

West Valley Church
1/15/12

Community Created by God

On September 12, 2011, Brandon Wright, a 21-year-old Utah State University student, was driving his motorcycle en route to the school's computer lab when a BMW pulling out of a parking lot collided with him. Both vehicles burst into flames. The BMW driver quickly escaped from the car, but Wright was trapped under the 4,000-pound sedan.

The horrific accident drew an immediate crowd of students and construction workers. One passerby walked around the burning vehicles to survey the situation and saw a motionless body, apparently dead, beneath the BMW. Another individual, testing his strength, attempted to lift the car, but without success. A handful of others joined the effort but could not budge the car. A young woman lay on the ground to peer under the car and saw evidence that the trapped victim was still alive.

The flames were intense at the front of the car, where the motorcycle also lay on the ground burning. Nevertheless, at this point a dozen members of the growing crowd joined shoulder to shoulder at the side of the car, lifted in unison, and tilted it high enough to allow another rescuer to pull Wright to safety. At that point the city's emergency responders appeared on the scene. They doused the flames and transported Wright to Intermountain Medical Center, where he was treated for two broken legs and a fractured pelvis.

What one person could not accomplish alone, a team of people did. "Every one of those people put their lives in danger," assistant Logan police Chief Jeff Curtis said. "Those people are heroes. You can only speculate what the outcome would have been if they hadn't lifted that car." That's a picture of healthy, live-giving community as God intended it to be. Where people work together to accomplish something for the benefit of others, that they can't accomplish themselves. And in the process, everyone benefits.

Edward Hallowell, a senior lecturer at Harvard Medical school, talks about the basic human need for community. He uses the term *connection* and defines it as the sense of being a part of something that matters, something larger than ourselves. Let me repeat his description, and you tell me if it sounds like the church. We need face-to-face interactions; we need to be seen and known and served and to do the same thing for others. We draw life from these relationships. Of course these involve other people, and especially God, but Hallowell notes that

people draw life even from connecting to pets, to music, and to nature.

I think we all realize that we want and need these relationships, but we've all been burned enough that the thought of true community—true disclosure—is something we avoid. Some people fear being hurt if they get too close to others, so they withdraw into things like work or hobbies or watching TV or going online. But isolation is not the answer. You didn't get here on your own; neither did I. We define ourselves by the relationships that we have. I am the son of Bill and Donna, brother to Mark, husband to Shelly and father to Sean, Ryan and Brenden. I am pastor, a friend, a neighbor. And I was not put on the planet just to be by myself. I was made for community and so were you.

So let's begin today by first looking at

1. The ***Human-Shaped Void***

I can remember before I became a Christian, someone told me that people have a God-shaped void or hole in our lives, and they said our lives are not complete until that hole is filled by God. That makes sense. But I want to say that there is also a human-shaped void: a space in each of our lives that can only be filled by other people. And even if we don't realize it, we all hunger for it. In fact, even advertisers have recognized this. Have you ever noticed in places like McDonalds and Burger King, and other franchise food-service-employers will sometimes have flyers will put out encouraging you to apply for a job with them? Have you seen those? They will say things like "get a raise in six weeks" or "you could be a manager" or "opportunities for advancement." Like climbing the burger flipping ladder is everyone's American dream. I was in a Starbucks awhile back and noticed that they had cards on display that were encouraging people to apply with them. But instead of appealing to the promise of managing your own group of minimum wage earners, they appeal to something different. Look at what it says. I don't know if you can see that at the top, so let's enlarge it. It says what? "Create Community." Working at Starbucks, they would like you to think, is about more than a job or money. You can actually create the very thing you need; community. You can "Make a difference in someone's day" the bottom of it says.

Isn't it amazing that even Starbuck's knows we instinctively want and need community. Community, by the way, means literally "shared unity." Communion: "shared nearness" or "shared intimacy."

From the beginning, we were made for community. If you look in the first two chapters of Genesis, the book of beginnings, you will see a little refrain that is repeated: "And God said . . . And it was so . . . And God saw that it was good." This is the song of creation until the final act of those chapters, when the song suddenly stops. God creates a man in his own image. God looks at the man (who

remember is made in God's own image), God looks at him and He says, "Not good." This is God's creation, but He says it's not good enough. Why? Because *man was alone*. Now think about that. No one has sinned yet. The fall has not happened. There is no sin to come between Adam, the first man, and God. Their relationship is completely unhindered. Adam walks with God in the garden in the cool of the day. He is known and loved completely by God. But in spite of all that, the word God uses to describe Adam is "alone." And God says that *alone is not good*. That means that God has created a human-shaped void in us that *not even God* can fill. And this isn't just a statement about intimacy between a husband and wife. It's about our need for each other. Our need for community.

There was a research project done that was by far the most thorough study ever done on relationships. It was called the Alameda County Study and it was done by Harvard scientists. They tracked the lives of 7,000 people for over nine years. And the results were overwhelming. They found that the people who were most isolated—most alone—were three times more likely to die than those with strong relational connections. Here's the amazing thing: people with BAD health habits (like smoking, overeating and obesity, alcohol use) but had strong relational ties lived significantly longer than those with great health habits but who were isolated or alone. In other words, it is better to eat Twinkies with friends than to eat broccoli alone. Harvard researcher Robert Putnam said that if you don't belong to a group of people and then you join a group of some kind, you cut your risk of dying over the next year in half.

In another study reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* 276 people were infected with a virus that produces the common cold. The study found that people with strong emotional connections did four times better fighting off illness than those who were isolated. Those people were less susceptible to colds, caught less viruses, and produced significantly less mucous than relationally isolated individuals. That's right: people with strong relationships have less mucous. That means that unfriendly people are snottier than friendly people.

Robert Putnam, the Harvard sociologist that I mentioned earlier, concluded that today we are more isolated than ever. He wrote a great book called Bowling Alone. It is the most in-depth study of our society. He gave the book that title because he found that even though more people than ever are bowling, fewer than ever are bowling in leagues. His research found that for twenty five years American society has gone through a steady decline in what they call "social capital"—which is the value of connectedness and community. And the direct result of this lack of community is lower educational performance, more teen pregnancy, greater depression, and higher crime rate, among other things.

Kind of casts verses in the Bibles about unity in a different light, doesn't it? The Bible says, "Make *every effort* to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:3, niv) And it doesn't say that just so we'd get along in the church. The Bible tells us this because it is what we *need: it's what we were made for*.

Now I think you can begin to agree with King David when he wrote in the Psalms, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, *even life forevermore*." (Psalm 133:1-3, niv) Relationships give us life!

But we're not just talking about *any* relationships. We are talking about

2. The ***Divine Community***

To see why this kind of community matters so much to God, we have to go back even before Genesis, before Adam and Eve were created, to think about what life was like for God before anything else. And this is why the Doctrine of the Trinity is so important. I've given you in your notes a number of scripture references regarding this critical doctrine. Essentially what this says is that God is three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in One: all distinct and yet distinctly and inseparably One.

Over the years, I've heard people try to describe the doctrine of the Trinity in a number of ways. Like an egg that has a shell, a white, and a yolk. Or the Trinity is like water—it's steam, liquid or ice, but still water. Or like an apple—a core, the meat, the skin. None of these really help all that much. But the early church fathers didn't describe the Trinity using eggs. They tell us that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist as three persons—One God, perfect oneness, yet three persons. As difficult as it is to understand, the reason this is so important is because it tells us that God Himself has been experiencing community throughout eternity. *Community is rooted in the being of God.*

Did you ever wonder what life is like inside the Trinity? The writers of Scripture are really only interested in talking about God's relationship *to us*, so we don't know a lot about this. But it is worth thinking about.

Do you think there was a lot of bickering about who is the most omniscient or the most omnipotent or which member is the oldest? Or who is better at something? My wife Shelly and I will occasionally get into a "discussion" about division-of-labor issues—who should make the bed or do the laundry or clean the bathroom this week. Can you imagine that kind of discussion going on within the Trinity?

Not quite. Because they are always in agreement. That's why Jesus could say "Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me? The words I speak are not My own, but My Father who lives in Me does His work through Me. Just believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me. Or at least believe because of the work you have seen Me do." (John 14:10-11, nlt)

It's a kind of mutual indwelling. The ancient Greek word for this is "Perichoresis" which is related to our word "choreography." It's like the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a kind of eternal dance. God Himself is intimate, joyful community. And *we* are made in His image.

God didn't make human beings because He was bored or lonely. God created us because He is all about a loving community. He loves community so much that He wanted a world full of people to share it with. He wanted to invite us to the dance. And life with Him, the Trinity, is the pattern for our lives. If you look at that passage in Genesis, it indicates that this is a large part of His image in us: community. It says "So God created human beings in His own image. In the image of God He created them; male and female He created them." (Genesis 1:27, nlt) He makes them two, and yet the two are capable of some kind of oneness. God, who is three in one, creates us in His image and says the two shall be one. And not just male and female, but His church too. Jesus prayed for us as His church that we would be one in him, just like the Trinity is one: "I pray that they may all be one. Father! May they be in us, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me. I gave them the same glory you gave me, so that they may be one, just as you and I are one: I in them and you in me, so that they may be completely one, in order that the world may know that you sent me and that you love them as you love me." (John 17:21-23, gnb)

God invites you and I to the divine dance.

3. The **Great Invitation**

You and I are invited to join the dance. Jesus prayed this for you: "'My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for *those who will believe in me through their message*, (That's us!) that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one-- I in them and you in me--so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.'" (John 17:20-23, niv)

We've been invited into this community of love. That's why Jesus said, "For where two or three gather together as My followers, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20, nlt)

To gather “in His Name” is not reserved for attending church. In the Bible, a person’s name represents his or her character and identity. To gather in Jesus’ Name means to relate to each other the way the Trinity does; in close agreement and love to each other. Whenever that happens, Jesus can’t stand idly by. He can’t help but join in, enjoying it, and cheering it on.

And that is why authentic community is so life-giving. We join the dance of Life Himself. When I am isolated, I feel lonely. When I am in real community, I feel more fullness of heart. If I am closed in on myself, my heart is empty. In divine community, a heart comes alive. We were not made for loneliness; we were made for joy. *Sin isolates! Sin separates!* And when Jesus prayed for us to be invited into divine community, it isn’t a casual request. There was an enormous price to be paid for it. The Son had to go to the cross to remove the great isolator, sin. The Father, who has always known divine community, experienced the violent tearing of separation from His Son. The Spirit came to earth and allows Himself to be rejected and grieved by thoughtless and selfish humans. Your invitation to the dance came at an enormous cost to every member of the Trinity. But they willingly did it for you.

So if you don’t value community, or if you tolerate or contribute to disunity among God’s people or even sin, that is a huge slap in the face of God. It means you are at odds with the very character and nature of God. Please don’t take this lightly. Make every effort—every effort—to maintain the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace.

Not long after the I.Q. (Intelligence Quotient) test was developed, several studies were conducted to find out how different groups of people scored on the test as groups. The test was administered to men and women, young and old, rich and poor, and many ethnic groups as well. It was in this context that the I.Q. test was given to a group of Hopi Indians.

When the Hopi received the test, they immediately started to ask each other questions and to compare their answers. The instructor saw this happening, and quickly intervened, telling them that they each had to take the test alone. He told them, “You are not permitted to help each other or to share your answers among yourselves.”

When the Hopi heard this, they were angry and they refused to take the test because they said, “It is not important that I am smarter than my brother, or that my brother is smarter than me. It is only important what we can do together!”

We live in a world that isolates. Sin isolates. Our own woundedness isolates. Our own relational defense mechanisms lead us to isolation. But we really do need each other, and community is worth the effort. What we do together is important!

In the next few weeks we are going to learn about healthy Biblical community. But I hope you've learned today how important this business of community is in the first place. "Make *every* effort." This kind of community fills the void in our hearts, it shares in the very nature of God, and you have been invited. Will you accept the invitation? This is a growing church. Next week we will begin a two service worship schedule. That's a great thing! But we need to continue being a healthy community filled with life-giving relationships. That's why the foyer area needs renovation—so that we can gather there between services and continue as one community. That's why the Community Groups on Sunday morning are so important—so that you can gain new life-giving relationships with people you may not know, or you don't know very well. That's why we are starting Growth Groups—small groups where we can grow together and care for each other and pray for each other. This is a growing church! We are making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit as we grow together.