

“Shift:Accelerating on the Discipleship Highway - A Life of Community”

Scripture: John 13:31-35; Acts 2:42-47

Graphics: car, highway, shifter

Big Truth: Discipleship is not a passive event or anything we complete in our lifetime. Following Jesus is a process that takes intentional engagement and sacrifice to live fully into the call of Jesus to, “follow me.” There are milestones along the way to help orient us and show us what areas we can engage: Worship, Community, Openness, Obeying, Serving, and Sharing.

Focus phrase: Community is sharing a life in Christ together.

1. Introduction

- A. PRAY!
- B. As we begin this morning, I’d like you to think about your **community**. It can be the community in which you live...or the one in which you work. Maybe it’s the community here in Panama, where this church sits.
- C. Help me out with your voices, do you know everyone in your community?
(No)
- D. Of the people that you KNOW in your community, do you talk to every one of them? (No)
- E. An even more probing question might be, “Do you LOVE or even LIKE every person in your community?” (No)
- F. I would personally answer no to those questions as well, honestly.
- G. Yet...in my community, I know lots of people. I like most of them. And, in profound ways, I love them simply because they’re members of my community. I realize that you’re thinking, “Well, you HAVE to love them because you’re the pastor.” That’s true in some degree. But each one of us has the same opportunity to learn how to build community in such a way that we can LOVE, simply because we are in community together.
- H. If we live in a community, we are somehow connected to others. And, as much as our culture and world want to offer the false structure of individuality or isolation as good ways to live, **Jesus offers just the opposite**. And, as followers of Jesus, isolation and fierce individuality tear down community instead of building it.
- I. Father Thomas Merton, who taught for a while at St. Bonaventure University in Olean, wrote a book called *No Man Is An Island*. It’s a collection of essays through which Merton describes true, meaningful, spiritual life as life in community, and not isolated from others...or from the God who created us.
- J. Merton teaches that life is all about relationships...with God...and with each other.

- K. Last week in worship, we spent some incredible time studying worship. And then we simply worshipped, as a response to God's steadfast love and faithfulness in our lives.
- L. We agreed that *A Life of Worship* is something we grow into, so that every day, in all areas of life, we worship. I pray that this past week, you found yourself desiring to worship more, as you SHIFT gears and increase a life of worship.
- M. Today, we're taking a look at the second milestone, which is related to worship because these two milestones are pathways to being part of the body of Christ.
- N. The second milestone is A Life of Community.
- O. If you're taking notes this morning, let me give us a definition. **Community is sharing a common life in Christ.** It's not just about sharing Christ or sharing the things we have. It's taking ONE LIFE in Christ, and sharing THAT with others!
- P. **The people of this world are desperately seeking genuine community.** The Church and the people called disciples of Jesus have the answer to that longing. Our job this morning, is to get some equipping in this community-building, and then invite others INTO it.
- Q. And just like there was a mandate and a vision for worship, there is a mandate and a vision for Community.
- R. Here's our chance to CLUTCH, SHIFT, ACCELERATE, and REPEAT until we find our church and our lives in deep and transformational community... until we find ourselves wanting to share our lives with others.
- S. Turn with me in your bibles to the gospel of John, chapter 13. In John chapter 13, we read a narrative of Jesus washing the disciples' feet and the famous Last Supper. Jesus did that before he was arrested and crucified on the cross.
- T. In John 13, Jesus was starting his farewell. And at the end of the Last Supper, Jesus identified Judas as the betrayer. Judas is the one that attempted to break the community...but Jesus continued to BUILD community, even after he's gone. Look at verse 31...

2. Scripture

A. READ John 13:31-35

- i. Jesus knows that He's going back to be with the Father (this term of glorifying has the sense that Jesus is re-taking His status as Son of Man).
- ii. Jesus isn't going to be around anymore, physically. The disciples may have been used to hanging out with Jesus, but that was about to change. Jesus needed to prepare them to stay in community, even if He wasn't there as the focus of their community.

- iii. So he said, “Little children, I am with you only a little while longer...”
- iv. Why did Jesus call them, “Little children...?” It wasn’t because they were actual children, right? It wasn’t because they had somehow regressed. He called them little children because he was asking them to **grow up** and take responsibility for building community without him there.
- v. And, thankfully for us, Jesus made this pretty simple. The ONE THING -say “there is ONE THING” - the ONE THING that they most importantly needed to do to keep building the community was LOVE. This is the mandate to live a life of community.
- vi. Now, the command to love was not new - that was at the heart of the Jewish Torah, or law that the disciples would all know. What WAS new to the disciples was the fact that LOVE was to now derive from the fact that Jesus came to earth and would die because of God’s love for them. See it?
- vii. The disciples were now being asked to enter into the same relationship with each OTHER that Jesus was about to model for THEM - one of sacrifice, even of death for their sake.
- viii. So, this mandate to love is the mandate to build community. In fact, Jesus was certain that if the disciples LOVED like he did, that the community would be built and expand.
- ix. In verse 35, he said, “By THIS (by loving each other) everyone (inside and outside the church) will KNOW that you are my disciples...”
- x. Building community in the church through loving the fellow disciples that are also present will not only build internal community, but will draw others into the community of love...so that THEY TOO can be loved.
- xi. And if we think about this for one second, if we live in a world that desperately wants genuine community...and we have the opportunity to build that by loving each other and inviting others into that Christ-like love, then Jesus really DOES have the answer to the world’s tragic bent on isolation and individualism.
- xii. But HOW do we do that? How do we grow up in this life of community? How do we build a life of community that’s shifting and accelerating? The disciples figured it out in the first century...turn we me to Acts 2:42-47... here’s what the VISION of community looks like...

B. READ Acts 2:42-47

- i. We can picture this scene and we might think it’s some kind of crazy cult or a movie made by Disney. In fact, THIS WAS the church of the followers of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem in the first century.
- ii. And throughout this section, you can see the progression:

- a. At first, people are curious about these Jesus people...people that show love because of Jesus. Curious about all these incredible miracles and healings.
 - b. Then they want to become part of the team, to participating in the things the believers and disciples did,
 - c. And then continue to build this community by inviting others to be saved and building community together.
- iii. This is the **vision** of the church - the VISION of community that the church offers. It's not a stagnant community that likes to keep to itself and simply enjoy the company of those who are part of the community.
 - iv. It's been said that the church is the only organization that exists for those who aren't yet part of it!
 - v. And this community did four things, as described here:
 - a. First, they spent time talking about Jesus. They proclaimed the gospel - the Good News - about Jesus.
 - b. Second, they bonded together in what's called KOINONIA or deep Christian fellowship based on love for Jesus and for each other.
 - c. Third, this community ATE together. And this may seem trivial, but eating together is the best way to spend time building community.
 - d. Finally, they spent time in prayer and praise to God.
 - vi. And the result of this vision of community becoming a reality was that people started to take notice. They had the goodwill of ALL the people. And God added to their numbers...and the community grew.

3. Application

- A. Do you yearn for the type of community that's described by Jesus based on love? Do you desire for genuine relationships and community in the way that was present in Acts?
- B. Accelerating on the discipleship highway means shifting gears to build a life of community in your own life, and in the church.
- C. bible.org gives this take on community: [Community is] a process that is revealed in the "each other" language of the New Testament: Love one another, forgive each other, regard each other more highly than yourselves. Teach and correct each other, encourage each other, pray for each other, and bear each other's burdens. Be friends with one another, kind, compassionate, and generous in hospitality. Serve one another and submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. This list just scratches the surface, but it is enough to

remind us that we need the community of faith to grow up in Christ. (<https://bible.org/article/community-god's-design-growth>)

- D. And remember, the “other” is primarily the one who is not yet part of the church. Your focus is not to be internal, as comforting and homey as that is. Your attention is always outward.
- E. Community includes those people you don’t know, those you don’t like, or those with whom you disagree. The ultimate mark of discipleship is that you can experience a profound love for others, based solely on the fact that you’re a follower of Jesus, and that other persons or person groups are not me or us.
- F. Said another way, you follow Jesus by loving those who don’t deserve it. Because, in fact, you and I don’t deserve God’s love, but only receive it because Jesus died on the cross because of His love for you.
- G. Building community has very little to do with hanging out with people that you like and that like you. That’s the start and a benefit of being part of the body of Christ and having family relationships. YET, true, authentic, Christian community is experiencing love for someone else that is, indeed, NOT like you and that can’t OFFER you anything.
- H. Keeping the commandment to love is the identifying mark of discipleship because it is the tangible sign of the disciples’ abiding in Jesus.
- I. So, what does it look like to be growing in A Life of Community. For each of our milestones, we have four gears to which we up-shift. Each gear - or phase - has certain characteristics. And for each gear, you can ask yourself the questions in your HANDOUT to help determine what God is calling you to be doing to grow up in your life of community.
 - i. First gear is the EXPLORING phase.
 - a. In this phase, God is working in your life to draw you into Christian community, but you're not really all that aware of how or why. If you ask our confirmation class about how God is working in this phase, they would, I’m positive, tell you that this is because of God’s PREVENIENT GRACE wooing you into community.
 - b. A statement that would express this phase might be, “I am curiously drawn to the Christians who graciously accept me as if I belong with them already.”
 - c. Questions for you to identify if you’re exploring:
 - i) Am I eager to say yes to a friend who invites me to church or small group or a church event?
 - ii) Do I have a sense of belonging when I come to worship, even though I don’t know many people I’m with?

- iii) Do I feel at home here?
- d. If this describes you - at the EXPLORING PHASE - my counsel is to be patient. Be patient with the church. Be patient with yourself. And, as much as possible, enjoy this growing sense of community. It may have been something that you've been searching for, and hadn't been able to find anywhere else. It may be something that took you by surprise. Just go with it and patiently let community be built in your life.
- e. My other counsel is to say to you clearly, the people around you are all sinners saved by grace, make mistakes, will disappoint you, and may not live up to your hopes. That goes for me as well, as the pastor. I WILL disappoint you. I say that because many people find community only to leave it because someone does or doesn't do something they thought they should. Patience and grace builds genuine community.
- ii. The second gear is the FOLLOWING STAGE.
 - a. At this stage, you feel called to not only receive community, but also to offer God's gracious acceptance to others beyond the church.
 - b. When you shift into this gear, you're beginning to take some on-ramps to different hands-on ministries. Maybe it's making a crock pot of soup for the Super Sundae. Maybe it's helping with the Easter Egg hunt or Back-to-School Bash. the Hospitality Team loves when people volunteer to help.
 - c. You may be asking yourself:
 - i) I'm beginning to like these people and this church, I wonder how and where I can help?
 - ii) I like to receive, but I wonder what it would be like to tell someone else about this community?
 - d. If you find yourself in the FOLLOWING stage, then **just do it**, as Nike says. Pick one thing that might be fun, and just try it. If you need ideas, some talk to me or any of the people that you see in leadership. It takes lots of gifts to build a community. And always be thinking outwardly - how do we show hospitality and love to those who aren't here?
- iii. That leads us to third gear - the BECOMING phase.
 - a. In this phase, the vision to see every family in our community have the opportunity to believe in and follow Jesus starts to take on urgency.
 - b. Because no man is an island, and the best way to a life of discipleship is through community, you begin to not only focus internally, but externally.

- c. You might say, “I seek to relate to others both in the church and beyond in ways that reflect God’s hospitality to me.”
 - d. The desire in you is that more and more people would come experience the community that you’re helping to grow. Maybe you tell a family member about some of the things going on here. Maybe you post something on social media that lets people know you checked in for worship. Through your first few contacts while serving, you’ve found a few people that you connect with in a special way. Life is good and you want others to know about it.
 - e. Ask yourself:
 - i) What is about this community that I can help to grow and make better than it is now?
 - ii) Who else is interested in building community?
 - iii) What my next step here as a focus outwardly?
 - f. Many are at this stage, especially if you’ve been here a while. You find yourself comfortable coming to church on Sunday and during the week.
 - g. One of the challenges in this stage is that you **forget** what it was like when you first came and started to build community. The assumption you make is that everyone is comfortable and connected, so you forget to break outside your group of friends or family in order to intentionally meet new people, welcome them, **KNOW THEIR FACES AND NAMES**, and invite them to join you. Intentional discipleship is **ALL** about the **OTHER**...not just the ones you are already comfortable with.
- iv. In fact, that takes us to the final phase - **CENTERED**.
- a. Those whose lives are **CENTERED** on Christ in a life of community do what Jesus did: you invite the one who’s least like you into a relationship with you and the community of believers here.
 - b. Jesus invited fishermen. Jesus invited children. Jesus invited those who were sinners. Jesus went to those who were lost, and broken, and least. Jesus reached out to the sick and frail and scared and demon-possessed. And from that lot he built genuine community.
 - c. People who are centered on Christ in community intentionally seek to build relationships with unchurched people in order to share God’s love.
 - d. People who are centered look for opportunities to meet new people for the purpose of loving them, and maybe being loved in return.
 - e. This is the goal of intentional disciples - loving others as Jesus loved.

4. Conclusion

- A. Thomas Merton wrote, “The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them” — Thomas Merton, No Man Is an Island
- B. As much as the world tells you that you are yours and yours alone, that flies directly counter to Jesus’ message of community. And even though we don’t yet KNOW everyone, or talk to, love, or even LIKE everyone in our community, we are STILL in community at some level.
- C. We have one life in common. His name is Jesus. We all share in that one life.
- D. We get to share one life...and we live it together in Christ. When one part of that life is hurting, we all hurt. When one part of that life is rejoicing, we all rejoice. When a life is added to that life, we all benefit from it.
- E. Be part of that shared life. SHIFT and ACCELERATE in your life of community here at Panama UMC. It can be as simple as learning and remembering the name of just one person today that you don’t know.
- F. After worship, I encourage you to simply say hi. That’s where this all begins.
- G. The Holy Spirit can work from there...be faithful, love deeply, and let’s build a life of genuine Christian community right here.
- H. We’re counting on us to do that intentionally for Jesus.
- I. Let’s pray...