

Week 45

November 5 - November 11

Matthew 27:57-28:20; Mark 15:42-16:20; Luke 23:50-24:53; John 19:38-21:25;
Acts 1-9

The theme for this week is community. As we transition from reading about the life and ministry of Jesus to the formation of the early church, we will explore some elements of the community that were so crucial to the spreading of the gospel. I hope that each of you is connected right now to a nurturing Christian community that encourages your faith and strengthens your relationship with Jesus. God designed us to work and function as a part of community and not as lone rangers. -David Curtis

November 5th

Matthew 27:57-28:15; Mark 15:42-16:13; Luke 23:50-24:12; John 19:38-20:18.
"Variety"

What do two rich politicians, two uneducated fishermen, and a woman who had been demon-possessed have in common? They were all followers of Jesus. The community of faith brings together a wide variety of people. The very word "community" can be thought of in two different concepts: common and unity. What creates community is having something in common in spite of differences. Community can be based on zip code, workplace, political affiliation or, in this case, religious affiliation.

The beautiful thing about community is that there is so much variety within community. Two people can be opposites in every aspect except for one thing, and that can be enough to create community. The community of believers in the first century came from different geographical, political and religious backgrounds. The Church today is really no different in this respect; from the Chinese pastor sitting in jail, to the African believer struggling in poverty, to the American Christian who takes God's blessings for granted, we all have a faith in Christ that unites us.

November 6th

Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:12-18; Luke 24:13-49; John 20:19- 21:25. "One Baptism"

The last two years I've had the privilege of leading students from our church on a mission trip to Mexico. Both times I have been able to participate in a baptismal service with our sister church. What a blessing it has been to baptize some of our Spanish-speaking brothers and sisters. This experience has impressed upon me the common unity we have with Christians who speak a different language. Last year, after a couple of times of hearing our translator, Paul, translate my declaration of their baptism, I began to, with some difficulty, baptize them in Spanish.

I realized that it did not matter what language I was speaking in performing the baptism. I was baptizing a child of God and recognizing their membership into the universal Church. For no matter where or when Christian baptism takes place, "we are all one body, we have the same Spirit, and we have all been called to the same glorious future. There is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and there is only one God and Father, who is over us all and in us all and living through us all" (Eph. 4:4-6).

November 7th

Mark 16:19-20; Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:1-2:47. "Relationship"

While it is indeed true that it only takes one commonality to generate community, it is also true that community without relationship will die.

Like many couples who get married young, my wife and I lived in a number of apartment complexes during our first couple of years of marriage. Because of our proximity to the other residents, we were a community, but one that lacked relationship. Because of the lack of relationship, the community was of no benefit to us. We now own a home in a quiet neighborhood where we know all of our neighbors by first names. This neighborhood is a far more fulfilling community because of the relationships we enjoy.

In the early days of the church, the believers met together often (Acts 1:14; 2:44). This practice developed the relationships that led to mutual sharing and more satisfying and fulfilling relationships with the Lord. Developing community requires relationship and relationship requires communication.

May you experience genuine Christian community that flows out of authentic relationships.

November 8th

Acts 3:1-5:42. "Unity"

In January 2007, the International Bulletin of Missionary Research reported that there are now 39,000 Christian denominations today and they project that number to increase to 55,000 by the year 2025. 39,000 denominations! This staggering report makes it hard to believe that the early Christians "were of one heart and mind" (Acts 4:32).

I wonder how it is that the church went from this close-knit group of believers to the highly fractured and often dysfunctional group that we are today. Jesus even prayed for our unity (John 17:21), and yet here we are 2,000 years later, Jesus' prayer going unanswered.

I think the cause of all of this disunity is that we don't always keep the main thing, the main thing. Hebrews 12:2 says that we are to keep our eyes on Jesus. This has to do with our focus as individual believers, but also as the church. When we take our focus off Jesus and the unity we have in Him, then disunity develops and the community of faith is fractured.

May you keep your focus on Jesus.

November 9th

Acts 6:1-8:1a. "Conflict"

As a community grows and develops, it will inevitably change as the needs and demands of the people change, resulting in conflict. In Acts 6, the church was growing rapidly and the first recorded conflict occurs. I think that it is instructive to us, how the church handled this early conflict. There are five distinct steps that were taken that brought a positive solution out of the conflict:

- 1) The conflict was not ignored, but acknowledged by the leadership (6:2).
- 2) The community was involved in the solution (6:3).
- 3) The decision of the leadership was accepted by the community (6:5).
- 4) The ministry of prayer was involved (6:6).
- 5) The gospel continued to expand (6:7).

I am not intending to give you a full explanation of conflict management today. But I do hope that you catch the spirit with which the early church handled this conflict. Remember, if a community is growing, then conflict will arise. It is when a community has become stagnant that there is a lack of conflict.

November 10th

Acts 8:1b-9:43. "Risk Taking"

Community can be very messy because it involves people who are unique and come with baggage. The New Testament church was no exception to this rule by any stretch of the imagination. In Acts chapter 9, we see that the church in Jerusalem was unwilling to accept Saul into the community of believers. The risk was too great in their mind and Saul had too much baggage in his background. However, every person that accepts the Lord and seeks to be involved with a church comes with some history and baggage, and fortunately Barnabas believed that the risk was worth taking.

We do not get to pick and choose who God intends to save and include in the church. If we did, the church would end up being a boring collection of people who walk, talk and think alike. Instead, because of God's infinite wisdom, the church includes people of different backgrounds, nationalities, experiences, education and personalities. This can make our relationships messy and it will always be risky to open up to new people.

November 11th

Acts 10:1-12:5. "Playing Favorites"

"If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but say to the poor one, 'You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor' –doesn't this discrimination show that you are guided by wrong motives?" – James 2:3-4

In the reading today, Peter's vision makes it abundantly clear that the gospel of Jesus Christ is for all people regardless of race, creed, gender or any other category that we use to define groups of people. There is no external issue in people's lives that makes them unacceptable to God. It is only our personal sin and our sin nature that makes us unacceptable before a holy God. And there is no sin that cannot be forgiven when we come to Christian faith.

The result of this reality is that we all have the same standing before God. So, if this is true, why do we play favorites in the community of faith? This is what James (2:2-4) warned us against.

So, who do you play favorites with? Who do you choose to ignore at church? If God says that they are of infinite value (Luke 12:28), why would you treat them as if they are of no value?

General Questions for each day:

Summarize the day's Bible passage in your own words.

What thoughts, actions, attitudes or beliefs are addressed in the passage?

How is the Holy Spirit leading you to apply this passage to your life today?

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Bible Discussion Guide:

What different types of community are you involved in? (i.e. work, neighborhood, etc.)

Other than in your church, where do you feel the strongest sense of community? What is God calling you to do in that community?

Do you identify yourself with the local church more, or with the universal church more? Why?

Think about the relationships that you have within your church community. Are those relationships stronger now than they were, say a year ago? How about 5 years ago, or 10 years ago?

What can you change or start doing today to develop deeper and more meaningful relationships within your church community?

Do you feel that it is a positive or a negative that there are approximately 39,000 Christian denominations in the world today? Why do you feel that way?

How can Christians maintain community with so much division in the church?

How has conflict been handled before in your church community?

Regarding conflict within a community, there are primarily four types of people. Those who tend to instigate or generate the conflict directly, those who tend to work to be part of the solution, those who pretend it doesn't exist, and those who abandon the community because they fear the conflict. Which one do you most identify with? Why?

What type of people do you have a hard time accepting as part of your church community?

When have you taken a risk to reach out to someone new or different? How did it work out? If you have never taken the risk, why not?

Do you play favorites with people in church? What can you do to change this pattern?