

Choosing Community over Isolation (Matthew 25:31-46)

I'm from a country that is community oriented. So I am used to say our house instead of my house, our mother instead of my mother, our teacher not my teacher. There are very few that I can claim as mine. I was part of a community as small as our family and as big as our country, Korea. When I first came to the United States that was one of the challenges I had. Not only does the culture require me to say my but also I found that things and people I share the sense of "our" are not there anymore. She was our mother when I shared mother with my siblings. It was our church when I shared church with my friends and others. It was our country when I shared Korea with people living in it. But in the United States, there are very few that I can claim as ours. I only had my husband but I couldn't call him our husband. Losing the possessive case 'our' was losing the sense of belonging. I felt lonely and extremely isolated. Gradually I gained the community I lost. When Shawn was born I could call him our son. I belonged to Boston University and found many friends that we can all call it as our school. I also belonged to a church with people I felt close that we all called our church. And now I am proud and privileged to call Christ Church as "our church."

There are still people out there isolated longing for a community that will provide them a sense of belonging. There are still people out there longing for a community that will provide the opportunities to reach out to people in need. The researches have proven that two of the most important characteristics of growing churches are "providing sense of community" and "serving others." So inwardly they provide a community that members would feel strong sense of belonging. Also outwardly they reach out and serve the local, regional and global communities. But interestingly enough if a church focuses on just one of these aspects, it tends to decline, researchers say. When a church only focuses on having their own fellowship without reaching outside the church, or when a church only focuses on reaching out and doing mission without meaningful worship and spiritual growth opportunities, they tend to decline. When both inward and outward communities are strong and constantly exchanges its energy, as a result the church naturally grows.

The Jesus also calls us into a community. Immediately following his baptism Jesus called a community of the disciples to work with him. They worshiped and they served together. He called 70 others to send to proclaim the good news and heal the sick and cleanse the possessed by demons. No one in the Bible worked in isolation. Eugene Peterson describes well in his book "Reversed Thunder." "Love cannot exist in isolation. Away from others, love bloats into pride. Grace cannot be received privately. Cut off from others it is perverted into greed. Hope cannot develop in solitude. Separated from the community, it goes to seed in the form of fantasies. No gift, no virtue can develop and remain healthy apart from the community of faith."

The gospel lesson this morning gives us a clear message. “Value and meaning of our life is measured by the way we served others.” God calls us to simple service. The activities that Jesus mentions here: feeding the hungry; giving drink to the thirsty; showing hospitality to strangers; clothing of the naked; caring for the sick; and visiting the imprisoned. This parable describes acts of mercy we all can do every day. These acts do not depend on wealth, ability, or intelligence; they are simple acts freely given and freely received. Any one of us could easily be involved in a number of these simple acts of kindness without stressing our time, money or strength. Jesus does not tell us to fix all the world’s problems in one shot; rather He invites us to make a difference in a simple fashion: one person at a time. It doesn’t mean these simple acts won’t cost anything to us. Rather the acts which Jesus mentions in this passage all have a ring of personal compassion, and require more than simply writing a check to charity. The call of God to simple service is the call to become personally involved in the lives of those who are hurting and to touch them with our lives. The call of God to simple service is simply to see the face of Jesus that we love most in the faces of the suffering, and treat them as we treat Jesus. He clearly claims that the value and meaning of our life will be measured by the way we served others by the love of God.

At this point I want you to take a look at the question sheet and try to answer the questions. We have questions regarding to reaching out to the outer communities and questions regarding to the inner communities to meet the needs of the members’ sense of belonging. Think about it and share your thoughts with your neighbors.

Discussion topics

1. Think about the least of the community—children & youth in need, single parents, senior citizens, unsheltered, sheltered in poorly managed housings, the poor, the uninsured, the immigrants & their children, the prisoners... What are your gifts and resources to serve the least of the community?

2. What are the Lee Church’s gifts and resources that can be utilized to serve the needs of the community? (Try to think beyond what we are already doing)

3. In order for the church to provide the opportunities for your spiritual growth and fellowship, what are the small groups that you are interested in joining in?

Group with Spiritual focus

- Prayer group
- Study group (Bible & other, specify your interest)
- Covenant group
- Other, specify _____

Group dealing with Life Issues

- Senior adults group
- Parenting support group
- Children's play group
- Couples group
- Singles group
- Other, specify _____

Group with Outreach Focus

- Regular work day for different projects

Other groups, specify

4. What will be your preference for the group meeting?

- weekly every other week monthly

I was intrigued by the fact that goats and sheep were separated as groups, not as each individual. Being in a community of people that encourages us to bear fruit and provides the opportunities to grow in faith and action is a blessing as Christians. For a moment I thought nothing will be more thrilling than seeing people from Lee Church entering into the kingdom of God as a community. We are saved by the grace of God in the faith of Jesus Christ. And we are called to serve God and God's people. John Wesley's saying is appropriate for the conclusion of the sermon today.

Do all the good you can,

By all the means you can,

In all the ways you can,

In all the places you can,

At all the times you can,

To all the people you can,

As long as ever you can.

May this be the way in which we live and are recognized by those we meet each day.

