

Community: We Gather in Christ

Pillars Sermon 2

Acts 2:36-47 | September 10, 2023

A sermon given by The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

See page 10 for small group discussion questions

A few years ago, while getting my hair cut, I fell into a conversation about church with the hairdresser. Learning I was a pastor, we talked a bit about faith. She considered herself a Christian. I asked her if she had a church, and that's when the conversation got interesting. She shared that she'd gone through a divorce and was single parenting. Through this, she'd left her old church community and was trying to find a new one. I asked her what she was looking for in a church. She said quite emphatically, "I need a church that's real... I can't do fake anymore."

As we talked, it became clear that her experience reflects that of many others. She was starting to distance herself from Christianity, not because of disbelief in the church's doctrine, but disappointment with the church's community. When the surface of your life breaks, you need a community that's more than surface level. She needed a place where she could really connect, where she didn't need to be perfect to belong.

I've thought a lot about that interaction. It represents two things worth considering:

First, it reminds us that Christianity is communal. It's about more than private beliefs. It's about fellowship—being joined to a local community, called a church. Secondly, it reminds us how important this communal aspect of Christianity is for meeting core human needs. People are lonely. People need friends. People don't want to go it alone.

Twenty years ago, Harvard researcher Robert Putnam, in his bestseller, *Bowling Alone*, showed us that meaningful community was declining in America. He left us with a memorable illustration of a rising individualism: Bowling leagues are in decline, he explained, but more people are going bowling than ever. Why? Because they're bowling alone.

And it turns out that too much individualism isn't good for us. It severs us from a core human need—*belonging*. Social psychologist Roy Baumeister has demonstrated in his research not only that

belonging is a fundamental and powerful need we all share. He's also demonstrated a link between belonging and well-being:

Belongingness appears to have multiple and strong effects on emotional patterns and on cognitive processes. Lack of attachment is linked to a variety of ill effects on health, adjustment, and well-being.¹

Christians shouldn't be surprised by this. We're made in the image of a relational God. For time eternal, The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in perfect fellowship. And it shouldn't surprise us that God's mission, across the Bible, involves more than saving individuals; it involves calling together a people.

Community is essential to Christianity, and it's also essential to well-being.

Here, then, is a place where Christianity ought to have much to offer a world—despite all its digital connectivity—that's growing lonelier. Today, an authentic Christian community may be our most powerful apologetic. And by Christian community, I mean both our *togetherness in Christ* which shows up in Sunday morning gatherings, and all the fellowship that overflows from there: small groups, service projects, prayer gatherings, hospitality, and much more.

So, let's be sure we understand what Christian community is, and be intentional in cultivating it. To do so, we'll turn to the first expression of it in Scripture. It comes at the end of Acts 2 and is the outworking of Peter's Pentecost day sermon. Looking at Acts 2:36-47, we'll notice that the Christian community involves these three things: (1) a specific calling, (2) a unique culture, and (3) a dogged commitment. Calling. Culture. Commitment. We'll consider all three.

I. Calling:

When God calls us to Himself, He calls us to each other.

Our passage breaks into two parts. Part one, verses 26-40, represents God calling people to Himself through the preaching of the Gospel: Peter says in verse 49,

The promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself (2:39).

Part two unfolds in verses 42-47, and represents God calling people to each other:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (2:42); And the Lord added to their number day by day all who were being saved (2:47).

The Lord *called* (v39). The Lord *added* (v47).

He calls people to Himself; then He adds them to the fellowship.

Christians think much about calling—our callings to vocations, or marriages, or cities. But do we think enough about our callings to other Christians? Fellowship with God includes fellowship with God's family, His people. And this is not abstract, as though all it means is a mystical connection to all the Christians. It's concrete. The early Christians gathered as little churches in homes. Notice verse 46, they were "breaking bread in their homes." Paul greets "Nympha, and the church which is in her house" (Colossians 4:15).

Here is the biblical principle behind Acts 2:

When God calls us to Himself, He also calls us to each other.

Paul puts it this way, "So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another" (Romans 12:5). Jesus states it this way, "By this people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

How might this principle impact our approach to community at TFCA?

First, it should caution us against settling for only man-made community. You know you don't need God to build a community. And people build pretty vibrant communities without God all the time.

Man-made community is built around affinity, things we naturally have in common: shared interests, shared life stage, and shared educational backgrounds. It's not wrong for community in a church to be

built in part around affinities. Men's and women's ministries, youth ministry, ministries to young families—these relational bonds are perfectly okay.

But a church must ask if our community is built on something deeper. Acts 2 makes clear that the church community is *God-built*, not *man-made*. And God does not build His community around our natural interests but around a supernatural calling. In fact, God is known to bring people into fellowship who by nature, are enemies—like Jews and Gentiles. And all they have in common is a supernatural love for Jesus that overcomes their natural inclination to hate.²

This will mean that the community God builds will not look like the community we'd build. Expect to find yourself relating to people here who, outside of God's call, you'd never befriend otherwise.

Do you have any friendships like this at church? Do your friendships at church reveal the supernatural call of God or just the natural inclinations of man?

Also, this principle—that God calls us to each other—encourages us to rethink our posture on Sunday mornings. Do you know that you may be God's answer to someone else's need for fellowship and belonging? Does your posture at church—how you enter, who you talk to after services—make you more like an open or closed door for others? We are to be a doorway into community on Sunday mornings.

II. Culture:

Community built by the Gospel must reflect the Gospel.

Near the conclusion of his sermon, Peter makes a statement to his hearers about their *culture*:

And with many other words [Peter] bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation"(2:40).

"Generation," refers to the common characteristics of the people living in that area at that time.³

"Crooked," means morally bent, twisted.⁴ If Christians are saved out of an unhealthy culture, we would expect that their communities would foster a better one.

Have you ever noticed that the way a community is entered into, often shapes that community's culture? I visited a friend one fall who was an RA in a dorm at Harvard. The community on that dormitory floor was entered by *giftedness*, and the culture reflected that: you sensed a flavor of ambition, competitiveness, and even elitism. People entered by hard work, tremendous natural ability, and an application process where they put their best foot forward.

Around that time, I also went with another friend to an open AA meeting where he shared his story of recovery. That culture was very different. People entered this community, not through giftedness, but *brokenness*. The culture reflected this: it was marked by meekness, radical honesty, servanthood, and an unashamed longing for hope.

We might ask, therefore, how is the church community entered into? The answer is right before us in verses 37-40: it's entered by an encounter with the Gospel. Let's look at this, noting that a *community built by the Gospel should have a culture that reflects the Gospel*—and just what the culture might be.

Notice the process by which people are brought into the church. It begins with an encounter with the Gospel through Peter's preaching:

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified (2:36).

Verse 37 tells the hearer's response:

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (2:37).

They are convicted of their sin. They don't know what to do. Peter shows them the path:

And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (2:38).

And verse 40 summarizes the scene:

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls (2:40).

Here is an encounter with the Good News of Jesus Christ that leads to conversion. It flows like this: hearing, conviction (faith), repentance, and baptism. This is how God brings people to Himself and to the new community.

What type of culture should result from a community entered into through the doorway of the Gospel? We can identify in our passage at least two qualities:

1. Humility

First, Christian community must be marked by *humility*. Why? Because the Gospel humbles you in the process of saving you. Notice how these hearers' experience is described in verse 37: "Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'" (2:37).

They are "cut to the heart." This is different than being "interested in the mind." The Gospel has crashed through all pretense and become personal to them. And notice their plea to the apostles: "Brothers, what shall we do?"

The Gospel exposes our desperation; the Gospel lays us low. We are not okay. We cannot fix ourselves. We are part of the problem. We have sinned against God and neighbor. In our own strength, we cannot fix ourselves, our lives, or our world.

Community built up of people who've experienced their desperate need for God must foster a culture—not of pride—but humility.

2. Honor

A second quality is *honor*: The Gospel doesn't leave you low; it lifts you up. Hence these men are invited to be baptized, to receive forgiveness, and to receive the Holy Spirit. (v 38). God did not send His son to condemn us as enemies but to bring us home as sons and daughters.

The church community is made up of people who have not only been brought low but who have been lifted high. They are sinners *and* saints. This means we must treat one another with the same honor that God has bestowed upon us. Paul calls the Christians who make up the church in Rome to “Outdo one another in showing honor” (Romans 12:10).

What does it mean to honor someone? It means more than being nice. It means to show them dignity, respect, gratitude, esteem.⁵ King David said in Psalm 16, “As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight” (Psalm 16:3).

Honor the men and women God has chosen to be His sons and daughters for eternity. Esteem them. Do not be embarrassed to be associated with them. See them through the eyes of Jesus Christ, who loved them and gave his life for them.

So here is our second point about Christian community:

It has a culture shaped by the Gospel, which must include an atmosphere of humility and honor (among many other qualities).

We’ve considered the calling and culture of the community, thirdly, we consider its *commitment*.

III. Commitment:

Commitment to Christ is expressed in commitment to Christ’s people.

Verse 42 uses the word *devoted* to describe the community. It’s a word that means “to persist obstinately,” “to adhere firmly,” “to devote oneself” to something. In other words, the community was the opposite of indifferent, lax, half-hearted.

What were they committed to? Four things:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (2:42)⁶

Let’s note something that all four of these have in common: *Christ*.

The Word is about Christ, the fellowship is in Christ, the breaking of the bread represents the body of Christ, and the prayers are said to Christ.

So, before we say more specifically what this commitment looks like, we note this: *the individual Christian's commitment to other Christians, is simply part of her commitment to Christ.* In loving Christ, she loves what Christ loves, his people. And the same way that Christ is the mediator between us and God the Father, Christ is the mediator between us and other Christians: he brings us to them.

Can we be committed to Christ and not committed to Christ's people? Now notice two specific ways we relate to Christ's people *through* Christ.

First, their devotion to the "word of the Apostles" means not only that this community studied the Scriptures, but they spoke scripture to one another. One of the God-ordained ways Christians relate to each other is by speaking God's word to one another.

German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected much on the nature and blessing of Christian community. In his book *Life Together*, he explains how we relate through God's Word:

Christians live entirely by the truth of God's Word in Jesus Christ.... God put this Word into the mouth of human beings so that it may be passed on to others.... God has willed that we should seek and find God's living Word in the testimony of other Christians, in the mouths of human beings. Therefore, Christians need other Christians who speak God's Word to them. They need them again and again when they become uncertain and disheartened because, living by their own resources, they cannot help themselves.... They need other Christians as bearers and proclaimers of the divine word of salvation.⁷

***Are you committed to speaking God's word to others in your church community?
Do you recognize that at times, when your brother or sisters in Christ are low, and in doubt,
and fear, it may be the Word of God coming through your mouth that upholds them?***

The Christian community's commitment also took the form of practical service:

All who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. (2:44-45).

This is not a picture of communism or communalism, where private property is forbidden. There's nothing in Acts of the NT that suggests Christians cannot own property—in fact, it's clear that many own their own homes. What it stresses is a transformation of the way people hold onto their property. Suddenly they see it as a way to serve others in the community. How would Christ want to use my possessions, for the people he loves?

So here is Christian community—it's founded by God's calling, reflects the Gospel in its culture, and finds one's commitment to Christ fueling commitment to Christ's people.

Let me close with four encouragements for fostering community at TFCA:

1. Commit

This may mean sacrificing preferences, schedules, and other things. But commit to the church—to being here on Sundays, and to finding ways to be involved other than on Sundays such as small groups or volunteering.

2. Be patient

You may have been coming for a while and have made a few acquaintances but haven't yet felt any real sense of belonging. But you've been trying. To you, I would say, "this is a great start. Don't give up. It takes time." Friendship is challenging in a society like ours—even in the church. But the answer isn't to retreat, but to face down the challenge with intentionality: embrace real, meaningful, face-to-face time with people in the church. And pray God blesses you with deeper connections.

3. Build Gospel-bonds

Don't just hang out with others but pray with them. Don't just share a laugh but share a Bible verse. Don't just gossip about someone you don't like, but together, ask what Christ thinks of them.

4. Put down your daggers

Your barbs and opinions that come out of other communities you're in—whether cultural, political, or ethnic—put these away. You must respect what God is doing in His church and be careful not to harm someone who may be just new to the faith with a harsh word that doesn't reflect the voice of Christ, but this "crooked generation."

My hairdresser friend needed more than sound doctrine from a church. She needed satisfying community.

**This is our calling at TFCA:
to be a people who not only believe the truth but express it in our lives together.**

Questions for small groups:

Members of your small group are encouraged to listen to the sermon if they were not there on Sunday. We also encourage you to begin your small group meeting with prayer and then by reading Acts 2:37-46. The below questions are suggestions for how to have a meaningful discussion about the passage—but you may have better questions that come up in your group.

1. Acts 2:37 says that some who heard Peter's sermon were "cut to the heart." Has there ever been a time when you were "cut to the heart," or deeply convicted about who you are in relationship to God?
2. What are examples of community in your life? What are examples of community in the life of The Falls Church Anglican?
3. Why do you think God calls us, not only to Himself but to be in relationship with other Christians? Do you find anything about this challenging or encouraging?
4. What are some things that undermine Christian community at TFCA?
5. What are three ways you can be more intentional about fostering community with other Christians at TFCA—and even beyond that community?

Endnotes

1. Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 117, No. 3 (1995): 497-529.
Cited in Jeremy Linneman, *Why Do We Feel Lonely at Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 14.
2. In his book, *Love in Hard Places*, biblical scholar D. A. Carson writes challengingly: "Ideally ... the church itself is not made up of natural friends. It is made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common ancestry, common accents, common jobs, or anything else of that sort.... In this light, they are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus' sake" (Carson, *Love in Hard Places*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 61).
3. "γενεά," BDAG, 191.
4. "σκολιός," BDAG, 930, pert. to being morally bent or twisted, *crooked, unscrupulous, dishonest*, etc. Psalm 78 refers to moments in Israel's history with this image: don't be like your fathers, "a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God" (Ps 78:8).
5. "[Honor] is far more than niceness; it's dignity, respect, gratitude, and esteem—for starters! And how could it be otherwise, as we learn to see one another with gospel-illuminated eyes?" Ray Ortlund and Sam Allberry, *You're Not Crazy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 60.
6. We could say here what the Christian community is not: it is not the community that ignores the Word of God, neglects fellowship together, never shares a meal, and doesn't say their prayers.
7. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Trans. By Gerhard Ludwig Müller and Albrecht Schönherr (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 32.