

COMMUNITY AND COMMUNION

[written in oral form]

I Corinthians 11:23-26; Acts 2:42-47

Theme: What's so good....

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The theme this fall is "What's so good about the Gospel", with today's focus being: "What's so good about community and communion.

I think the answer is pretty obvious, so we could go ahead and sing the response hymn. Even though the kids are thinking "excellent", I will proceed.

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Being in a community increases our odds for survival. This was embedded in our DNA eons ago. There is strength in numbers.

However, community needs a qualifier because some are good and healthy, and some are not so beneficial.

Concentration camps, like the ones along the Mexican border, are communities, but they are mostly toxic and destructive.

The New York Times had an article Friday about a rural, undereducated county in Arkansas. The majority voted against supporting their library, claiming that they don't use it. They chose to NOT nurture their community's growth and development.

That is another example of an unhealthy community.

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The Acts passage presents a wonderful, vibrant and giving community. They spent time together, rejoicing and worshipping God. They shared what they had with each other. They nurtured their community, and they grew.

A church is a community, and we Mennonites tend to do community well, most of the time.

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I have often heard the label, "Our church is like one big family."

I'm not fond of that simile.

The concept of family can carry some tainted baggage, and is too often narrow in perspective.

There is something appealing about being adopted into a family, yet it may not be so easy to get in / to be accepted.

I was pastoring at one church that loved to identify as a family, but I would periodically be told, "You are not from here."

Apparently, I was in the community, but I did Not belong.

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Belonging is the key. Belonging is what most people desire. Belonging is an instinctual need.

According to the Canadian Index of Wellbeing: "Vital communities are characterized by strong, active and inclusive relationships" [where individuals have a sense of belonging].

It goes on to state: At the individual level, belonging leads to numerous positive health benefits, both physical and mental. Conversely, people with poor or insufficient relationships experience a number of negative effects on their long-term health and wellbeing when their sense of belonging is lower."

The report also said: "People who feel a strong sense of belonging are more likely to donate their time and money to improving the community, and show caring for other people who live there."

[U Waterloo 2014]

Belonging is very important.

Belonging to a healthy, open and inclusive community adds value to life and aids with coping with intense painful emotions.

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Nevertheless, the community needs to foster and encourage openness, accept change and have mutual generosity to remain healthy.

Again, the community in the Acts text is a good example.

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Sometimes the community itself becomes the focus, rather than the dynamics of trusting, loving relationships. When that happens, the demand for conformity becomes a factor.

This is evident when uniforms or other certain appearances are required. Such things bring confidence to being "IN" the community, yet with a contingency / with particular expectations.

I am sure there is a degree of pride in wearing a Maple Leaf uniform, but those players must perform / must meet expectations in order to remain on the team. Their sense of belonging may be passionate, but it is ephemeral,... which carries a deep sense of insecurity.

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The question in the shadows for all of us is: "Do I really belong?"

"No matter what.... Do I belong?"

Back in the early 1980's, a friend of mine and his wife decided to adopt a child from the foster care system. The girl was about 9 or 10, and she had been moved around to a number of foster families. Needless to say, she had some developmental issues.

They had two other children close to her age, so they thought it would be a good fit.

Overall, the transition to their family had gone fairly well, until Christmas time. They had decided to go to Disney World for the holidays. Suddenly, their new daughter,... and I can't remember her name,... started acting out. She was increasingly becoming obnoxious and annoying.

My friend and his wife were beside themselves. They were extremely frustrated. They assumed that she would be thrilled to go to Disney World, and she even said she was excited to go.

Her negative behaviour intensified, and was almost unbearable on the flight there and in the hotel the night before.

Finally, as they tried to reason with her, they asked, "What's wrong? Why are you acting this way? What's going on?"

She blurted out, "I know you are mad at me, and I know that you will NOT let me go to Disney World in the morning. You don't like me."

There was a silent pause.

Then my friend said, "Yes, you have not be behaving nicely lately, but we still love you. You are part of the family. We are all going to go in the morning, no matter what."

Instantly, she grew a big, surprised smile, and then there were tears.

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They found out later, that her various foster parents would promise her rewards, but would always withdraw them because of her poor behaviour. Her instilled sense of punishment was false promises of something good.

Her acting out was testing them. She was demanding, "Will you still love me when I do this...that upsets you?" Or "Will I be rejected if I hurt your feelings?" "What happens if I betray you?"

Do I really belong? Do I really belong... is the heart question.

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On the night that Jesus was betrayed, he took a piece of bread, and said, "Think of this as my body; take it in"

Then Jesus offered the cup, and said, "This is my blood / my life given to you. Take it in."

And, the questioning, doubting, rejecting and even betraying disciples did as instructed.

Jesus added, and I'm paraphrasing, "Now remember, remember:

you are a part of me and I am part of you. Recall the bread and wine you have taken in. I am in you. We are together. You belong! We belong.

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That was too much for Judas, and he ran away.

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When we do communion, we remember. We who believe / we who have chosen God's way as Jesus did, we remember.

We remember that we belong, no matter what we belong.

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Paul ties communion to Jesus' death, likely because he lived in the temple era. I think that is why when we do communion it often feels like a funeral. We focus on death

Communion is more than that. Communion is a community event, and It is mostly remembering Jesus' declaration that we are in this together. We belong.

The early church got it. Communion was a thanksgiving celebration, and thus the name Eucharist -- giving thanks.

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We ..who have chosen to be in this God thing,...as Jesus did,...we become the Gospel message as Jesus was.

Let us remember / let us Not forget that by the love and grace of God, Jesus showed us that we belong.

We are in this together.

You and I belong in this Gospel message, and that is more than good.

It is wonderful to belong / to be so amazingly loved.