

**[Please note these are unedited preaching notes and are not for publication. They are made available here to aid the deaf community in Christ Church and to be a reference for anyone who found the sermons useful.]**

## **Community**

**The more observant of you will realize that we are in the middle of an excellent sermon series on 2 Samuel and you were no doubt looking forward to the next installment and instead you have me about to spout forth on community. And you may well ask how this is related. It isn't – I just wanted to.**

**This topic has been sitting with me for some time I suppose because of SG work and my membership of a CG and then I read Ortberg 'everyone's normal till you get to know them' which really got me going. So I am grateful to Duncan for his flexibility in letting me do this. I hope you don't feel too aggrieved. And I am also very grateful to Ortberg for his insights which I used a lot in prep.**

**This am I want to look at why community is so important to us, why we find it so difficult, and suggest some ways of getting over the stumbling blocks we face and some of the benefits.**

**Lets start by clearing up what do we mean by community anyway? It can become one of those nebulous concepts that mean very little knew – because it means different things to different people. For us this morning I am meaning everyone with whom you could get closer or with whom you could fall out - our families, friends, neighbours, our colleagues. The definition is rather broad – but then so is Gods' love.**

**Now, Why is community so important? Why can't we just keep our heads down and just worry about our relationship with God? Get that right and let the rest take care of themselves?**

**Well, community is so important because we were made for it.**

**God made the world and the animals and then he made a man. God and Adam were still at this stage on great terms, and there lots of lovely animals and potential pets around for Adam to make friends with – talking snakes for instance. But man was still lonely.**

**So God made him a partner. Something more than the animals and less than the angels just like man. His partner his equal. Of course there were modifications – one or 2 improvements - it was the 2<sup>nd</sup> model after all – but we won't quibble those, these 2 were more or less equal. And they needed each other. Without each other they were lonely – why? because God created us for relationship with one another. And obviously I don't only mean the marriage relationship but relationship in general.**

**You see God created us in his own image and God is three and God is one. God is in community. We will hunger for relationship because community is rooted in the being of God in whose image we are made.**

**God did not create us because he was lonely or bored. We are not the product of god twiddling his fingers or of a needy god filling the world with devotees. If that were his aim he'd have 100% faith rate. No. Ortberg says God created us because he loved community and wanted to fill the world to share it with him.**

**We hopefully don't have children because we're bored or don't want to be lonely in our old age but because we are in love and want to extend that love. Our happiness in relationship promotes us to build on it.**

**God wanted to extend the community that he loved. And because this is the rational behind it, this community that he made us for goes deeper than successful net works of support. Its not re loneliness avoidance. It is the reason we exist.**

**The work of building community is the noblest work a person can do. The desire for it is the deepest hunger we can have.**

**`my prayer' Jesus said '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'. Jesus wants us to be one.**

**He also said - 'where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name I am in the midst of them'. To gather in his name means to gather in his spirit which means to relate in love and submission to one another. Its not just our getting together but the way we do it - when we meet in a Christ like manner.**

**Intercessory prayer is not just about the content of the prayer its about the process of prayer. Its about being together, listening for God together, its about discerning, its about being accountable to one another. When we do that Jesus tells us he is there with us, cheering us on. So when we are in community in that way we not only meet one another – we meet God.**

**This is why authentic community is so life giving. This is why knowing and being known, loving and being loved are such a joy because we meet God.**

**To reject community, to tolerate disunity is to be fundamentally at odds with Gods' purpose for the world. Unresolved conflict, gossip unchallenged, ministry leaders attacking one another this all leads to us dishonouring God's purpose for us. Conversely when we forgive, encourage, extend compassion and devote time to others we are aligning ourselves to God purpose. To paraphrase Ortberg.**

**Evidence of our fundamental need for community can be seen in practical ways. In our health for instance. One of the most thorough research projects on relationships followed the lives of 7000 people over 9 years.**

**It concluded that isolated people were 3 times more likely to die than those with good strong relationships.**

**If people had bad health habits such as smoking, poor eating / drinking habits, obesity but had strong relationships, they lived significantly longer than those that had good habits but were isolated.**

**Other research done by Rene Spitz demonstrates that if infants are not hugged and touched even though healthy and fed, they suffer retarded neurological development.**

**Helen.**

**You may say this is obvious, but then our need for community is obvious too. We don't outgrow needing to be loved.**

**We need to be in community. It is what we were made for, it is where we thrive, where we meet one another and God.**

**So why do we often find it so hard? Why do we get irritable and irritated with one another? Why do we fight and bicker and live with grudges and hurt?**

**There are 2 things that profoundly effect our ability to relate well.**

**Firstly time. We don't give relationships enough of it. Edward Halowell, the psychiatrist, says that the 2 most powerful experiences in life are connecting and achieving. These 2 things grab our attention and energy.**

**Halowell points out that while both are considered important by us we are devoted and obsessed with achieving and only give what is left of us to connecting. We see this all around us don't we. During our working lives which is a good portion of them, we spend our days at work and come home exhausted to our families. We cram connecting into 2 days when most of us need lots of rest too.**

**I know its not a choice for most of us – work is a necessity – its that which puts the roof over and pays for**

**pick and pay. But achieving and status can become a god. The recognition we get at work can become the only one that counts.**

**Psychologist Alan McGinnis says the answer to creating deep friendship is simple – make it your priority – meaning give it time.**

**Ortberg says `Ironically we devote massive amounts of time to making money, running errands, succeeding at our work, but neglect giving our most valuable possession – time to the experience for which we are created – community.'**

**A friend of mine says we often hear that so and so is very successful or doing well. What is meant is rich. He [usually it is a he] is very wealthy but divorced twice and has no relationship with his kids. We don't often call the happily married man that lives in the small house down the street and spends his holidays with his family camping, highly successful.**

**You don't hear `Oh he's doing so well – gets on really well with his wife and kids.'**

**And yet if he has good relationships with his family and has time for his friends, that is exactly what he is. Highly successful. He is achieving that for which he was made.**

**The 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians met daily. We try to cram 1<sup>st</sup> century community into a 21<sup>st</sup> cent timetable. How often do we say [my self included] `we must get together some time, when things settle down'. It is not easy to slow life down. I wish there were a simple solution to the busy schedules that many of us with school going kids live by. Awareness of the problem is helpful though. Awareness that we can't microwave friendships or marriages or parenting. There is no warp speed setting for relationships.**

**Many of us need to reminded of that as we rush through life.**

**So the lack of time that we invest into building community is one of the reasons we find it difficult, the other is that we are all weirdos but we don't know it.**

**When I was small some ageing relative had a sampler saying 'the whole world is queer save thee and me and even thee is a little queer'. Got to be careful with that terminology these days of course but we know what was meant.**

**What the sampler was saying was that we all think everyone else is a little weird because they are all different from us. Sometimes we get close to people that we think are normal, like us, discover, inevitably that they don't see everything exactly as we do and then we try to fix them. Make them normal like us. They don't usually want to be fixed.**

**The fact that we think there is such a thing as normal is unhelpful itself. The fact that we think everyone else ought to and could have the same world view causes a lot of grief. It always amazes me how a friend and I can see the same movie or read the same book and get a totally different message out of it. But it shouldn't amaze me. I should get used to it. Its normal**

**A friend of mine was laughing recently about the fact that she and another friend had such different ideas about dogs. My friend happily lets her dog lick the pots clean which horrified the other woman – whereas this other woman thinks its fine to have the dog sleep in the middle of the bed. My friend had the insight to see that they both thought the other odd. We don't often have that insight.**

**Thinking we are right and expecting others to be like us is a big problem with community. And I'm not talking about major differences ie: those between Muslims and Christians here – I'm talking about people that we think we have a lot in common with.**

**Having accepted that we have differences then we need to realize that just because someone sees it differently does not mean that they are wrong.**

**And the next step is – say they are wrong sometimes. Part of making a community work is forgiving one another – which is easier to do when you accept that you are wrong too at times.**

**But sadly we tend to carry around an arsenal of opinions: condemnation, resentment, selfishness, envy, contempt. We carry them round our marriages, offices even our churches and our friendships.**

**I had an incident which demonstrated the above to me at the end of last year. I have a good friend. I haven't known her for ever but since we're been here so 7 years. Late in December we had a major fall out. She did some thing that I found very hurtful and I was very upset and angry. A lot of things were said. I was devastated. I could see no way of us being friends again. I'd been very angry and she'd said some very hurtful things to me.**

**I phoned her the next day meaning to sign off really, so that as least we could greet at the school gates if need be. I said you talk and I'll listen then I'll talk and you listen. Lets not interrupt one another so that we are able to say all we need to. I thought it would be a 10 minute conversation. We talked for over an hour.**

**When she was talking the worst thing happened - I realized there was truth in what she was saying. I then had a devastating experience – I saw myself from her point of view. And once I let the door open a lot of truth flooded in. it was a very uncomfortable experience. I had been so righteous and comfortable in my anger. But of course suddenly there was a chance of reconciliation. Because I could now say sorry because I could see what I needed to say sorry for.**

**And then over the next few days it was like dominoes. My being able see her side helped her to see mine and we both understood each other probably for the first time in years. This had been building up for a long time. Little resentments and little condemnations being banked without our even realizing.**

**And you know one of her biggest gripes with me was how little time I made for our friendship. I had eroded our relationship by not investing in it. We both learnt so much about ourselves thru this. We both grew thru this.**

**Learning to live in community is not about how normal people handle weirdos but requires accepting that we are all weirdos and helping other to handle us. Accepting that at time we are not just different but wrong and that we need to say sorry and be forgiving ourselves.**

**Now I know this is all very well when people want forgiveness – but what about when they either don't know or don't care that they have hurt us or drive us nuts? I have someone like that in my life. [is anyone worried yet that I have so many examples of issues from my own life??]**

**There is a man that I have to have regular contact with for various reasons who drives me dilly. [don't all look at graeme] Not so long ago we were out in a group and in fact the evening had gone well. We were all on our best behavior. Then right at the end he did something that incensed me. It was deceitful and undermining and I was livid.**

**I went home seething full of righteous indignation. `you see that's why I cant spend time with him! He always does these things! Why do we bother!!' And being a good Christian I took my righteous indignation to church with me the next morning for an outing – fully intending to take it home again with me at the end in tact.**

**And then someone said `love thy neighbor as thyself'. I've heard it hundreds of times. But that morning it hit me in the stomach. Oh God you can't mean him - you can't possibly expect me to love him – you saw what he did last night' – and I knew that I just had to do it. And not on my own of course. I had to let the HS in on the job – which I realized that I hadn't. I didn't want him in messing things up and making me let go of my holier than thou feelings.**

**Do you want to get well? Jesus asked the sick many by the Sheep Gate pool. `Not really' I could hear my reply, I quite like not loving some people. But I realized then I had to come to the party. And my prayer could not be fix him but fix me. Make me more tolerant. More understanding. More loving. Help me see beyond his weirdo-ness – and see what my weirdo-ness does to him. And I have to keep praying it.**

**When it comes to healing difficult rifts we have an amazing resource to draw on. Do we use it? Do we have the will to?**

**How is this morning's reading relevant in all this?  
It's a great example to us of 3 things that we have talked about**

- 1/ not letting differences get in the way of relationship**
- 2/ taking time for relationships**
- 3/ and also forgiveness**

**Appros pro the differences, the one man was badly disabled. Big deal you may say. It was in those days. A Roman statute stated that all deformed children should be killed. The Israelites thought that we brought disability and illness on ourselves thru sin. [who sinned, this man or his parents?]**

**The 4 able bodied men could so easily have ignored this man. He was different from them and his problems were probably of his own making.**

**But they didn't ignore. They saw beyond the differences. They didn't leave him to it. They gave him their time and considerable physical effort.**

**When Jesus looks up he sees the faith of the friends and their love and care of this man.**

**And then Jesus forgives him. Jesus sees that the real need for healing – as with all of us – is on the inside. And knowing how he would associate sickness with sin he proves that he is forgiven by healing the whole man. He can now literally walk into new life.**

**What had this man gained thru his community of friends? Love and physical healing yes but more – forgiveness and spiritual growth.**

**Authentic community always involves spiritual growth. We are made for community and we grow thru community because when we are in relationship our sin becomes evident. And unless it does how can we grow?**

**We can all be perfect in isolation. No one push the wrong buttons, no one to get angry with – and no one there to be irritated by you either. If my friend and I had not got talking again we would not have learnt from one another. We would not have grown.**

**In community our sin is evident, confronted and forgiven and we grow because of it.**

**So in community we not only meet one another and God – but we meet ourselves.**

**Ortberg describes the men in this mornings reading as the best small group in the world. It made me think straight away about our small groups and CG's here. Over the years that I have been involved with the groups I have been greatly moved by leaders and group members that go way out of their way to see past differences and to help one another. Some acts of real selflessness. Time effort care and love that is given. Chances for growth and healing.**

**I wasn't passionate about groups when I started this job – odd really because I was in a great group – but I am passionate now. I can see that they are opportunities for community.**

**And we have a particular need for that at the moment. Someone left a really interesting and disturbing article in my pigeon hole recently. [thanks] It was talking about the situation of the Anglican church in England. And saying how ridiculously accommodating it has become – of other faiths. I'm not going to give examples – you've probably know some of them and they are not here to defend themselves. The article was aggressive in tone and therefore unhelpful but the point was well made – the Anglican church - at least in the UK, seems to be far too ready to capitulate. And we know that's true in other parts of the world too.**

**However we are not tolerant within the church – as the tone of the article demonstrates [if the man is a Christian]. There are 33,000 denominations of Christianity in the world.**

**All but one was a split. Almost all born out of anger and hostility and withdrawal. All follow Jesus – who prayed that they may be one and that they `be brought into complete unity to let the world know that you sent me'.**

**What does our disunity our lack of community say about our faith?**

**We may not be able to fix the world wide church but we can have an effect in our own communities.**

**How wonderful it would be to be recognizable as Christians because of our sense of community, our readiness to make time for one another, our ability to listen to the other point of view, our quickness to forgive and persistence in prayer for those with whom we struggle.**

**`Go forth and evangelise' St Francis said – and if you must, use words'.**

**Community is what we are made for, it is where we meet with one another, ourselves and God.**

**It requires time – which most of us battle to find, and humility. But it is worth both because, as Jean Vanier [founder of the L'Arche community for the mentally handicapped] says `a community is not simply a group of people who live together and love each other, it is a place of resurrection'.**