

## PROPER THIRTEEN, PENTECOST 11, YEAR B, AUGUST 3, 2024

What is community? Is it the people in your neighborhood? Is it the people you work with? Is it the people in your family? Is it the people in your close group of friends? Is it the people in your place of worship?

What defines what a community is? From when Meghan was a child to a teenager she used to go to a Lutheran summer camp. One year the theme was community. So the teens came up with their descriptions of community. They are:

Nothing says community like eating mac and cheese off your friends clothes. Nothing says community like everyone eating oatmeal from the same pot. Nothing says community like jumping in mud puddles together. Nothing says community like sharing your wet clothes with each other. Nothing says community like sitting up all night and eating junk food. Nothing says community like singing obnoxiously loud to wake everyone up. Nothing says community like screaming together and running for your life when you encounter a rattle snake

Those are just a few of the wonderful ideas of what community means to a group of teenagers at camp. In today's letter to the Ephesians, Paul also talks about community. He reminds his readers that a wide variety of people with diverse gifts and interests make up Christ's community of the one worldwide Church.

Yet, we all know, that diversity makes unity an elusive quality. We live in an increasingly fragmented society that forms countless special interest groups in order to advance our own causes. What's more, at least many Americans also spend much of our time with people who share our interests and perspectives and barely interact with those who differ from us. On top of that, little even seems to unite even most Christians.

Paul tells us a good community needs to be humble, gentle, patient, to bear one another in love and to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Paul expects us to make a deliberate effort to contribute to that unity. He summons us to the counter-cultural, Christ-like attitudes and actions which is the hard work of being unifiers rather than dividers. In a world that increasingly seems to embrace arrogance, violence and short-temperedness, God through Paul calls Christians to embrace humility, gentleness and patience. But the most vital ingredient that Paul talks about is speaking the truth in love. What exactly is he talking about.

Lots of times we believe it means to share difficult truths in a gentle, kind, inoffensive manner. From a practical standpoint, we know that difficult things are best heard when our defenses are not up. In a loving, non-threatening environment, hard truths are more readily received. But that is not what Paul is saying here. Instead he is saying that "speaking the truth in love" moves us Christ-ward. Speaking the truth in love moves people toward Christ where life's deep meaning and effectiveness are to be found. That is our anchor especially in troublesome times.

Note that the anchor is truth *and* love. Someone once said that love without truth is sentimentality and truth without love is brutality. Although we often have trouble holding them together they belong together. I believe as Christians it is imperative for us to speak truth in love.

Paul tells us we are to speak the truth to one another, with love, so that we can all grow in spiritual maturity. We are to train one another in the truth of foundational gospel truths, truths about who God is and what God has called us to do, hard truths

that often are in opposition to the special interest groups we belong too. And our motivation should always be love.

The “love” referred to in this verse is agape love, a self-sacrificial love that works for the benefit of the other. We speak truth in order to build up not to tear down. Several verses later Paul writes, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” Our words should be beneficial to the hearers of those words. That’s how we speak truth in love.

Looking at the Gospel this morning, the setting is after Jesus had fed five thousand people. When they realized that he might be a source of food, they wanted to make him their king. So Jesus slipped away but the crowd found him. Jesus tells them they have been looking for him for all the wrong reasons. They were asking for bread and butter, but Jesus was not about that kind of bread: My bread is deeper than that. I am what life is about and I am here to show you how it works.

Jesus made it clear in his teaching that life is about connections and relationships. Jesus also demonstrated that life works best when self-giving surpasses self-serving. But we drown out those truths in our clamoring for what we personally want. This happens when we eat the Bread of Anxiety rather than the bread of life. We live in an age of uncertainty that anyone who offers us certainty we grasp it like it’s our only lifeline. Even some churches do this when they preach follow these rules and you will earn your way to heaven or pray this way and you will be saved. The only certainty we have is that there is a creator God and that Jesus is the expression of how God love us. The truth is we need to live more into the mystery of God that continually teaches us that life is about being connected and then using that connection to offer something to others.

When we are grounded in the hope of our calling, and when we seek with all our hearts to live lives worthy of God’s call to discipleship, then we glean from this letter a direction for how to live in community. We use our gifts to build up. In the writings of Paul and his disciples, that’s a message that’s repeated throughout. How do we live as the body of Christ? By building up, not tearing down. Just like we build up our own bodies by developing muscles, giving good nutrition to our bodies, tending to our bodies’ needs, we build *each other* up through figuring out what practices, what actions, what acts of care and love and devotion will nurture each other’s health. We figure out how we can use our gifts to serve others. We seek to build up those who have been torn down through oppression and injustice. And as we build each other up, we *grow* up, maturing in our faith, and measuring up to the stature of Christ.

One of the best definitions I know of love is ‘actively seeking that which is best for another.’ In this context, speaking the truth in love is being connected to others and actively seeking what is best for them. When Jesus told the crowd — those who wanted to make him king because of one kind of bread, he is saying to us: Keep your eye on the bread of life, the kind that connects us to others and leads us to seek that which is best for them.

The invitation is extended to us today. Can we live lives worthy of the calling to which we have been called? Indeed, we are called to one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, one priority to shape the whole of our

existence. Let's claim a unity of purpose, and build each other up into Christ, as we endeavor to be his hands and feet, his body in the world. Amen.