

*Community Beyond our Expectations*  
A Sermon on John 17:20-26 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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One of the things you and I need is to be part of a healthy community. None of our communities are perfect, but some are much healthier than others.

Healthy communities take actions to keep people safe, and people are treated with equal respect. Conversely, in unhealthy communities there are many threats of violence, and some members are intentionally disrespected.

In healthy communities, people build relationships of trust. One of the ways this is done is that information is shared in ways that support and protect members of the community. In unhealthy communities people are afraid and those in positions of power manipulate those feelings of fear. In unhealthy communities secrets are kept, which only makes people feel more fearful.

In healthy communities rules are written by democratically elected councils and are freely available for all members to learn and use. In unhealthy communities there are many unwritten rules and people struggle to learn how the system works.

Diversity is encouraged in healthy communities, and diverse points of view are welcomed. In unhealthy communities there is little tolerance for different viewpoints, and those who hold different values, those with different backgrounds or different points of view are treated as scapegoats.

In healthy communities, leaders focus on the needs and the work of the community, not on themselves and their accomplishments. In unhealthy communities, leaders give lots of attention to their accomplishments and expect others to do the same.

In unhealthy communities, people use power to try to control others; power is used over others. In an unhealthy community you are always being reminded of the hierarchy. In healthy communities, power is used to serve the community. People are empowered; they are encouraged to use their gifts in powerful, healthy ways.

I began to pay attention to these differences between healthy and unhealthy communities about thirty years ago, when I was an elementary school teacher. I noticed that in healthy classrooms students feel safe and build relationships of trust with one another. In healthy classrooms students are treated with equal respect and care, and all of the students are empowered to make full use of their gifts. In unhealthy classrooms none of these things are true.

If you work in a school you will notice that some classrooms are healthy and other classrooms are less healthy for the students. The same thing is true in our churches. Some churches are healthy communities and others are much less healthy.

Many of the best ideas for establishing and maintaining healthy communities come from the Bible. For instance, there are many different, and sometimes conflicting, ideas about God in the Bible. All of those different ideas about God are allowed to coexist together, in a way that is similar to the diversity of ideas found in a healthy community.

Some of the best ideas for building a healthy community come from the Hebrew Scriptures. In the book of Leviticus, the people of Israel are commanded to treat foreigners with equal respect. *Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt.*

Other ideas for building a healthy community are found in the New Testament. In chapter fifteen of the Gospel of John Jesus says, *I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.* Jesus is telling his disciples that as the leader he is not hiding information from them.

It's especially harmful and discouraging when we experience or witness predatory or malicious behavior in our church communities because we in the church have been given the instructions, and we've been commanded to build healthy, safe communities in our churches. We've also been given instructions about building communities that are healthy and life-giving in ways that go beyond what we might find in a really good public school classroom. Our Christian Churches are called to be life-giving in ways that go beyond what we might see in a vital, healthy neighborhood.

For instance, ideas of equality are expressed in the United States Constitution. Likewise, in Holy Scripture we are commanded to treat others as equal, yet St. Paul commands the followers of Jesus to go further. In his letter to the Philippians he writes, *do nothing out of selfish ambition, but in humility regard others as better than yourself.*

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he implores followers of Christ to set aside the status and labels given to them by the broader culture in order to be united. *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* In the Christian Church we are called to set aside some of our attachments to the social categories that so often divide us in order to embrace our new identity as equal members of God's family.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he describes the diversity of the gifts of the members as a blessing: *Now there are varieties of gifts...but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone...Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.* Christians are commanded to use these gifts, given to us by God, not for individual fulfillment, but for the fulfillment of God's mission.

Then Paul introduces the idea of love as a rule for behavior in our communities. *Now I will show you an even better way. For if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have a faith so powerful as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.* Paul's description of love as a rule for our communities is not found in any national or state constitution or in any set of organizational by-laws.

Christians are given instructions to establish and maintain healthy, safe communities, but our churches are expected to be nurturing and supportive in ways that go beyond what might be possible outside the church. This is the idea behind today's Gospel passage from John 17.

Last week I described the Gospel of John being laid out like a labyrinth, or a spiral. Here, at the end of chapter seventeen, we have made our way to the center of the labyrinth. That doesn't mean it's easy to understand the ideas, but we can see threads of several of the main ideas of the Gospel of John here at the end of chapter seventeen, the center of the labyrinth. Jesus prays that the community of disciples would build relationships of reciprocity and engagement. *As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.*

Jesus is praying for his disciples to be united and engaged in the shared task of fulfilling God's mission. *The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one.* The word that is often confusing to us is 'glory'.

When I was younger, I used to think the word 'glory' had a similar meaning as the word 'power'. There are those situations where the two words are used in close proximity, like this: "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory." What I have learned is that the word 'glory' in the New Testament is always connected to a word we do not expect: the word 'crucifixion'. In the New Testament 'glory' is always connected to Jesus' willingness to give up his life.

Glory is an indication of God's presence around Jesus. Jesus was filled with God's love and power, and people could see it. People could see that Jesus was filled with God's love and power by the

way he served people, by the way he treated everyone as a child of God, and by the way he was willing to give up his life for the sake of God's people.

You will be relieved to know that in our healthy church communities no one is ever asked to give up their life for the sake of the community. Yet we are asked to give up things that are important to us. We are asked to give up our precious time. We are asked to give up our tendency to think my ideas are right or are better than other people's ideas. We are asked to follow Jesus' example by being servant leaders.

With this idea of 'glory' being connected with Christ's example of servant leadership I think of the verse about us sharing in God's glory this way: *As you, Father, 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. The task of servant leadership that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one through their servant leadership.*

One of the things you and I need most in our lives is to be part of a healthy, life-giving community. Christians are given instructions to establish healthy communities. But there is more. Following the example of Christ and the instructions of St. Paul, Jesus' disciples are called to form communities of healing and reconciliation in ways that go beyond what we might hope for outside the church. This is our shared goal, to be part of God's blessed community, thus fulfilling a mission that goes well beyond our hopes and expectations.