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## THE NORMAL CHRISTIAN LIFE: A LIFE OF COMMUNITY

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Ephesians 2:11-22

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of men) — 12 remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. 17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. 19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

True community is beautiful. Community speaks of a shared life, of common purpose, of belonging and unity. It is connection and participation in the life of another. It is the only true antidote for the isolation and loneliness so prevalent in our world. Unfortunately, the word community is so overused that we sometimes fail to recognize the true significance and beauty of community. If you did a Google search on the internet, you would find there are about two billion websites that use the word *community*. You get twice as many hits for community as you do for the word *war*, five times as many hits as for the word *football* or *church*, almost ten times as many hits as for *Obama* and *McCain* combined. The word *community* is so overused that radio talk show host Joe Soucheray fog horns it every time someone uses the word *community* on his show.

Thursday morning, I became a little obsessed with tracking down different “communities” on the internet. Fortunately, in my research I discovered there were even “obsessive compulsive communities” for the times I am obsessed and compulsive about *community*. I discovered that I have missed many communities I could have been associated with, had I only known they existed. (There is) the bicycle community, the reading community, the fishing community, the Irish community, the food community. I think I would like to be a part of the food community. I discovered a raw food community and a fast food community. I doubt they get along very well together. I found a hog community. I do not know what a hog community is – maybe it is just a herd. I could not read the article about the hog community without joining the hog community, so I was left wondering how this sentence on its website ended: “More than half the respondents from the hog community...” I wondered if you had to be a hog to be part of the hog community and if hogs were really responding. If they were responding, what they were responding to?

Maybe I should go back to my obsessive-compulsive *community*. There are swimming, newspaper, railroad, Oldsmobile, global warming, and circus communities. It might be fun to be part of a circus community. There are rural, urban, suburban, farming, and homeless communities. But what surprised me most was to discover that there are even “hermit communities.” Hermit communities — who would have thought there would be a community for those who have withdrawn from community to be alone.

There are a lot of communities out there, thousands, if not millions. It made me wonder why – with all the communities – real, imagined, and otherwise – why are there so many isolated, friendless people? Why is community – which, in its truest, purest sense, is life shared – so uncommon? Why are so many people alone and lonely – when from the very beginning God said, “It is not good for man to be alone”?

In his book *The Living Church*, John Stott wrote, “Aloneness is not the will of God not in ordinary life or in the Christian life.” We were not made to wander this world alone. We were created for community. We were made in the image of our Creator, who is one in the community of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Isolated people hunger for community. Gangs are about not only crime, violence, and drugs. They are often attempts by young fatherless men to find a community, any community that would accept them just as they are. The social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace try to create a “virtual community” for people who are increasingly isolated from one another. We were not made to walk through this life alone. Sadly, our hunger for community has led many to mistake clubs, organizations, common interests, even common maladies, for community.

True community is deeper and richer than a shared interest in hogs, or raw food, or fishing. True community connects us on a deep spiritual level. It takes individuals from all different backgrounds and binds them together. While the word *community* is found only infrequently in our English Bibles, the concept is present from the beginning of Genesis when God created the first community, the family, to the end of Revelation when church and Jesus Christ are united as a bride and bridegroom for all eternity. At the very beginning, God took two individuals, a man, Adam, and a woman, Eve, and he made them one — two individuals into one family.

Did you notice as we read our text from Ephesians 2, that is what God did in the church too? He took Gentiles and Jews, who had long been bitter enemies (who had absolutely nothing to do with each other, who would not even enter each other’s homes, or share a meal together) — He took them and He brought them together in one body. That unity in the church is the normal Christian life. Read the description of the church in Acts 2, “All the believers were together and had everything in common. (The word *common*, is the root of our word *community*). All the believers were together. They were a community, sharing everything. Acts 2:45 says they were “selling their possessions and goods, (and giving)... to anyone as he had need.” Verse 46 “...They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” Salvation not only frees us from the threat of hell. Salvation makes a part of a new community – it makes you a part of the body of Christ. It takes those who were on the outside and brings them in.

Just as God takes a bride and a bridegroom and makes them one, so also He takes people from every tribe, nation under heaven and makes them one. Ephesians 2:14 says, “He himself (i.e. Jesus) is our peace who has made the two one....” That is marriage language. Later in his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul would quote Genesis, writing, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”

Then Paul would say, “This is a profound mystery — but I am talking about Christ and the church.” It is not just husbands and wives who become one. The church becomes one, a new community where people belong to each other. Ephesians 2:15 says, “His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross.” Jesus died not only to redeem us from hell, not only to restore our relationship with God; Jesus died to restore the broken relationships between people who had long been enemies. He died to create a new community where he could dwell. In Ephesians 2:22 we read, “And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

Last week, we talked about Christ's indwelling presence in each of His followers. "Christ in you, the hope of glory." That, however, is not the complete story, for He dwells in us not only as individuals. He lives in His church. We are built together. The apostle Peter said, "Like living stones, we are being built into a spiritual house..." The living Christ is not only seen in individual Christians. He is seen in the church. Christians were not made to live in isolation. We were made for community — to be a community in which God Himself dwells. When we are the kind of community God intended us to be, we bear witness to Jesus Christ.

On the night before Jesus was crucified, He prayed for us saying, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. (The community of the godhead, the perfect unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is to be seen in us, the church. "That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.") May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

The world will be brought to Christ not only by the witness of individual Christians but by the witness of the church that is one. When the church demonstrates the kind of community the world is seeking, then the world will be convinced that Jesus truly is the Son of God sent from the Father.

It is not a love for lutefisk, scrap booking, the Minnesota Twins, or Scrabble that makes us one. It is the shed blood of Christ that unites. Jesus is our peace. He makes us one. We are not all alike, and still we are part of a community that extends around the globe. (It is) a community that demolishes the barriers between men and women, young and old, Jews and Gentiles, black and white, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, rural and urban, beauties and geeks. We are not just alike but we are one in Christ. We have different temperaments, gifts, interests. However, we share this in common: the same God is our heavenly Father, the same Jesus Christ is our Savior and Lord; and the same Holy Spirit is our indwelling Comforter. We are a community — His Community. We bear witness to that fact ever time we come around (the Lord's) table.

It is not an accident that we call this meal "communion." In this meal, we share in the life of our Lord. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him." This meal is communion with Christ and we share this meal within the community of those who belong to Him. 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 says, "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." This meal is a reminder that we are one, a community bound together by the sacrificial death of our Lord. One Lord, one meal, one body, one community — His table, His body, His community.

Ten years ago, I attended a worship service at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Jerusalem. Strangely, most of the service was in German. The sermon was in Swedish and some of the prayers in Arabic. I could not understand a thing that was going on. While I tried to listen, my mind wondered. I checked my watch. (Have you ever done that while someone was preaching wondering if he was ever going to finish?) I fidgeted. Then, as the service drew to a close, we celebrated the Lord's Supper. I still could not understand the words but all the sudden I knew what was happening. We were remembering Christ's sacrifice for us. We went to the front of the church to receive communion. In the line in front of me, was a small, elderly Palestinian woman. As we approached the front of the church, it struck me that she was my sister in Christ. We were separated by culture, by language, but in Christ, we were one. He

made us one. Tears began to stream down my face as I celebrated communion with my Lord, and with my brothers and sisters in Christ.

Community is not found in common interests or geography. Community is found in Jesus Christ. He makes us one. When we come to His table, we celebrate that unity. The world draws all sorts of circles that exclude people. It erects walls to keep people out. Jesus died to tear the walls down, to make us one, to reconcile us to God, and to each other.

Do you remember when you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in His family, foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world? But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away, have been brought near through the blood of Christ. He is our peace. He made us one. Consequently, we are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household. In Him, we are being built together to become a dwelling (to become a community) in which God lives by His Spirit.

Christ in you the hope of glory. Christ in His church is witness to the world. That is the normal Christian life. It is how the world will know we are Christians.