



## The Seven: Community

November 26 | Weekly Devotionals

### Day 1 – The Call of Community

This week, we're focusing on our church's priority of community.

In our culture today, however, community seems a little hard to come by. In the age of Instagram, Facebook, Amazon, Kroger Clicklist, and more, what even *is* community? In an age of transience and moving locations and not knowing our neighbors very well, where do we get our community? In a time when more people *form* their own communities (like the 90s sitcom *Friends*) than previous times when people were *born* into their communities (think small-town America in shows like *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, or the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*), what should Christian community look like for us?

That's what we'll be diving into in this week's devotionals.

In shows like *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, or in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, the community portrayed consisted mainly of one's family. The Ingalls family all were there for one another out on the prairie – father Charles, mother Caroline, and their daughters. Andy Griffith found community with his son Opie, Aunt Bee, and even their funny cousin Barney Fife. And what made life so wonderful for George Bailey was all of his small-town connections he had maintained since he was a child – his mother Irene, his wife Mary, his brother Harry, and so on.

In shows like *Friends*, you have sort of the opposite of the three examples of above. In *Friends*, Rachel, Ross, Chandler, Joey, and others don't make community by staying put in their small towns and caring for their friends and family over the course of their lives. Instead, they find community by leaving their family of origin and forming new relationships together in the big city. The result is a mixed group of 20-somethings who do life together with only the occasional appearance by members of their family.

There are obviously pros and cons to both the situation found in the shows and movies like *Little House on the Prairie* and the situation found in *Friends*. What's interesting, however, is how our culture's conception of community has changed since *Little House on the Prairie* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to what community looks like in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in *Friends*.

So in a cultural milieu with ever-changing ideas of what community is, what community looks like, and what community should be like, what are Christians to do as they form Christian community? What does it look like to live in faithful Christian community in our day and age?

In the gospels, Jesus' call to *himself* is actually a call to *community*. When Jesus calls the disciples to follow him, he's not just calling them to follow him individually, one person each in their own way. No, his call was a call to a life of discipleship *within the context of a group*. And this group was made up, quite literally, of people who would have otherwise never "hung out."

Take, for example, Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot (see **Mark 3:13-19**). Matthew had a history of working for the Romans and collecting taxes from the Jewish people (which also probably meant that he extorted his own people too). Simon, as a zealot, was about as far away from Matthew as one could possibly be on the political front. As a zealot, Simon had bought into the vision that one must do whatever it takes to overthrow the Roman government, including acts of violence, terrorism, and even holy war.

So, Jesus invites both of these guys into his "life group" and you can be sure that things were probably tense. Two political archrivals in close proximity...yikes!

What made the difference for them was that this community was different. Jesus was at the center. Their allegiance to Jesus trumped their political ideologies and they remained bound together despite their differences – all because Christ was a greater adhesive than what the world's ideas could pull apart.

Just as Jesus called his initial group of disciples together, so too is he calling groups of people together today. This is what we call "the church." And the church is made up of people with different political ideologies, non-essential theologies, socio-economic statuses, ethnic backgrounds, ages, sexes, races, and so many more variations it'd be impossible to list them all.

AND YET...even with *all* of these differences between us, we are held together by a greater sameness: Jesus himself.

Questions for reflection:

1. Describe 2-3 examples of how your conception of community has been influenced by the culture around you.
2. What role has community played in your relationship with Jesus over the years?
3. What distinctions do you have with people in your group? How is your love for Jesus allowing you to supersede these differences?

## Day 2 – A Theology of Community

Sometime around 1410, Andrei Rublev painted a picture depicting three persons – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit – gathered around a table.

*If you're able, take a moment to Google "Andrei Rublev Trinity icon 1410." You'll see the painting. What does this picture tell you about the nature of God? What invitations do you sense this picture is giving you? Take a few moments to reflect on this and jot down any reflections in the provided space.*

In the picture, as the Trinity is seated, they are positioned with an openness to the viewer inviting each person who reflects on the image into the communal moment they are sharing together.

This serves as a good starting point for us as we continue our conversation on community.

One of the reasons as to why we pursue community is because God himself is a community. Christians, since the first followers of Jesus, have maintained that the God we worship is a triune God. In fact, to sum up our belief about God as a church, we'd say that, "We believe in one true God, Creator of all things, infinitely perfect and eternally existing in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

This means that at the core of God's being is his being a community. And not just any kind of community. God is a community of love.

In the book of John, as Jesus is giving some of his last words, Jesus relays some really interesting insights into the nature of God. In **John 17:22-24**, Jesus says the following:

*"The glory that you have given me I have given to them [those who believe], that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and*

*loved them even as you loved me...because you loved me before the foundation of the world."*

Did you notice Jesus' words in just these three verses here? Three things to note:

1. Jesus says of God that they "are one" (**verse 22**)
2. Jesus says that God loved believers "even as you loved me" (**verse 23**)
3. Jesus says that God loved him "before the foundation of the world" (**verse 24**)

And lest we forget about the Holy Spirit, the Bible tells us that it is the Holy Spirit who co-existed eternally as God (**Genesis 1:2**) and who is the person in the Godhead who acts as the conduit of the love found within the Triune God (**see Matthew 3:16-17; Romans 5:5**).

This tells us three things about the nature of God that we have already looked at: (1) That God is a community; that (2) God is a community of love; and that (3) God has *always* been a community of love.

Now, as people who are created in the image of God (**Genesis 1:26-27**), who are striving to look, live, and love like Jesus (**Romans 8:29; Ephesians 4:13**), and who are partakers in the divine nature (**2 Peter 1:4**), it follows that we should be trying to both live within and embody that kind of community here and now.

As we discovered yesterday, Jesus calls us to community – not just to follow him individually. Because of this, there is a sense in which Christians do not *form* community. God has already formed our community for us. Our community is the group of believers both across the world and our local context. Our aim is to *realize* the community that God has already purchased by the blood of his son (**Acts 20:28**).

*Realizing* that community means that we fulfill or live up to the many different ways that God's community is talked about in the New Testament. In the Bible, the church is referred to as...

1. The bride of Christ (**Ephesians 5:25-33; Revelation 19:7-9; 21:9; 2 Corinthians 11:2**)
2. A body (**Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 10:17; 1 Corinthians 12:7ff; Ephesians 5:23**)
3. God's house (**Hebrews 3:6; 1 Timothy 3:14-15; 1 Peter 4:17**)
4. A temple (**1 Corinthians 3:11; 6:19; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5-7**)
5. A family (which we'll talk about tomorrow)

Christian community, first and foremost, should resemble these various metaphors. And at the center of that resemblance should be love. As Jesus says, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you *love* one another" (**John 13:35**) and as Paul says, "If I don't have *love*, I have nothing" (**1 Corinthians 13:2**).

So, to summarize: God has always existed as a community of love. We, as his people, are both invited into that community and called to embody that kind of community here on earth with his people – the Church.

Questions for reflection:

1. What new thoughts or questions do you have about the character of God or about the nature of Christian community?
2. Spend some time looking up the Scriptures for one of the different metaphors for the Church that you read about earlier. What do you learn about God's people from these verses? Are you living up to the metaphor? Why or why not? What's getting in the way?
3. When have you experienced the church as a community of love in your own life? When have you personally experienced the church being *less than* loving?

### Day 3 – The Family of God

On Day 1, we talked about how Jesus calls us into community. Yesterday, we talked about a theology of community which centered on the idea that God is a community of love that we are to join in on and to embody here on Earth. Today, we are going to expand on the idea of what it looks like to embody a community of love here on earth by talking about how the church is the family of God.

Alan Jones writes, "In the waters of baptism we are reminded that we are not born in a vacuum, nor do we journey entirely alone...Being reborn, being made alive, involves being born into a community. So there are strings attached to this adventure."

When it comes to Christianity, it seems as if Christians only ever talk about two aspects: (1) being made right with God and (2) becoming more like Jesus throughout one's life.

And rightfully so! But when we place our faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we need to know that we are at that point not *just* fully justified (i.e. made right with God), not *just* beginning to be sanctified (i.e. becoming more like Jesus), we are *also* placed into a new family – we are "*familified*."

In **Mark 3:31-35**, we read of Jesus' mother and brothers looking for him until they eventually find him and stop outside of one of the homes that he is in. The people inside alert Jesus that his family is seeking him. And, rather controversially, Jesus responds to the notion that his biological family is seeking him by asking, "Who are my mother and brothers?"

*What? Why even ask that, Jesus? You know who your family is!*

And then Jesus continued after posing his rhetorical question by looking at those he was with saying, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother!"

By saying this, Jesus was *radically* reorienting how people thought in his day.

In Jesus' day, your blood family ties, especially those between siblings, were the closest relationships one could have. But Jesus comes in, disrupts that line of thinking, and essentially says, "Relationships amongst God's children are to be the closest relationships you have in life – even above blood family ties!"

A bit crazy? Perhaps. People thought so too of Jesus.

However, if you look closer throughout the New Testament you'll see that there is a huge emphasis on God's new family being central – everything from Jesus talking about what it costs to follow him in **Mark 10:28-30**, Jesus' new surrogate family operating out of a common fund in **Luke 8:1-3**, Paul's use of brother/sister language in his letters (for a few examples see **Romans 16:1**, **1 Corinthians 1:10**, and **Colossians 1:2**), to Paul's theological foundation that we have all been adopted into a new family as sons and daughters like in **Ephesians 1:5**.

Now, this is not to say that, as Christians we should abandon our biological families. Of course not! Paul lays out in a couple of letters in the New Testament the roles of husbands, wives, and children in the home. Families are important to God.

At the same time, however, the New Testament's teaching on this is very clear: You have a faith family to whom you are obligated. There is no such thing as having Christ without his church. You can't have God as your Father without at the same time having fellow Christians as your brothers and sisters.

And if that is the case, that has huge implications for how one does community!

In the early church, we see the sharing of resources (see **Acts 2:44-45**), the sharing of hearts (see Paul's example in **1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:8**), the commitment level each person had with one another (see Jesus' words about reconciling with a brother in **Matthew 18:15-17**), an emphasis on unity (**Ephesians 4:3**), as well as all sorts of commands to love, encourage, honor one another, and bear one another's burdens.

All of that is to say this: *Your local church is one of the tangible expressions of the family of God in your life.* And the key way we practice community here at The Creek is through attendance in the worship service on Sundays and by participating in a life group.

Questions for reflection:

1. What do you make of Jesus' teaching on one's family being primarily those who "Do the will of God?" Why do you think Jesus says that? In what ways is that ultimately true?



2. How does it feel to know that your relationship with your faith family is central to your relationship with God? How does that work itself out in your life?
  
3. Take a few moments to list out in the space below some of the things your family does for each other (examples could include: share resources, hold one another accountable, cook meals for one another, count on one another, etc.). What sorts of things do you think should characterize how God's family (especially your life group) relate to one another that are like how your biological family relates to one another?

## Day 4 – What Will Kill Your Community, Pt. 1

We live in a unique time in human history. At no other point in human history has our ability to leave the people most proximal to us been easier or more encouraged. With the advent of technology like the internet, the cellphone, the car, Netflix, etc. it is so easy to opt out of our local communities emotionally, mentally, and even physically should we so desire. And sometimes, we are even encouraged to do so with cultural mantras like, “Anything that costs you your peace is too expensive, let it go...” or “If it doesn’t make you feel fabulous: don’t do it, don’t buy it, don’t keep it...” floating around.

And while some of the heart behind those sentiments is valid, those kinds of ideas can wreak havoc on one’s relationships. *What if a relationship becomes burdensome? What if bearing with a brother or sister in Christ is hard work and emotionally taxing? What if walking with someone through an addiction doesn’t feel fabulous? What if, what if, what if...?*

Stop for a moment and think about what sorts of thoughts, mantras, or questions like the ones above that you maybe wrestle with that actually might hurt your chances of being in committed relationships with others. Jot down your thoughts in the provided space.

Many times in relationships, when the going gets tough, we opt to get out. We try to get out of dodge. The same thing happens in church communities...

- If the church or life group doesn’t go “deep enough” ...well, time to find another church.
- If people are too needy in the church or life group...well, that’s too much, we didn’t sign up for that.
- If someone disagrees with us and we don’t wanna put up with it...sayonara!
- If the church or life group doesn’t meet our expectations...we get frustrated, don’t talk about it, and ghost everyone.

Today and tomorrow, we'll be looking at some problems that churches encounter that prevent them from being all that God intends for them to be. Today, we'll be talking about what we call the stages of church community life.

It is said that church communities can often be broken down into three main stages:

1. A honeymoon stage
2. A let-down stage
3. A covenant stage

In **Stage 1**, you start at your church and everything seems to be going great. Everyone is getting along, your kids enjoy it, you like the preaching, you meet new people, you get invited over for a dinner or two, you do the same for others, you start to get involved, you join a life group, and you feel like this group could really be something special. Then, as time goes on, you enter stage 2.

In **Stage 2**, scheduling conflicts start to arise, kids complain about going, the preaching has lost some of its luster, people start to get on each other's nerves, you find out that the church has different views than you on certain secondary issues, people begin to feel burdensome, and life is just chaotic for you. Of course, there are still some good things along the way, but is committing to this local group of people really worth the effort?

Then comes the potential for stage 3.

Upon arriving at **Stage 3**, you have a choice. You can either hunker down and covenant with this group of people or you can leave.

You probably experience something similar to these three stages with many things in life – school, hobbies, friendships, etc. And just like with everything else in life, where we have the option to commit to a hobby, or a sports program, or a job, or a marital relationship when it gets tough, so too do we have the option to do the same with our church. It is the task of every person and their church to move past Stages 1 and 2 and into Stage 3.

Lead Pastor Dan Hamel once gave a message at The Creek talking about the covenantal relationships we believe God is calling us to as a church family. In doing so, he talked a lot about oxen and yokes and how we are to be "yokefellows" with one

another. He got this from **Philippians 4:3**. Here's what he said about that and how that relates to covenanting with one another as a group:

*"The picture of an oxen's yoke takes us deeper than the public space or personal space, it's private space. Private conversations aren't for everyone....just for the few people intentionally included. Private space allows for more than just casual or committed friendships to develop, it allows for covenant friendships to develop. Just like oxen that have been yoked together, a covenant friendship is one where two or more people can say: God has called us to one another, God has brought our relationship together for the purpose of pursuing Christ together, for the purpose of mutual encouragement, for the purpose of advancing his kingdom.*

*Covenant friendships aren't just people you work out with at the gym, or people you play sports with, or people you grab meals with, or go shopping with, though you might do those things with covenant friends. The real quality of covenant friendships is that you can say: 'Because God has called me to you and you to me, because he has united us together, my life is fully open to you, any question you want to ask, ask it. Any concern you want to share, share it. Any challenge you want to offer, offer it. We have complete access to one another's lives. There is nothing that's off-limits.'*

*And it's not just about character formation and having a Christ-like attitude and disposition; it's about the kingdom output of our shared relationship. Two oxen yoked together aren't just close to each other, they're not just good friends who know everything about one another, they do work together. Covenant friends are able to say God has joined us together for us to combine our efforts and our resources, our energy and passion, in order to bring him glory, in order to love and serve people, and in order to move the kingdom of Christ forward through our relationship."*

Your time in a church will inevitably reach Stage 2. Upon reaching Stage 2, you'll have to make the decision whether to enter into Stage 3 – the stage of covenantal relationships. It'd be well worth your while to really think about what kind of church community you want to be a part of, what your expectations are of the group, and if your expectations are in line with the purpose of the group.

If you want to know what will kill your relationship with your church or life group fast, look no further than one's inability to express their expectations, work through any conflict, and resolve to root themselves with others.

Questions for reflection:

1. What kind of group do you want your life group to be? What are you hoping to get out of your life group? What are your expectations of it?
2. **Read Philippians 4:3.** When you read the above description of covenantal relationships, is that something you are searching for in your life group? In what ways are you personally contributing to this community being covenantal in nature? In what ways have you personally hindered that from happening?
3. Write out a brief paragraph of why you think covenanting with a community will serve your spiritual growth well. Then, write out a second brief paragraph about how *not covenanting* with a community will hinder your spiritual growth.

## Day 5 – What Will Kill Your Life Group Pt. 2

Do a Google search on the most invasive species in the world and more than likely you'll see something about the Cane Toad. Gross, right? The Cane Toad was introduced in many places like the Philippines, Hawaii, and Florida to combat certain insects. Little did folks know that the toad would be a much worse problem. With a heartiness and strength to fight against any would-be predators, a skin that releases toxins to shoo off anything that would eat it, and a reproductive ability to lay thousands of eggs a year through just one female toad, these beasts have become a force to be reckoned with.

Yesterday, we began talking about how the "let-down" stage of life groups can be a life group's killer. And while life groups may not have to worry about any amphibians ruining their weekly gathering, there are some other things that can occur within a life group that are as ugly as toads.

Here are *five* life group "killers" that, like the Cane Toad has done to environments around the world, will wreak havoc on your church and life group being all that God intends for it to be:

### **Killer #1: Shame**

Researcher and author Brené Brown defines shame as the, "intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging."

All too often, churches and life groups, once safe havens for all kinds of spiritual maladies, become shame factories. A snide remark, a flippant joke, a dismissive criticism, a passive aggressive comment is all it takes and people begin to feel that maybe this isn't the safest place for them to bring their hurts, habits, and hang-ups. As pastor Timothy Keller writes, "Instead of being a hospital for sinners (where triage happens), they [churches] become a museum for saints."

Don't let shame ruin your church or life group.

## Killer #2: Bitterness

**Hebrews 12:15** exhorts Christians to, "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no *root of bitterness* springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled."

Bitterness, anger, and frustration can all well up within us when we have misguided expectations. Expectations are not misguided when they are stated clearly and agreed upon.

All too often, in churches and life groups, people will allow things that irk them or bother them to build up pressure inside of them until they can no longer take it anymore. At that point, they either leave a group or explode on unsuspecting victims.

Make it your goal to cultivate a church community that doesn't "let the sun go down on your anger" (**Ephesians 4:26**). But instead, resolves to be "quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (**James 1:19**) and that confronts people lovingly if you have something against them (**Matthew 18:15-20**).

Don't let bitterness ruin your church or life group.

## Killer #3: Gossip or slander

The third killer that can infiltrate your church or life group is gossip or slander.

Paul writes in **Ephesians 4** to "put away falsehood" (**4:25**), to "speak the truth" (**4:25**), to not allow any "corrupting talk" to come out of your mouth (**4:29**), but only that which is "good for building up" (**4:29**). He goes on to say that Christians should, "Let all...clamor and slander be put away from you..." (**Ephesians 4:31**).

Make it your aim to speak truth to those in your church and life group. Make it your aim to assume the best. Make it your aim to trust. Make it your aim to put away falsehood and seek clarity where clarity is needed. It does no one any good to get secondhand information, nor does it do anyone any good to spread false information.

Don't let gossip or slander ruin your community.

#### **Killer #4: Partiality**

This killer is less known than maybe the first three we've looked at, but it can be just as deadly if not nipped in the bud. Our culture applauds inclusivity (and rightfully so!), but there are parts of us that are naturally inclined to make judgements about people. And sometimes, whether we are aware of it or not, those preconceived ideas that we hold to can prevent us from showing the same care or concern for some people as others.

James writes about this in **James 2:1-9** saying, "My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism...If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers."

I'd encourage you to read all nine of those verses and commit to fostering a Christian community that is invitational to everyone in the group, is inclusive of everyone in the group, is ready to jump at a moment's notice to help, not just the people whom everyone likes, but those who are less popular as well.

Don't let partiality ruin your church community.

#### **Killer #5: Immorality**

This last invasive enemy of church and life groups probably goes without saying. Immorality will ruin your church community. And that goes for both immorality interpersonally between group members and immorality that goes on personally for just one member.

Paul, using a food illustration, writes in **1 Corinthians 5:6-7** to the Corinthian church saying, "Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are."

Here, Paul is addressing the Corinthians that were allowing someone in their church to go on sinning deliberately. He compares that person to yeast in dough that affects the whole lump, even at a molecular level.

You may agree and see how interpersonal immorality could lead to a group's demise, but personal holiness matters just as much as interpersonal holiness. It follows that if a church or life group is intent on looking, living, and loving like Jesus and helping one



another do that, then each person must be committed to that goal both in a group sense and in a personal sense.

If one person goes on sinning deliberately, then he or she will slowly begin altering the course of the group. No longer is the group about following hard after Jesus. It becomes something else entirely.

Don't let immorality ruin your church community.

Questions for reflection:

1. Which of these five church community killers could you commit yourself to? When has one of these shown up in your relationships and hurt that relationship? How has one of these killers shown up in a relationship and hurt you personally?
2. What are some other community "killers" not listed here that you think could be just as detrimental? List 2-3 and why.
3. What practical steps or commitments do you think your community needs to make to ensure that none of the above "killers" ever get so bad that your group suffers as a result? List out 3-5 and know that you'll have a space in your next life group gathering to discuss these commitments!