a word of encouragement to a burdened co-worker, a visit to a lonely or sick person, a Bible study with a neighborhood group, a card or note or email—this is what makes up 99% of the most vital ministry that goes on every day. And it requires very important gifts that most of us have of one kind or another, but which are so ordinary they may go unnoticed. Unnoticed, that is, except by God. He is the one who connects us with the needs and gives us the word of wisdom, the patience to listen, the compassion to cry and pray and hope with someone who needs exactly that.

Now I said earlier that there are *two* common but unhealthy attitudes about spiritual gifts. The first was thinking that our gifts are unimportant. The second unhealthy attitude often occurs among those who actually have very visible, high-impact gifts. You know them. They're the dynamic speakers or charismatic personalities that we all love to listen to and be around. The temptation among this group is to think that because the impact they have is often very powerful, *they don't need others as much as others need them*. And so Paul adds:

*The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. **Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.***

Do you get Paul's drift here? *We desperately need each other.* Unless we are linked together in a deep, organic way, we all suffer. This is one of those core biblical truths that we all pay lip service to but find it so difficult to embrace. Because we are all children of our fiercely independent and individualistic American culture, I can understand why this is so hard. But nonetheless, we must make it a priority to connect with this community in a deep, meaningful way. In other words, Christian community is not a soft option. It is a life jacket, a survival kit that God has provided to help us on our journey through a very dark and difficult world.

Do you have a close band of other believers who care enough about you that they will speak candidly to you should they sense something is not right? And in particular, do you allow those most *dissimilar* to you to get close? Yes, a "bosom buddy" can be helpful—a husband, wife, a close friend—but we need the whole range of the Spirit's gifts at work in our lives. *And the reverse is also true: others need us, even though we may not think they do.*

As you look ahead to your future here at Valley Covenant Church, my prayer is that you will be alive to the fact that God has **called** each and every one of you and **gifted** you and **placed** you here within a community of believers for the purpose of **both** ministering to them and to be ministered to by them. May all of you do what you can with what gifts and opportunities God sends you, and you will—I repeat, **you will**—have an impact for good in this place that will endure forever.

Amen