

## *The Center of Our Community: Christ at the Center*

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Matthew 6:25-34; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

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Today, we are beginning a Lenten sermon series that is entitled, “Christian Community: Life and Ministry Together.” We are entering this theme because building community is a matter of particular urgency for us. Community has been important for humankind from the very beginning. In Genesis 2 the Lord God announces that “it is not good that the man should be alone,” and so God creates woman. In Genesis 1 we are told that humankind, male and female, are created “in the image of God.” And Christian faith teaches us that the God in whose image we are created is not some disconnected, unitary deity, but a *trinitarian fellowship of love* between the Father and the Son and the Spirit. We are created in the image of community, and created for community.

But it is also the case that living in community is a very demanding thing, and it always has been. In Genesis 4, the first family experiences murder within itself, as Cain murders his brother Abel. In our own time, we are experiencing an unraveling of our wider community, as our society becomes more and more polarized, as we can become highly reactive to each other’s positions, and simple, decent things like dialogue and conversation can become really challenging.

And the church, of course, is not immune to these things. The church never has been. The New Testament is filled with churches that had to work really hard at living together as the body of Christ. Some people have quipped that ‘wherever two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus Christ, you’re going to have a conflict.’ In any congregation where you have a diversity of opinions – many of which can be held quite strongly – and in my limited experience, that has described every congregation I have known – life and ministry together is not an easy thing.

It strikes me that in our highly polarized society, building healthy, respectful, life-giving, life-sustaining community, in which the needs of the vulnerable – whom Scripture often describes as the ‘widow, the orphan, and the alien’ – are attended to, in which persons are encouraged to think for themselves, and in which persons appreciate and love those who think differently; building healthy community is a vital part of our mission and our witness to the wider society.

And in fact, wherever the church sees healthy, life-giving community being built in our society – in friend and support groups, in recovery groups, in neighborhoods and communities – the church ought to celebrate that. The question, then, is what exactly is

distinctive about *Christian* community? What makes the Christian community, the Christian fellowship of the church, different from other communities?

And right off the bat, we can dispense with a couple of things that are not what makes the church distinctive. It is not that Christians are nicer or better people. This can sometimes be hard for us to admit or acknowledge, but we Christians can be every bit as mean, greedy, and fearfully reactive and controlling as other people. The history of the church is a complicated mix of beautiful, world-transforming mission, as well as awful things that we have done, sometimes doing them in the name of Christ. Which is to say that Christians are sinners, just like everyone else. 'All have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God,' the Apostle Paul teaches us in Romans 3. The distinctiveness of the Christian community is not going to be found in those of us who are part of the Christian community.

The difference is Jesus Christ. The difference is that the Christian community gathers around Jesus Christ as our center. He is what makes Christian community different. When the church keeps its eyes on him, following him, we will stay on the path. And when our eyes are distracted by other seductions, that is when we wander off. "Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. There is no Christian community that is more than this, and none that is less than this," writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his astonishing book, *Life Together*, written about the gifts and the demands of Christian community. I want to give a shout out here to Jan Jacewicz for helping me to see how essential Bonhoeffer's work is. Jesus Christ is what makes Christian community possible.

Christian community is not built on our winning personalities – because personality is a fickle thing; it is not built on our total agreement about the issues of the day – because that kind of agreement and uniformity is always going to be one argument away from breaking down; and it is not built on our having warm and fuzzy feelings – because warm and fuzzy feelings are transient and changing. Trying to build Christian community on those things is like trying to build your house on beach sand. It may be pretty for a while, but sooner or later, a wave will come along and wash it away. The only solid rock to build Christian community upon is Jesus Christ. He is the center.

When Jesus says, in Matthew 6 that Linda read for us, 'Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or what you will drink, or what you will wear, he is pointing to our tendency to try and secure our lives *on external variables* – how we look, how we feel, whether others agree with us – and he says that kind of life, that kind of community will always have an underlying anxiety. Seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, he says, put Christ and following Christ at the center, and that will keep everything in perspective. Then you will see more clearly how to do the things that you are called to do, and you will see more clearly what things you do not need to

do. And you will see more clearly how to work with those who disagree with you about those things.

Having Christ at the center of our community in the church is not just about having his name on a mission statement. It is about being consciously aware of his presence with us in everything that we do. In every meeting, Christ is at the center. In every interaction with another person, Christ is at the center. Christ is between us and every person with whom we interact. Every time we meet someone, Christ is there between us, with his gracious, steady, holy, and merciful presence. Every time we have a conflict with someone, Christ is there between us, with his gracious, steady, holy, and merciful presence. His presence grounds everything we do, his presence illuminates everything we do, his presence turns down the temperature on everything we do. "More light, less heat," as someone as said. His presence makes us less dependent on everything coming out just the way we want.

A final reason why Christ must be the center and the focus of Christian community is that if he is not, *something else will be*. Something else will be our focus in our community. And often, that something else will be some ideal that we have of what the church ought to be. We will place our opinions or our wishes for the church in the center, what we think the church should be like, and when the church inevitably fails to live up to those ideals, those idols, things will fall apart for us, and we will fall into disillusionment and disappointment with the church.

And when that happens, by the mercy of God, we will have the opportunity to rediscover that Christ is the center of the church, and he has been all along. Not some fancy words of wisdom or lofty experiences of really good feelings, like Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2, but Jesus Christ and him crucified, a figure that the world sees as one who is weak and poor and foolish, but who we have experienced as the enduring power of God. The crucified Christ is the center of the church.

As we move into the season of Lent, let us return again and again, to the awareness that the center of our lives, the center of the church is Jesus Christ, and as we serve him and those in need, those in whom Christ hides himself in a particular way, all things will be held in their proper perspective. Our lives, as turbulent and challenging as they may be, will have a gracious, joyful, and merciful center. To God and to God alone be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.