

Why are we here?
To Fellowship in Community
Spilman Memorial Baptist Church
Dr. H. Powell Dew, Jr.
July 31, 2022

Text: Acts 2:42-47

Purpose: To help the congregation realize that we are to live in harmony and unity. This is possible if we are willing to share, care, and be vulnerable.

Some churches are often so dysfunctional, that fighting, fussing, and bickering are the norm. A few years ago, I read a story about a church in Louisville, Kentucky. The headline read, “Church Meeting Ends in a Fray, Beleaguered Pastor Resigns Amid Turmoil.” The article told the story that involved years of discord, division, and turmoil that finally erupted one Sunday into fistfights between members. It took over a dozen Louisville Police officer to break up the fight. The reporter noted that those there that had “just finished raising their hands in praise to God, were raising their hands against one another.”



Sadly, this is the way some people outside the church view all churches. The unchurched do not want to attend because of the poor reputation that churches have regarding the practice of community.

To help heal the brokenness in community, we need to examine several things that often break our community. Our oneness as community can be broken because we experience an absence of authenticity, the presence of brokenness in relationships, as well as a spirit of exclusion.

An Absence of Authenticity



The first sign that all may not be well in the area of community has to do with the absence of authenticity. The ancient Greeks wore masks according to the characters they played. Our word *hypocrite* literally means “a mask wearer.” Sometimes we think that word means that someone is hiding a secret sin, but it also means someone that conceals self.

Sometime we are asked, “How are you?” and we respond, “Fine.” When on the inside we are not doing well at all. Instead of sharing our pain, our struggles, our heartaches, our anxieties, we interact with others in a superficial manner.

The Presence of Broken Relationships



A second sign to look for in the mirror has to do with the ongoing presence – and acceptance – of broken relationships.

James Emory White shares his experience in the book, *Rethinking the Church*, about a church in Louisville, Kentucky where he was called as pastor at the age of twenty-six. He was the fifth pastor in ten years. The

church was full of division, discord, broken relationships, power plays, malicious gossip, and slander. Unsigned letters full of accusation and hate were commonplace. Deacon's meetings manifested a spirit of broken relationships. Monthly business meetings were like twelve rounds of boxing.

After he had served there a year, he called a former pastor and asked was it always like this in this church. He discovered that the former pastor had suffered an emotional breakdown. Another pastor had been run off by some in the church. For three years, James White tried to turn this church around. In that church, broken relationships, fighting, and division were not only seen as normal, but as one man said, "Why have a business meeting if we can't fight?"

Community is broken when relationships are broken.

A Spirit of Exclusion

Church members should also watch for a spirit of exclusion.

Paul wrote in Romans 15:5-7, "*May ... God... give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus... Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you.*" Every church wants to think of itself as friendly. Unfortunately, often church members are only friendly to each other, to people they like, or to people who are like them. That is not acceptance, much less community. Real acceptance involves looking at people, differences and all, and accepting them for who they are and how God made them. It doesn't matter if they are white or black, male or female, rich or poor.



We as a community should be careful for one another – and not exclude ourselves from others.

The Church as Community

Well, if we are to live in community, in fellowship with one another in unity, what exactly does it look like?

Billy Hybles has noted that often the only fellowship we have with one another is the fifteen or twenty minutes before and after the church service. We stand around and ask each other superficial questions.

"So, how's is going at work, Jake?" one may ask.

"Fine, Phil. Say, you driving a new car?"

"Used," Phil replies. "What do you have going on this week?"

"Not much."

"Well, it's been great fellowshiping with you, Jake."

"Same here."

And that's about it – until next week, when Jake and Phil give it another round. But the bible says that true fellowship has the power to revolutionize life. True community is when the "masks" come off, conversations get deep, hearts get vulnerable, lives are shared, accountability is invited, and tenderness flows. People really do become brothers and sisters.

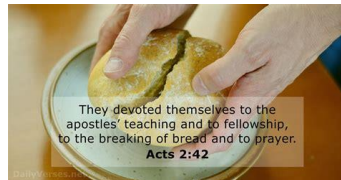
Quite a few years ago, I remember when a television program called "Cheers" came on. I occasionally see the reruns on



TV. There was something special about that program. Do you remember that? What was so special about that program and place? Was it the people like Norm? Was it all the one liner quips from Cramer? No. It was not that at all. It was the fact that there was a sense of community there.

We all want a place to go where “everybody knows your name.” At Cheers everybody seemed to care about each other, support each other, and accept each other’s weaknesses. But if you compare that to what we find in scripture about the church community, it doesn’t begin to compare. Acts 2:42-47 describes it like this:

They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with gladness and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)



The portrait of a community of believers is marked by these four authentic items:

- (1) Love and be loved
- (2) Know and be known
- (3) Serve and be served
- (4) Celebrate and be celebrated

I. Love and Be Loved

Where there is authentic community, we can love and be loved. In Acts, Luke observed that “*they devoted themselves to the ... fellowship.*” That word fellowship in the Greek is *koinonia*. This expresses companionship, sharing, and being closely connected with other people. People take the high road with one another. They think the best of others, and never assume the worst.



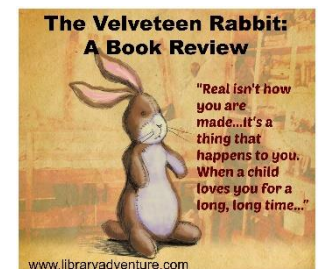
There is great risk in love. It sometimes accompanies great pain and hurt. C. S. Lewis observed this about love.

“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the shell of selfishness. But while inside that shell, that safe, dark, motionless shell, it will change. It will not be broken, it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable ... the only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers ... of love is Hell.”

TRUE LOVE IS
...vulnerable
and yet secure.



In the classic children’s book, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, we find a rabbit that is all clean and new, who becomes “real.” During that process, the rabbit meets an old, worn-out, but very much loved, stuffed horse. As we



listen to their discussion, we capture the real essence of a community giving itself over to love.

“What is REAL?” asked the rabbit one day.

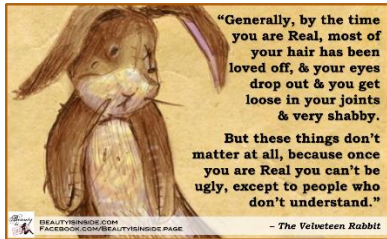
“Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

The Skin Horse replied, “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really love you, then you become real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the rabbit.

“Sometimes” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”



The Skin Horse said, “It doesn’t happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be

carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.

II. Know and Be Known

Let's get to know one another.

A second aspect of living in true community is to “Know and be known.” Luke not only said the earliest believers were devoted to the fellowship, but that “*all the believers were together and had everything in common.*” They were sharing, talking, supporting and giving of themselves to one another.

True community takes place when we can stand up like so many do in support groups like AA and say, “Hi, I’m John and I’m an alcoholic.” Or “my name is Bill and I just lost my job.” When we are open with one another, we open the door to the giving and receiving of love and support. Divorce, the death of a loved one, getting laid off, financial setbacks, miscarriages, cancer – each of these things people have walked through and have come out on the other end because of God’s touch on their lives through a supportive community. If there is no authenticity, however, such a community is not possible, because it begins with a willingness to admit weakness.

We are reminded of the childhood game, *Hide and Seek*. Most of us played that game as a child. There was always a problem. Somebody always hid too well, and nobody could find him. Sooner or later, they would show up mad because everybody had stopped looking for him. And then everybody would get mad because he wasn’t playing the game the way it should be played. You have to be willing to be found.

III. Serve and Be Served

A third mark of real community is that it is a place where you can serve and be served. When Luke described the early church, he noted that they were *“Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.”* There was an attitude, a spirit of giving to each other to meet them at the point of their need.

Here in this church, when someone is sick or there is a death of a church member, our church provides a meal for the family. Our church comes and supports that person’s family by letting them know that we love them, and that we care. In a few weeks or months later, those that were served, they serve others during a time of need.

Community is a place of mutual serving and being served.

IV. Celebrate and Be Celebrated

Finally, authentic community is where we can celebrate and be celebrated. Notice how Luke ended his summary: *“They broke bread in their homes and ate together with gladness and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”* Over the years, I have been invited to celebrate birthdays, graduations, and weddings. As members of the community of Spilman, we want to celebrate with you.



The early churches’ fellowship was so good, that others wanted to join the community of faith. Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed the same enthusiasm for community when he wrote that it “is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community.”

There is a story told of an event that occurred at a Special Olympics foot race. Special Olympics feature mentally and physically disabled athletes from around the world. One of the most memorable events happened during a foot race among those that had Downs syndrome. The runners were close together as they came around the track towards the finish line. One of the runners stumbled and fell. When that happened, the rest of the runners stopped. They went back as a group, helped the runner who had fallen to stand up, and they all started to run again.



God has given us a wonderful gift – the church. For us to live together as a fellowship, we need to be involved in all these areas.

**Love and Be Loved.
Know and Be Known.
Serve and Be Served, and Celebrate and Be Celebrated.**

I believe at Spilman Memorial Baptist Church, we do community pretty well. We do love, we do know one another, we do serve one another, and we also celebrate each other’s success. I believe we could do it a little bit more if we were willing to take some of our masks off and begin to be authentic and genuine with one another.



Over the past month, we have examined five ways to answer the question, “Why are we here?” We are here as a local expression of the body of Christ.



1) We are challenged to **evangelize** our community.

Tell others about the good news found only in Jesus the Christ.

2) We are challenged to **disciple**, or teach each one what Christ taught His disciples.

3) We are challenged to become personally involved in **ministry** to others. We do not meet here just for ourselves. We gather to become a blessing for others.

4) God has given us the privilege to come and **Worship** Him in Spirit and Truth. Our worship may be imperfect, but one day it will be perfected.

5) Today we have explored what it means to live in **community and fellowship** as we serve one another in this local body of Christ.

Coming up during the month of August, we will begin the election process of selecting three new Deacons and one trustee.



I remember when I was ordained on November 13, 1988 (almost 34 years ago), it was an honor and privilege to be ordained as a deacon at First Baptist Church in Kinston. Even though I cannot remember the exact words, I can clearly remember being charged by the pastor with the duties and responsibilities of a deacon. I

knew that I was not totally 100% sure I was able to meet the challenge, but I can tell you that I wanted to be able to fill those shoes. I determined in my heart that I would give it my best in order to be that person God described in Timothy, Romans and Philippians.

When it came time for the laying on of hands, Jan Barwick (a woman) and I went and knelt on a prayer bench at the front of the church. In the back of my mind, I thought the scene looked kind of like a wedding ceremony with a man and woman kneeling before the congregation. Those that were serving as deacons, or had ever served as a deacon in our church or any other church were invited to come forward and whisper in our ear a word of blessing, prayer, or encouragement to us. That particular day, there must have been 50 people lined up ready to pray for us.

As that stream of people came by to lay hands upon me, I had an overwhelming sense that I was joining a group of people that had dedicated themselves to serving Christ and His church through the office of Deacon. There were men and women who had selflessly given their time, effort, energy, devotion, to service within the church.

This is one visible way in which our church continues to lift up and support one another. May God continue to encourage our hearts to not quit, but continue on with the mission and ministry of God here in this church and community.

LET US PRAY