

May/June 2020

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

COMMUNITY



ALSO: JESUS IN HEBREWS

Dear Friends:

In the early seventeenth century, the English poet John Donne famously wrote, “No man is an island.” He went on to add, “Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” Donne’s poem states the obvious: to be human is to be in community. God made us for life together.



Because of our rebellion against God, however, we live in broken communities, often marred by strife and conflict. The gospel tells us that through the blood of Christ we are reconciled to God and to each other. As Christians, we are one family with all other followers of Jesus. We are not alone; we belong to Jesus and to each other.

This May, as Bret Lamsma reflects on the lives of members of his congregation, he shares the beauty of Christian community from a wide variety of biblical angles. And in doing so, he encourages us to rejoice and grow in the blessings of our life together.

Then, in June, Brian Kuyper dives deep into the book of Hebrews to explore the person and work of Jesus Christ. This study helps us to build up our relationship with our Lord and Savior, who makes it possible for us to be the people of God.

May God’s Word refresh, refocus, and renew you each day!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

—Kurt Selles

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**“Community”
Bret Lamsma**



**“Jesus in Hebrews”
Brian Kuyper**

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ReFrame
Media

may

Community

Bret Lamsma

We are all a part of at least one community. It may be the community of a neighborhood, a group of friends and family, a church, a school, a place where we volunteer. Whatever that community is, it helps shape who we are. Communities help us grow, help us deal with problems, help us celebrate great things, and help us confront conflict together.

The Bible is filled with stories of community. From the Old Testament people of God to the New Testament church of Jesus Christ, the Bible gives us all kinds of lessons on community. Jesus was part of a tight community with his disciples and close followers. And he taught about the good and bad of community.

Throughout this month let's look at some of the Bible's teachings on community. We will also look at community through the eyes of *my* faith community. I asked members of my church to help me by answering the question "What is community?" They reflected on their own experiences of community, and their answers led me to reflect on what the Bible teaches about community.

One of my students even noted how cool it was that my community was helping me write about community. So, together, let's discover more about community.

Bret Lamsma is director of faith formation at a church in Denver, Colorado, and has served churches in Michigan and California in youth, intergenerational, and educational ministries. Bret and his wife, Julie, have two children, and he enjoys hiking and camping with his family.

COMMUNITY IS . . . BEING AND DOING TOGETHER

All the believers were together and had everything in common.

—Acts 2:44

I love the idea of community. At the first church where I worked, I taught about community so much that the students started to roll their eyes whenever I said the word. And yet, every time we discussed it, we would talk about something different. It also applied to everything that we did. When we played games together, we were building community. When we ate together, we were building community. When we studied God's Word or talked about a current topic and applied our faith to it, we were building community. When we served others in our church or neighborhood together, we were building community. When we prayed together, we were building community.

The early church, described in Acts 2, is a great example of this as well. Whatever the believers did, they did it together

and built community in the process. From the big things in life to the small things, they did them together and learned about who they were and who God is at the same time.

Being part of a community is important. It gives us the opportunity to be honest and vulnerable. To build others up as we are being built up. To discover our gifts and talents as we help others do the same. To learn from others as they learn from us. And to see a larger picture of who God is in the world around us and in ourselves.

Let's explore together what community is.

Father, help us on this journey of learning together as we think about community. In Jesus, Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . HOSPITALITY

“Wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat. . . .”
—Genesis 18:3

Caleb wasn't looking for a mentor or a friend when he went to work for Joe. He simply wanted to learn about woodworking. But the relationship became much more than that. Instead of assigning tasks, Joe asked Caleb what he wanted to learn through this experience. That set off a years-long friendship that went much farther than simply working together. Joe and Caleb shared meals and books together. Joe introduced Caleb to the details of selling his house so that Caleb could learn. Joe also introduced Caleb to his friends. Joe invited Caleb into his life and included him in all kinds of ways.

Community is about more than just a surface relationship. It calls for hospitality, and that often means putting oneself in a place of risk and vulnerability to include others. It means

inviting others into your space to include them in what is going on.

Abraham and Sarah invited three strangers to rest, wash up, and eat. It might not seem like much, but this is an example of inviting strangers into our space so that they are not strangers anymore. Abraham and Sarah gave of themselves in order to make the strangers feel welcome, and they were blessed in amazing ways.

The ways we make room for others in our community is important.

Father, help us to invite others into our community as we invest in each other. Help us to see and serve you in the stranger and in our community. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . HOME

[Titus] told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.
—2 Corinthians 7:7

Kyle, who enjoys the familiarity of home, was away on a trip for sixteen days. When he returned, not only was he glad to be back, but he also felt the security that comes with being somewhere familiar again. It wasn't the physical location so much as it was the people and the belonging that he appreciated when he returned. Everyone wanted to know how he was and what he had experienced while being away.

We all go our separate ways almost every day. Community isn't about being in the same place with the same people all the time. But it *is* about having a place to belong so that no matter where we go, we always have a place to return to—a place where we are known, supported, and loved. In a place of community, we can share where we have been and what we have done, and

we can rest from the difficulties of life.

The apostle Paul was often on the road and facing difficulties at every turn. Receiving the gift of Titus's presence was deeply encouraging to him. But even more encouraging were the messages that Titus delivered from people who cared deeply for Paul and were concerned for his well-being. The reminders of a supportive and caring community brought on feelings of great joy. That's the kind of joy we all need from a community that we can call home.

Father, help us experience community as home—a place to belong and to rest and be safe. Provide that for us, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . SUPPORT

“Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. . . . “I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty.” —Ruth 1:21

Melanie’s family returned broken after a move to another state. The purpose of their move away had not worked out, and they had suddenly found themselves without a place to live and searching for a place to belong. With their independence gone and their pride bruised, they came back and opened themselves up to being helped by their local church. A family took them in and let them live in their house until they figured out what to do next.

There are times in our lives when we need to learn that community is there to support us in difficult times. We tend to think that we can do everything on our own, so sometimes we fail to see that the people God has put in place around us are there to support and lift us up when we can’t support ourselves.

Naomi and her family had left Bethlehem looking for a better life in Moab. But when she returned, she said that all she had had was taken away from her. Of course, God was still providing for her; she just couldn’t see it. In her bitterness and despair, she needed a community of support to come around her and fill her up again—and her community did just that.

In the difficult times of our lives, let’s remember that community is around us to strengthen us, build us up, and support us in everything we are going through.

Father, provide us with a community of support and with the humble spirit to accept that support when we need it. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . ABOUT MENTORSHIP

Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said.

—Exodus 18:24

When Julie moved to Colorado, she wanted to find a new community to be a part of. She had a church and a work community, but she sensed a need for something more as well. Her daughter had begun riding horses, so Julie saw an opportunity and started volunteering for the organization that owned the horses. Though she didn't know much about horses when she began, the people there were eager to teach her what they knew and to help her along. While she is still learning, she now knows enough to be an important part of the volunteer team, and she helps other young riders as they learn about horses.

Every good community has mentors and mentees. There are things that we need to know and learn—and as we grow, we find there are things that we can teach and share

with others. Being open to both roles at the same time is an important part of community.

There are lots of examples of mentorship in the Bible. Moses was mentored by his father-in-law, Jethro, when the burden of leadership was becoming too great. And Moses mentored Joshua when it was his turn to take over the leadership of Israel (Deuteronomy 31).

In community we all need to ask, Who is mentoring us? From whom are we learning the things we need to know? And, in turn, with whom are we sharing the wisdom that God has given us?

Father, help us to be receptive to learning from people around us, and open to teaching others what we have learned. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . A REFLECTION OF GOD IN US

God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness. . . ."
—Genesis 1:26

Matt often wonders why God created us knowing that we would hurt him in such incredible ways. His conclusion centers on God's love for us and his hope that one day, in spite of all the hurt we cause God, we will live with him in perfect, eternal community. In a sense, that is also why we enter into community with each other.

Matt can't remember a relationship in his life where he hasn't failed, in one way or another, to live up to the ideal expectations of community. Despite that, Matt has some deep connections with people that he loves very much. And he isn't alone. We hurt people we are in community with all the time. It is in our sinful nature to fail, to let down, and to hurt others—not always on purpose but as a result of sin in our lives. Yet we all keep entering into community again and

again. The hurt doesn't stop us, because we keep loving others and hoping for everything that community is and can be.

Why do we enter into community? Because God did, and we are created in his image. God loves us so much that he sent his Son, Jesus, who laid down his own life for us in order to re-enter community with us, his creation. And we love others so much that we enter into community again and again with love and with the hope of something greater. Community is a reflection of God's love living in us. It's what we were created to be.

Father, thank you for entering into community with us. Help us to love others and to look forward in hope to the eternal community that we will share with you. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . INTERGENERATIONAL

"In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them. . . ."
—Joshua 4:6

I have two vivid memories of community from my time in high school: teaching a Sunday school class, and having breakfast once a month with a local pastor. I'm not sure how I was trusted to teach Sunday school, and I'm sure I didn't always do it right, but I remember being able to share lessons with children and laughing with them a lot. I think they taught me more than I taught them. I'm also not sure how I got connected with that pastor and mentor, but I remember it as a formative time for me during some difficult years.

At its foundation, the community of God's people is intergenerational. Young people learn from older generations, and older generations learn from children and youth! We are good at talking about today's youth being the "church of tomorrow," but the truth

is that they are every bit the church of today as well.

God wanted Israel to be able to learn from previous generations, so he told them to pile up twelve stones after crossing the Jordan River. Whenever a younger person asked what those stones meant, someone could tell them who God is and what he had done for them. What a perfect picture of intergenerational learning!

Jesus also taught God's people that they needed to be like little children, trusting in God and realizing their dependence on him (Luke 18:16-17). We can learn from children just as they can learn from adults.

Father, equip us to teach children and also to learn from them, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . ENCOURAGEMENT

When [Barnabas] arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.
—Acts 11:23

When Annika thinks about a recent mission trip she was on, she remembers meeting with the rest of her group each night to share stories about the day. Some of those were about joyful times when they saw God at work in what they were doing, and other stories were about struggles or hardships. Whatever the story was, the result was always the same. Her group would share encouragement and build each other up, helping everyone to refocus their attention on God.

We all experience times of joy and times of struggle in our lives. Having a place to share about them is meaningful and can help us celebrate and support one another. An encouraging community is a place where all of our experiences can be shared and we can receive support and friendship

no matter what is going on around us.

In Acts 4:36 we meet Barnabas, whose name means “son of encouragement.” And throughout the book of Acts we see him doing what his name suggests. He is an encourager to the apostle Paul and many of the early churches.

We all need people in our lives who encourage us, and we need to be encouragers to others. That is what Christian community does.

Father, help us to find encouragement from others and to be encouragers to people who need to hear kind words today. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . FAMILY

Pointing to his disciples, [Jesus] said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. . . ."
—Matthew 12:49

Ashleigh has a great family and extended family that she is very close to—both geographically and emotionally. But she is also a part of other communities that she considers family. Her class at school has grown close through a few tragedies and difficult times that have affected them greatly. The pool and swim club that she has been a part of for 10 years is also a big part of her life. And she loves her church and youth group and the times that she can spend with them. She feels cared for and loved in all of these communities through both good times and bad times.

Jesus gathered a close group of disciples around him who became like family to him. They shared monumental events and quiet downtimes together. They shared a God-given passion for living in the kingdom

of God. And while Jesus no doubt loved his earthly mother and brothers, he loved his community of disciples, followers, and friends as well.

With whom are you surrounding yourself? What communities are you a part of that are like family to you, loving you unconditionally and supporting you in both good times and bad times? Whom do you share life with? It is important for each of us to have a family around us to do life together.

Father, help us find people to share life with as a family community. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . TEAMWORK

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

—Ecclesiastes 4:12

Sam loves to play video games with his friends. He vividly remembers a time at the end of the school year when a group of them teamed up to complete an especially difficult level. None of them had been able to do that on their own, but when they teamed up and all used their abilities and skills, they were able to win.

That lesson has stuck in Sam's mind. Maybe you can think of a time when a group of people were able to accomplish something that would have been impossible for only one person to achieve.

I'm reminded of the story in Mark 2 about the friends of a paralyzed man who lowered him through a roof to set him in front of Jesus. While this story is about so much more than just teamwork, imagine if one person had tried to lower the man through the roof instead

of a group of them. How well would that have worked out?

The writer of Ecclesiastes knew the benefits of working together. His description of a man working alone is heartbreaking; in the end, all of that man's labor is meaningless. Working together with others gives greater reward, more assistance, and in the end is just plain smart!

Are you trying to do things on your own that would work out better if you were doing it with others? Who can help you, or whom can you team up with to get a better return on your efforts?

Father, help us to work together so that our efforts may glorify and honor you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

COMMUNITY . . . SHOWS ME I MATTER

From [Christ] the whole body . . . builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.
—Ephesians 4:16

Being a single older woman, Ina sometimes felt as if she didn't belong in her church, as if it wasn't for her, and as if she didn't matter, even to God. But she doesn't feel that way anymore. People with gifts of compassion and kindness noticed her, and caring people surrounded her with God's love, helping her to experience community. Now her gifts are being used, her feedback is listened to, and people make time to listen to her and spend time with her. She is a vital member of her church community, and people look forward to seeing her every Sunday in the entryway, where she hands out candy to children.

Ina also knows that she matters to God. Every one of us needs to know that.

We matter so much to God that he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to

give of himself so that we can show his love to others. He came to give us gifts of service and kindness and leadership so that we may be built up and reach unity in the faith, growing and maturing in Christ. As the apostle Paul puts it, all who believe in Jesus make up the body of Christ here on earth, and he is our head. And in his strength the body grows and builds itself up in love.

You matter to God. And you matter to the people around you. Your gifts, abilities, and presence make a difference to your community, and they make a difference to God!

Lord, thank you for loving us and growing us to be your body, with each part doing its work. And thank you for putting people around us who show that we matter. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . TRUST

Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.
—Proverbs 13:20

Like many of us, Torre has some friends that she can count on and can share anything with. They stand out in her life because they have shown that they are trustworthy. Although she spends time with other people too, she chooses to remain close and build relationships with the ones she can trust. The more she gets to know them and lets them get to know her, the closer to them she grows. This includes adult mentors and her parents, who have been there for her in difficult times.

Proverbs tells us to build relationships with wise people rather than foolish ones. Wise people know how to listen and to keep promises. They know how to protect confidential information. They are the people who love us and who want what is best for us. They are also the people who help us

use our gifts and abilities and allow us to be who God created us to be.

Who are your companions? Are they people who are untrustworthy? Are they people who don't look out for your best interests or even harm you?

Or are they people you can trust? Are they people who love you for who you are and who God made you to be? These are the wise people you want to be close with in life.

Father, please put people in our lives whom we can trust. Help us to avoid foolish ways and to help everyone find wisdom, which comes only from you. In Jesus, Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . UNITY

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

—Galatians 3:28

One of the things that struck Hannah about a recent mission trip she was on was meeting and getting to know all of the children that her team interacted with. At first she was hesitant about meeting so many new people who were so different from her and lived in unfamiliar surroundings. But as she saw the joy on the children's faces and realized that so many of them wanted to be friends, Hannah's fears faded. What amazed her even more was how easily she could talk about faith and life with these children. The differences didn't matter because they found a unity in Christ that transcended the differences.

All too often we let differences divide us. We tend to be afraid of other people or new situations, and we don't take the time to see each other as chil-

dren of God who are created in his image.

The apostle Paul wanted his readers to know that their differences didn't matter either. What really matters is Christ Jesus. As we believe in him, we are all one, no matter our ethnic background or our gender or our economic or social status. We belong to him as God's children. That's an important thing to remember in a world that seeks to divide and frighten us. We find our unity in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord.

Father, help us to remember all that unites us, and help us to seek unity as we broaden our community in you. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . BEING LIKE-MINDED

Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. —Philippians 2:2

When Craig moved to Denver, he searched for a community to be a part of. The one he landed in was filled with people who had interests similar to his. They would go mountain biking, hiking, and camping together—all while forming connections and deep bonds with each other. Those connections didn't stop at outdoor activities. They were also a group that shared a love for Jesus Christ, and they would talk about their faith often. They held each other accountable to spiritual and personal matters. Even years later, after they had stopped seeing each other regularly and many of them had moved on to different areas or different seasons of life, they still remain connected because of the things they had in common.

When Paul addresses the Philippians, he encourages them to be like-minded, to have

the same love, and to be one. Having similarities, especially those founded on Christ, can bring us together in Christian community. It gives us bonds that are not easily broken and that can grow into other things. And, when differences arise, the like-minded love that we have established can keep us connected to each other.

If you are looking for a community to be a part of, begin with things that you like to do, and build from there. Find other believers who play basketball or knit or love to read. Begin with those bonds and allow the connections to spread to conversations about God, faith, and life.

Father, help us find people to connect with, and help us grow in understanding your love for us. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . IN THE MOMENT

“Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.”
—Matthew 6:34

Some of Logan’s favorite memories from his high school youth group were the times when a group of students just hung out together. There was no schedule, no agenda, and nothing planned. There were just students and maybe an adult or two playing basketball or watching a movie or just talking. It wasn’t that nothing important happened in those times. Great, deep, and meaningful conversations often flowed out of those free-time gatherings. But with so much stress in the life of a high schooler—sports, grades, college and career choices—those times were a haven from all of the busyness, and Logan could just be himself.

Life is like that for a lot of us. The busyness of each day can overshadow the times when we can just be ourselves, hang out with our friends, and not worry. In busy times we often

miss opportunities for meaningful conversations. We don’t notice the friend who is hurting or the people who are outside the circle because we just haven’t had time to see them.

Jesus spent time alone with his disciples, away from the busyness of ministry. And he taught them to live in the moment, looking for the kingdom of God right where they were and not missing it by looking for something in the future.

In the midst of a busy life with deadlines and stress, don’t miss the simple moments of quiet and unplanned living where the kingdom of God is present and waiting for us to see it.

Lord, in the midst of our busy days, help us to find some downtime and enjoy life in the moment. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . NEIGHBORHOOD

“Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.”
—Jeremiah 29:7

Walt has always enjoyed being a part of the communities he has lived in. When his daughters were younger, they got to know their neighbors through activities like Girl Scouts and community festivals. His daughters babysat for neighbors, and they got to know many families with a variety of backgrounds. Now that Walt is older, he has enjoyed being a part of community leadership groups and has lots of stories about interactions with neighbors as they share life together. Knowing his neighbors and helping them where he can has been an integral part of his life.

Through Jeremiah, God told his people to seek the peace and prosperity of the city that he had placed them in. Even though they were far from home and their neighbors were quite different from them, God

wanted them to invest in their neighborhood and be an active part of their community. That message is still important for us today.

We aren't always like our neighbors. They may have different backgrounds, faith journeys, or family structures, but God invites us to invest in the people and the places where we find ourselves.

Get to know your neighbors, wherever you are and whoever they are. Seek their peace and prosperity. Invest in them. They are your community.

Father, help us to be bearers of peace and prosperity in the communities where you have placed us. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . GROWING

The mountain of the LORD's temple will be established . . . and all nations will stream to it.
—Isaiah 2:2

Shirley admits that the community she knew as a child was quite inward-focused. Everyone looked the same and had similar backgrounds and beliefs. But the experiences of her life have widened and deepened her sense of community in many ways. College increased her sense of community. A move to a different city increased it yet again. Technology, globalization, transportation, and different opportunities continue to increase it today. While she continues to hold on to the good things and loving people from her childhood background, she is thankful also to have friends across the world from a variety of backgrounds, belief systems, and experiences.

God has envisioned a much larger community than his people in Israel ever imagined. In Isaiah, he says that people from

all nations will stream in. All of those people will come rushing to the Lord not because of how great *they* are, but because of how great *God* is.

As our idea of community broadens and grows, God will bring people to us from all areas of life. They will have different backgrounds and experiences, but they will be drawn to us because of who God is in our lives. God loves people! He loves you, and he loves everyone who gathers around you. He loves your community and is the reason that it grows to include all types of people. The community that God envisions for his people is not a stagnant one but a growing one.

Father, grow our community and cause us to be accepting of all the people you bring into our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . LOVE

And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.
—Colossians 3:14

Sharon is part of a community of women who do life together. They study the Bible together, pray for each other, and support each other in everything they go through in life. There is no judgment or looking down on someone for not knowing the “correct” answer to a question. When Sharon’s brother was in hospice care and she was his primary caregiver, this group supported and loved her in every way possible. And Sharon has reciprocated that love by caring for other women in the group as they have experienced major challenges.

All of us have times in our lives when we need extra measures of support and love. When things are difficult or when we mess up and feel as if no one can love us, we need to be cared for and loved. And there are times when we need to care for others, especially

when they mess up or are going through difficult times.

Paul describes the new life that followers of Christ live into because of Christ’s sacrifice. Followers of Christ put off their old selfish ways and put on all the new virtues they can have because of Christ. And over all of those things we are called to put on love, which pulls everything else together. Unconditional love is essential and integral to community.

Father, help us show your love for others and experience others’ love in our communities. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . WHAT I WAS ADOPTED INTO

The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship.
—Romans 8:15

Sheri's family waited for her for a long time with great anticipation. What's more, the whole community around her family anticipated her adoption and prayed for her every day. As she grew up, Sheri was constantly reminded that she fully belonged to her family and to her community. She was part of her community from the very beginning. She was raised as a full-fledged daughter of her parents and as a full member of her community. If she ever began to question that, the community rallied around her to assure her that she was completely and totally theirs.

The apostle Paul uses the Roman concept of adoption to describe our relationship to God. Adoption in the Roman culture was total and complete. The adoptee was a full child and heir. No distinction was made after the adoption

was finalized. Paul uses that analogy for us so that we can understand we are completely and totally God's sons and daughters.

Community is the same way. Not only are we completely daughters and sons of God belonging to him, but we also belong to each other as children of God and siblings of Christ. Community is where we belong as adopted sons and daughters of God!

Father, help us to see ourselves and each other as brothers and sisters in Christ and as your sons and daughters. In Jesus' name, Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . CARING

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.
—Romans 12:6

Years ago, when Milt's son died of leukemia, he and his family felt the incredible arms of their community caring for them. This care was expressed in tangible ways. People brought them meals, and many others prayed for them and sent cards, and a number of people gave hugs when they were needed. At the funeral the people who gathered sang "Jesus Loves Me," and that was so meaningful to Milt that he remembers it clearly today. Some of Milt's supporters had dealt with similar situations before, and yet others could only sympathize, having little idea what Milt and his family were dealing with. But the entire community cared for them in whatever way they could.

When the apostle Paul talks about the body of Christ in Romans 12, he urges his listeners to use whatever gifts they

have been given to their fullest ability. It doesn't really matter which gifts we might have. What matters is that we use them to the best of our ability for the good of others.

In community, people care for each other. They use their gifts to help each other and to see that anyone who is wounded or hurting or in some other difficulty is looked after and loved. Sometimes healing is possible. Other times mourning and support are needed when healing won't take place.

At times we all need caring for. Having a community around us to do that is essential.

Father, help us to use the gifts we have been given to care for each other, and help us to receive care when we need it. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . FRIENDS

A friend loves at all times. . . .

—Proverbs 17:17

Karissa switched schools in the middle of fourth grade. She left behind a lot of good friends whom she had known for years. Though she was sad to leave those friends, she was also excited to meet new people and make new friends. She has made some great friends at her new school, at church, and at the stables where she rides horses. She also stays in contact with some of her friends from her previous school as well.

Friendships aren't always easy. Friends go through seasons of trial, arguments, differences of opinion, and busy schedules. Along the way, new friends are made, and old friendships sometimes fade. Friends can influence us for good and for bad. Friendships can be a lot of work. But when they are at their best, friendships are also very rewarding. Real friends

support us and also challenge us. They see us for who God intended us to be, and they help us grow in the grace and love of Christ.

The Bible contains stories of deep friendships. David and Jonathan's friendship is a great example of one that lasted through deep difficulties (1 Samuel 19-20). Friendships that endure are filled with love all the time.

Who are your friends? How are you supporting them and encouraging them? How are they supporting and encouraging you? Are your friendships filled with love at all times?

Father, help us in our friendships to love each other as you have called us to love. In Jesus, Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . CHALLENGING

Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”
—Exodus 3:11

Our high school youth group spent an evening handing out burritos and warm clothes to homeless people last year. That was way out of my comfort zone. In fact, I was so uncomfortable with the idea that I was hoping I might get sick so I could skip the event. But I didn't get sick, so I headed out with my group of students on a mission. I decided to share with my group how uncomfortable this made me feel. They looked at me and said they were uncomfortable too—but they wanted to do this and needed me to lead them. A lot of wonderful conversations and learning happened that night.

Moses didn't want to lead Israel, so he tried to make excuses to get out of the task God wanted him to do. But God promised to be with him and wouldn't take no for an

answer. Community can do that too. It carries us into uncomfortable experiences and walks alongside us, encouraging and challenging us along the way. And through the challenge and support, we grow.

Being part of a community that challenges you may not be high on your list. But being challenged is one of the only ways we grow. And growing is what God calls us to do.

Find a group of people that will challenge you and walk alongside you in living for God. For me, it was a group of students who wouldn't let me avoid an uncomfortable situation. And the results were amazing.

Father, help us find people who will challenge and walk alongside us as we struggle and grow. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . HAVING A COMMON GOAL

They were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.
—John 21:6

A few years ago Ed's church community became aware of a home for disabled children in Nairobi, Kenya, that needed help. There were so many kids who needed a place to belong that the home needed to expand. The church community set out to collect enough to meet the home's modest goal. People who had been to this home in Kenya shared stories and pictures, and together this community prayed for the ability to raise funds. When the offering was collected, the outcome was more than anyone had imagined. A new building was built in Kenya for this ministry, and more kids have been blessed than this church community even thought possible.

All of this took place because of God's blessing. Like the disciples of Jesus, Ed's community was fishing in one spot, hoping for one thing, and yet the

Lord had even greater plans. The whole community moved together toward this goal, and it took all of them to pull this off. Even more so, it took God's blessing to make it happen.

A community with a goal that is blessed by God can do amazing things. Together they can reach neighborhoods, serve unserved groups, and bless countless people. What it takes is a vision of something greater—possibly even something that they could never imagine on their own. Of course, it also takes the God who is bigger than we could ever imagine.

Father, guide us and work with us as we work together with you to change the world in Christ's name. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . ROLE MODELING

Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. —Deuteronomy 34:9

Cal remembers when he was a kid and his family moved a long ways away from their church. The distance made it hard for his family to bring him to and from his favorite church activities during the week. A gentleman from church offered to bring Cal home whenever he needed a ride. This man was also a leader in the boys club that Cal had joined at the church. He remembers the life lessons that this man taught him along the way—while camping, working on different projects together, or just driving home. There were other church members who did similar things for Cal too.

Cal isn't sure where he would be today if it weren't for those people who invested in his life when he was younger. They literally changed his life and gave him something to aim for and imitate when he became

an adult. Cal now gives back by being the same kind of role model to younger men in his church community. He knows how important community is!

Moses took Joshua under his wing and taught him about leading the people of Israel. In a few of the books of the Old Testament, there are stories about their interactions. After Moses died, Joshua was ready to take on the leadership that had been laid on him. That connection was important and prepared Joshua for his future. Positive community connections do the same for us.

Father, help us understand the importance of being a part of community for the benefit of those around us. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . THE LITTLE THINGS

When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. —1 Kings 19:13

Eli has enjoyed some big moments in his life. He is part of a close-knit family, a good church and youth group, and a meaningful group of friends. His family homesteads on the Colorado plains, and he recently visited Africa on a mission trip. But when he thinks of community, Eli thinks of the little things that his closest friends do together. He thinks of watching movies, working on cars, and talking about football. In those little moments of life Eli finds comfort, safety, and a feeling of connectedness that are very important to him.

God is present in big things, and God is also present in the small, mundane, and quiet things of life. God does huge miracles, saves countless people, and heals debilitating diseases. God also watches over us in our weakest times and knows the minute details of

our lives. God is present in the whispers of our lives when it seems as if no one is there and nothing matters.

Community is similar. It isn't just present in the big and life-changing moments. It isn't just present in huge groups. It is present in the quiet, little things of life too. Sometimes we aren't even looking for it, and it just shows up. It is present in quiet conversations over coffee, in small game nights, in family meals, or in a garage as friends work on a car.

What small moments do you find community in? Maybe when you look for community in those situations, you'll see it all around you.

Lord, help us to notice the small moments of community we can have with others and with you. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . ABOUT MANAGING CONFLICT

"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you."
—Matthew 18:15

Alan's dog had a habit of barking when the family was away. Of course, they didn't know it because they weren't there. They found out when the police showed up at their door saying that a neighbor had complained. Alan was shocked and a bit hurt. He was sorry that his dog was causing an annoyance in the neighborhood, but he was also upset that his neighbor hadn't just talked to him directly instead of calling the police. He went to talk to his neighbor and explained why he would have appreciated the direct contact and that he was sorry for the noise his dog was making. And his neighbor understood, even appreciated the conversation.

Our text from Matthew 18 has been a foundational principle for dealing with conflict. If you have a problem with someone, go and talk to them

about it first before including other people. It seems pretty basic. But it is also a foundational principle in community. Making a public complaint or using gossip or backstabbing will bring about mistrust and break community. On the other hand, directly addressing issues in a spirit of godly wisdom and love is a positive way of dealing with conflict.

Conflicts will arise. Managing them directly and in a timely way is an important part of community. Is there anyone with whom you need to discuss a conflict? Dealing with that has the potential to make your community even stronger.

Father, help us deal with conflicts wisely, and bring us into stronger relationships as a result. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . RESTORATION

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

—John 21:15

It is popular today to restore old things or repurpose items for a new use. Some TV shows, stores, and internet pages are dedicated to this idea. My wife and I walk through a nearby antique mall sometimes on my day off. It’s fun to look at all the old things and imagine what they would look like with a new coat of paint, a different set of accessories, or hanging on a wall. Every so often one of those projects comes home with us or inspires us to repurpose or restore something that we already have lying around the house.

Peter had denied being a follower of Jesus (see John 18). Even though he had told Jesus he would stick by him until the end, Peter didn’t. The shame, anger, guilt, and pain must have torn Peter up inside. Jesus knew that. But Jesus also knew who Peter was—and

would be. The rusty and broken parts of Peter weren’t the person he would become. So Jesus restored Peter. He took away Peter’s shame and guilt and made Peter a leader in his kingdom.

We all have scratches and dents from our lives—some from our own doing. But Jesus sees through all that and focuses on the person we are created to be. In community we also do that for each other. We see past old mistakes, and we accept each other for the people we are created to be. In community, restoration happens all the time.

Father, thank you for restoring us. Help us see others as you would have us see them—fully restored. In Jesus, Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . A CLOUD OF WITNESSES

Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses . . .
—Hebrews 12:1

Sandie remembers her dad reading from a monthly devotional guide every day while she was growing up. When she had children, her dad would sit her kids on his lap and read to them also from that devotional series. They have pictures of her kids with their grandpa reading those devotions. Now that she lives far away from her parents, she appreciates knowing that her dad is still reading from the same ongoing devotional series every day.

It's not just the devotional series, though. Sandie takes comfort in the strong faith in God that connects her with her family members far away. She felt the same way when her daughter left for college a few years ago. Friends and family told her daughter they were praying for her, and she felt and missed the community connections she had developed over the years. In both

situations, community was strengthened by a faith connection that crossed time and distance.

The writer of Hebrews spends a whole chapter (Hebrews 11) talking about people from the past who lived by faith. And that provides encouragement to believers to keep living faithfully for Jesus each day.

Christian community is so much bigger than the people who are geographically close to us. It is also about believers across the country and the world, and from earlier generations. The cloud of witnesses connects us together in one, great community!

Father, thank you for surrounding us with faithful witnesses around the world and throughout the centuries. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . DOING DIFFICULT THINGS

He began to send them out two by two. . . .

—Mark 6:7

Our high school youth group doesn't spend a lot of time sitting in a classroom. We do plenty of learning, and we do that by being active in our community. We prepare our students for what they will experience as best we can, and we debrief after we are done, but most of the learning is in doing things together. And many of those things can be difficult. Our goal is to learn how to love people the way Jesus called us to, so we take every opportunity we can to practice love.

This means interacting with immigrants, refugees, homeless people, and other marginalized folks in our community. It means sharing God's love with people in our church community in out-of-the-box ways. For many of our students and leaders, these are new things. And all of us are apprehensive at best when we begin. But for

us, it is the best way to teach our students about God's love in extraordinary ways.

When Jesus sent out his disciples, I think he had some of the same thoughts in mind. He sent them out together to do difficult things. He sent them out to preach and to heal. I'm sure they were apprehensive at first. But when they came back, they had amazing stories to tell of God's power displayed in their world.

Community does that together. It goes and does difficult things together—all the time witnessing the amazing work of God in the world around us.

Father, send us into the world together, in your name, to love people and to witness your power at work through changing lives. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . EVER CHANGING

I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.
—1 Corinthians 9:22

This explanation by Paul has often confused me. It seems like he was not being authentic (or maybe even manipulative?) by changing the way he acted in order to influence people for the gospel. But the longer I live in community and the more life circumstances I go through, the more I think I understand what he is talking about.

It helps if I look at this message in light of community and everything it can be. What I need from community today is different from what I needed 10 or 20 years ago. When I was in high school dealing with the death of my dad, I needed my community to listen to me rage against God and love me anyway. When my children were younger, my wife and I needed people to watch them for us and to listen to us when we wondered how to parent them. Today our needs are different

still. The same could be said of everyone who has shared their story here this month. A year from now or even a month from now, they might describe community differently.

A Christian community, serving with the grace of Jesus Christ, can be all things to all people. For those who are hurting, it can come and cry alongside. For people who are rejoicing, it can celebrate. It can offer so much because it is so deep. It is ever changing to reflect who God is in the ever-changing world around us. Whatever you are in need of today, the community of God's people is there to be Christ for you.

Lord, thank you for the ever-changing and deep love we can find in the community of your people. Amen.

COMMUNITY IS . . . FOR YOU

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."
—Matthew 7:7

The message of the gospel is for each and every one of us. Jesus points out in the gospel of Matthew that even a good earthly father gives his children what they need. How much more, then, will our heavenly Father show his love for us when we ask, seek, and knock? God the Father's perfect love is available to us all the time!

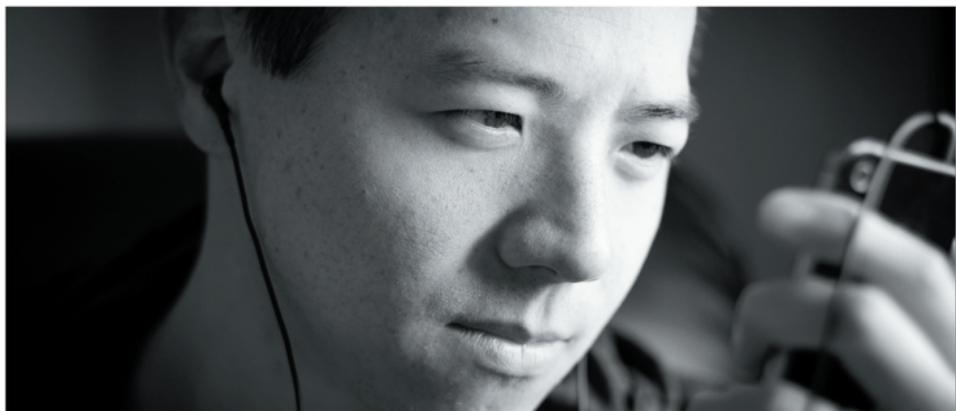
As Christ's representatives here on this earth, we are called to share God's love with everyone we meet. We are called to invite others into community with us and with God, our heavenly Father who loves us more than we can possibly imagine.

If you are part of a Christian community, you are called to invite others in and to share the love that you are a part of with others. Christian community is never full and is never closed. It is always open and

expanding to share God's love with others. Though our love may have limits, God's love never is never limited!

If you haven't found a Christian community to be a part of, please search for one. Seek one that is loving and caring and has the characteristics we have described here this month. Ask God to have someone show up in your life to offer all of these things to you in Jesus' name. Knock on the door of someone you know who is a Christian, and ask them to love you too.

Father, move us to seek community in all of its positive forms, and gather around each one of us a community to belong to. For Jesus' sake, Amen.



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