

“Finding God in the Waves: Take Me to Church”  
Acts 4:32-35

Today we focus on why our spiritual life needs community. Neuroscience helps us to see that we are wired for community. Social belonging is as essential to us as food and shelter. In his book *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*, Matthew Lieberman shares the results of his research on the social nature of our brains. Here is a clip from his TED Talk about this: [The social brain and its superpowers: Matthew Lieberman, Ph.D. at TEDxStLouis](#). As a result of his years of study, Lieberman asserts that being social is at the core of who we are for learning, growth, community, and all aspects of life.

The Church is the community we need for our souls to belong, grow, and shine. Yet, human communities are not always what they aspire to be, including the community of church. The social disconnects we experience in daily life are often reflected in church where people cut each other down, abuse each other, exclude others, compete with each other, slander each other, and even bully each other.

In his book *Finding God in the Waves*, Mike McHargue shares about his struggles with his church community. Growing up in a restrictive Christian community, community meant conformity. He had to believe a set of doctrines without any questions, and he had to live according to the conservative social norms of his church. But when his questions about faith began to emerge, he was no longer welcome in his own church. There was no room for doubt or questions in his church. When he ultimately had to leave his church, he was so heartbroken because he loved the community. Through science he understood that church represents two primal human needs: “an urgency to belong to a community and a desire to experience God...If you want to know God, it turns out some advice my grandmother gave me mirrors what science has to say: Pray, read the Bible and go to church...The Church is at least a global community of people who choose to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. Even if this is all the Church is, the Church is still the largest body of spiritual scholarship, community, and faith practice in the world –and this practice can improve people’s lives in real, measurable ways.”

In its beginnings, the Church continued in the Spirit of Christ to bring people together and to break down barriers. The early church as described in Acts 4 practiced their faith in a way that can inspire us today. The early followers of Christ were so focused on the love of God that their lives were so transformed for the whole world to see their amazing change. Motivated by the Holy Spirit, they generously shared what property they possessed. This was not an early form of communism because there is historical evidence that points to the continued ownership of homes and businesses by individual members. The sale and distribution of surplus assets is most likely what is described in both Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-37. Common ownership was not a community “rule”. Members sold and gave as they felt called to. Barnabas is presented as a notable example of generosity. This story is about how a community that was focused on the grace and love of God lives together. When the people experienced God’s love, they were transformed to share it with others. Their hearts were opened to the needs of others among them. Community became central to one’s life and that community was diverse in

every possible way. Everyone belonged and contributed. The Spirit of God created not just new practices in our lives. The Spirit of God created a whole new people out of them. Let's listen to Acts 4:32-35:

<sup>32</sup> Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. <sup>35</sup> They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

This was a genuine community where people practiced vulnerability, sharing, teaching, and joy. Those who needed help felt like they belonged. Those who were able to give felt compelled to share because great grace was upon them all. Genuine Christian community is about grace where our social hierarchies, divisions, and hatreds are turned upside down and exposed for their inadequacy to feed our souls.

The church over the centuries has not always lived according to this Spirit of God's grace. Conflict, division, abuse, greed, self-interest, and even violence have been part of the church's history. But when we as the people of God are able to focus on our relationship with God and grow in that love and grace, we are able to bring tremendous transformation to our world towards generosity and love. This is not just some idealistic dream for a Utopian community that exists only in our imagination. Our spiritual communities, no matter what they look like or how they practice the faith, are not immune to conflict and problems. In fact, genuine community is about working through conflicts, honoring differences, repenting and forgiving each other, and always finding new and life-giving ways to love God and the world. Parker Palmer, in his wonderful book, *The Company of Strangers*, writes that community is "that place where the person you least want to live with always lives. And when that person moves away someone else always arrives to fill the empty place." It seems we all carry some romantic notion of community—the idea that community is where we can hide out with a bunch of people who are just like us. But the real purpose, at least the Christian purpose, of community is for it to be a place where we give ourselves up to the workings of the Spirit by learning how to live with people who aren't exactly like us, but people we may not like at all. It seems that the way to open ourselves up to the God who is beyond our knowing, the way to beloved community, is to start small—with the neighbor who is beyond our knowing. What better way to learn about the reconciling power of Christ than to test it in a body of infinite variety." So community according to Palmer is not about intimacy with others but about seeing our connection to all of God's created world and practicing that on the local level.

This is the energy and soul that is needed in our world today. September is suicide awareness month. We know how challenging it is to maintain mental health when life can be so difficult or when our bodies fail us. A community of care is so essential to ground us in a sense of connection and that we belong, just as we are. Our country is desperate for a healthy model of community. In her book *Finding Our Way*, writer and consultant

Margaret Wheatley notes that, “America has embraced values that cannot create sustainable society and world. We organize too many of our activities around beliefs that are inherently life-destroying. We believe that growth can be endless, that competition creates healthy relationships, that consumption needs have no limits, that meaning is found in things, that aggression brings peace. Societies that use these values end up, as do all predators in nature, dead.” The real test for a church community is whether each part of the body is valued for who they are and allowed true belonging without being forced to conform. It is ultimately about God’s grace being allowed and celebrated in the diversity, successes, and failures of the community.

If we are to use the wisdom of science which is about what makes us truly happy, we have to focus on relationships and growing in our sense of connection and community. Faith leads us in the same direction.

How does this speak to or challenge you? How does it help our world today?

One of the gifts of community is our shared prayer experiences and times. Two weeks ago, Rev. Erin Jacobson and Claudia from Pittsford Presbyterian Church joined us for Centering Prayer as they are trying to start their own Centering Prayer group. I loved how as we started talking about what we do, I learned that Claudia had 15 years of Qi Gong (gentle movement similar to Tai Chi). Instead of watching our regular video, Claudia ended up leading us in that segment. At the end she had us stand close to each in a circle where we made circles of energy over each other’s hands. It was an incredible gift of sharing and the power of community. Even though we may practice prayer on our own and have powerful experiences with God, coming together brings a different level of experience.

Today, I would like to invite you to a time of shared prayer called, “Where will you be tomorrow?” Turn to two neighbors and share with them where you will be tomorrow at 11:30 am. What will you be doing? What are your challenges and prayer needs around that time?

Take time to bless each other using the words of St. Teresa of Avila:

“May today there be peace within.

May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be.

May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith.

May you use those gifts that you have received, and pass on the love that has been given to you.

May you be content knowing you are a child of God.

Let this presence settle into your bones, and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love.

It is there for each and every one of us.”

Then try to remember this week to pray for the people you spoke to for a few moments each day of this week at 11:30 am. Amen.