



## **My Last Three Words: Community**

**2 Corinthians 5:14-21**

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As my tenure as your pastor winds down, I am offering my last three words. These three Cs are but a summary of the many sermons I have offered over the past 9 years.

In the Spring of 2015, I was living in Kingstowne and commuting to Centreville, where I was the Associate Pastor for Mission and Contemporary Worship. It was a 45-minute drive most mornings across the Fairfax County Parkway, and I would plan my day around whether or not I had evening meetings at the church. If there was something on the calendar after hours, I would leave later in the morning with the intent of eating dinner in Centreville so as to not have to spend an hour and a half driving home and back again. You can imagine the immediate relief I felt when I was appointed here, in Old Town, just 4 miles from the house. No more cross-county commute, and no more missing dinners with the family.

It was a welcome change to be able to live and work in the same community. And despite both being part of Northern Virginia, Western Fairfax and Alexandria are not the same community. We may have similarities, but we are not the same.

For example, there is no Misha's in Western Fairfax. The population density is more spread out, and almost no one walks to church in Western Fairfax. I never knew the politicians who ran Fairfax County the way I know Mayor Wilson and the members of the Alexandria City Council. There's just something different about the sense of community here in Alexandria – especially here in Old Town.

This should come as no surprise for anyone who has heard me preach more than a few times, but My Last Three Words would not be complete without the word *Community*.

As a people of faith, *community* is perhaps the most important word for us to understand. What is community? How is it formed? How does it function? What is its purpose? Who gets to be a part of the community?

Similar to what I said last week, I think for many in the Christian faith, the idea of community is wrapped up in a misconstrued vision of homogeneous fellowship, which maintains a vision of the future that is toxically tied to the policies and practices of the past. We like to think of community as a gathering of people, which circles around our individual person. We, as individuals, become the central focus of our aspirations, and our community becomes nothing more than an echo chamber to make us feel good about our beliefs and actions.

We have miserably failed to see the nuance that is found in the Greek and Hebrew of the Biblical text, which more often than not uses plural pronouns where we insist on reading singular pronouns. For example, and yes, I've preached on these before, Jeremiah 29:11 reads, "Surely I know the plans I have for you ... plans to give you a future with hope." Every use of the pronoun "you" in Jeremiah 29 is plural. The Prophet is speaking on behalf of the Lord to the community at large, not to any individual of it. In Romans 8, Paul writes, "If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness." Paul is using the plural for "you," speaking of the faith community, not the individual person.

This happens time and time again – be it the Prophets, the Gospels, or the Epistles. The call of the Biblical text is for the greater wellbeing, health, and eternal joy of creation. The invitation of scripture is for us to be a healthy community.

And this is where the Biblical call to community gets really interesting. So, stay with me here. Especially in the Church, you hear people talk about how community comes into existence. Many in the Church will tell you that the way a faith community is formed is by you, as the individual, coming to the church and leaning how you need to change so that you might become part of the church. The purpose of you attending Sunday School, or reading your Bible, or participating in Book Studies ... the purpose behind all of this is to help *you* learn how to change *your* life so that *you* might acclimate to become part of who *we* already are in the church.

Some Church policies make this kind of acclimation more clear than others ... but perhaps none is more stark than the communion policy in the Roman Catholic Church. If you want to receive communion in a Roman Catholic Church, you can't just be any Christian. It doesn't matter how sinless and perfect you are as a person following the will of God, you can't receive communion in a Catholic Church unless you are professing Catholic member in good standing. You have to do what the Catholic Church requires you to do in order for you to be able to receive the grace of God and presence of Christ in the bread and wine of communion. If you aren't willing to acclimate, you can't really be part of the community. Sure, you can sit in worship; you can sing the songs; you can pray the prayers; but if you don't acclimate to become part of the membership of the community, the Lord's table is ... well, it's off the table.

The Church isn't willing to change to help you feel welcome. Either you change, or you might as well go on your unmerry way.

As we look at the text this morning from 2 Corinthians, I believe the invitation to the formation of community looks drastically different.

Paul, as an author, is both theological and practical. Paul likes to give a theological foundation for any practical advice. Today's text is a great example of this, as the practical and theological are woven together.

Paul writes, "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."

Keep in mind, Paul is writing to the early church in Corinth. He's not addressing people outside the faith community – he's writing a sermon to those in the early church. Paul assumes that those reading this are already convinced that "one has died for all." He assumes that his readers grasp the basics of the Christian faith, that Christ died for all of God's created humanity.

What Paul's not so sure about is that we, his readers and members of the church community, understand what it means that Christ died for all. It is the result of this belief, the belief that Christ died for all, that is going to be the focus of this text.

Paul explains, "Christ died for all so that **those who live ...**" and again, he's still speaking of those in the church. This is a reference to Christian believers. "Christ died for all so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."

This picks up on the invitation to commitment I offered last week. The commitment we make as a people of faith *is to Christ*. That's our number one priority and focal point: Christ is who we look to as those who live in Christ. "The purpose of life is to live *for* the one who died and rose *for* all."<sup>i</sup>

As Paul continues, it becomes clear this focus on Christ will affect how we live. Paul uses the conjoining word, "therefore," which indicates that what he's about to say is predicated on what he just finished saying. Because we who live do not live for ourselves, but for him who died and was raised for us, the following *will be true*.

Verse 16 begins, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

This is a significant claim by Paul. Notice what he's saying ... or perhaps, you know what, let's start with what he's *not* saying. Paul isn't telling us that anyone outside the faith community is expected to change. Did you catch that? Paul is 100% focused on the life of those in the church ... those who have centered their focus on Christ. The change he is talking about here is happening with those who are no longer living for themselves, but for Christ, who died and was raised for them.

Because we are so focused on Christ, our vision ... the way we see ... our engagement with the world is going to change. We will now regard no one from a human point of view. We won't see each other as humans tend to see people. That means, we won't see people in all the ways humans have tried to look at people for the purpose of dividing and controlling them. It means we won't see like those who set up human hierarchies based on race. It means we won't try to determine someone's cultural background when approving or declining mortgages or credit applications. It means we won't assume that someone is less capable because of their gender. It means we won't predetermine someone's educational capacity based on their residential zip code. It means we won't assume someone's posture towards us, or the world, based on preconceived notions or learned prejudices.

Nothing about the others has changed ... but because of *my* focus on Christ ... because of *my* commitment to Christ ... because of what Christ has done for *me*, I will see others differently, because *Christ* sees them differently.

This is the new creation that Paul says is formed in verse 17. “If *anyone* is in Christ, there is a new creation.” It’s not that others are newly created, it’s that I ... me ... myself ... because *I* am in Christ, *I* am a new creation. This new creation that I become “relegates to the past the old things like class and prejudices, stereotypes and misconceptions. Such old realities are not part of this new existence in Christ. ... The new creation has overthrown our human judgements filled with prejudice and bias.”<sup>ii</sup>

And because I am a new creation, because I am capable of seeing with new eyes those around me, I am now able to participate in the work of God in the world. And what is that work?

I’m so glad you asked.

In verse 18, Paul writes, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

The work of God is reconciling creation – pulling all of humanity back together, as one body, that we, as one body, might be reconciled to God. We, those who are ambassadors for Christ, we are the ones tasked with this reconciliation. But such a reconciliation is only possible because we are a new creation, and as a new creation, we are able to see one another not from a human point of view, but from the view of God in Jesus Christ. Because of our ability to see in this new way, with the eyes of God in Christ, we are uniquely gifted to lead in the work of reconciliation – of pulling God’s creation back together as one community, united in the glory and the love of God.

This is the vision Paul is laying out for what community should be. And notice, it’s not optional. Paul believes, and is preaching as such, that if we really believe that Christ is the one who died for all, our vision will change. We will become a new creation, and as a new creation, focused on Christ, we will be able to see as God sees. And with that new vision, we will dedicate ourselves to the work of reconciliation, because that is God’s work. And that work of reconciliation will bring together a community that looks drastically different than the kinds of communities human society normally established, because we will not see community from a human point of view, but from the eyes of Christ.

I was asked not too long ago why I believe so strongly in our work with the Church of South Washington, and more specifically, why I have worked so hard to help us establish a better relationship with Roberts Memorial United Methodist. My friends, this is why. Because for too long, even our churches – these worshipping bodies that were built upon some level of Christian understanding – have failed to live into this vision of reconciliation and community. And it’s not just our four churches – it’s the Church (universal). The overwhelming majority of churches are little more than homogeneous

fellowships, still existing in the ways of human society, which puts up barriers and gates, tall hedges and guard shack, redlines and railroads to try and subdivide God's creation.

To borrow from the Mandalorian, "This is *not* the way."

Our call as a people of faith, who are convinced that one has died for all, is that we might no longer live for ourselves, but for him who died and was raised for us. And by living for him – by committing ourselves to Christ, we become a new creation that see one another with new eyes, just as Christ sees. And because we see one another with new eyes, with divine perspective, we are enjoined to the work of God of reconciliation, that we might be part of a new community. Do not cease to see as God sees; and do not give up on the work of reconciliation; but continue in the work of building a new community, wherein everyone might know God's love. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Frank J Matera. *II Corinthians: A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

<sup>ii</sup> Mark Hopper. *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*. Eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.