

.COMmunity

We live in a world of people that increasing longs for community-connectedness, but increasing find themselves alone and isolated.

In a book entitled, “The All Better Book”, an author collected answers from elementary children on how to solve some of the world’s biggest problems. One of the questions in the book was, “With billions of people in the world, someone should be able to figure out a system where no one is lonely. What do you suggest?”

People should find lonely people and ask their names and address. Then ask people who aren’t lonely their name and address. When you have an even amount of each, assign lonely and not lonely people together in the newspaper.

[Kalani, Age 8]

Make food that talks to you when you eat. For instance, it would say, “how are you doing?” and “What happened to you today?”

[Max, Age 9]

We could get people a pet or a husband or a wife and take them places.

[Matt, Age 8]

Finally, here’s an answer that hits home.

Sing a song. Stomp your feet. Read a book. (Sometimes I think no one loves me, so I do one of these.)

[Brian, Age 8]

Loneliness is a problem that has run rampant in our society over the past decade. As families began to cocoon—to stay indoors-to fence yards- to build rear decks instead of porches-to order pizza and rent a video instead of venturing out into populated areas, connectedness has diminished. Just getting to know your neighbors in some communities is a slow and incomplete process.

God created us for community. There is a God-given need placed in our lives to connect with others—to be known and to know- God didn’t leave Adam alone-He created Eve because community was part of His plan for us. Tom Hanks in the movie Cast Away shows a good example of the human need for interaction with others. Anybody remember Wilson---his volleyball. One of the saddest points in the movie is when he loses his companion—his volleyball—at sea.

We're approaching a time in the year where many families are making a big move to enter our community. Some of you today may even be some of the early arrivers this fall. In the community we live in, one things for certain—there's high turnover every year. Those of you in the military can relate to frequent moves. In my early years, my parents were missionaries and we moved quit often. When we return to the US we continued moving every few years. One of my most difficult moves came at the midway point of the 4th grade---cry, refuse to go. Friday battleball...fine.... I belonged. I found community. I could go around the room today and many of you could tell of traumatic moves of feeling unconnected, of being alone. I chose a story from years ago, but the reality is that we often feel unconnected when life situations change.

If community is important to everyone—think about what community could be like in the church—where the Holy Spirit is present to bond us into a family.

Community---you know community is a part of Horizons name. Horizons Community Church. The reality is though that often people attend churches without every finding community.

In a church setting—I think of community as:

A gathering of believers who are mutually concerned for one another-striving to connect and build relationships in the church while at the same time, inviting others to become a part.

Mutual concern for one another. A hallmark of the church in Acts was the concern and camaraderie that was evident. They gathered together frequently and helped each other when times got tough. Somewhere along the churches path over the last 2000 years, community has diminished. Things that should make community even stronger tend to take from it. We have gadgets galore—cell phones, beepers, pagers, instant messaging, email, and more—yet people increasingly feel isolated. We have cars to get placed faster, and then we get on I95. There's plenty of reasons for community not being a reality:

Long commutes, hectic work schedules, life situations, personal priorities, television, the internet. Do you know that the average American watches 4 hours of television a day? I want to look alittle deeper at what keeps us from community today.

Today I'll be taking several quotes and ideas from a new book by John Ortberg titled Everyone is normal till you get to know them. I recommend this book to any of you who are interested in further study on this subject.

As I consider some underlying hindrances to community in the church, the first hindrance is what I'll call our "mats". Turn with me to **Luke 5:17-26**

Read passage:

One day as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven.”

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, “Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, “Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...” He said to the paralyzed man, “I tell you, get up, take our mat and go home.” Immediately he stood up in front of the, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, “We have seen remarkable things today.”

This is an amazing story of community in action. The paralyzed man was dependent on his friends to get him to Jesus. We don't know a lot about this man, but because of his physical limitation, he would have been confined to his little 3x 6 foot mat dependent on others to move him and care for him. What amazing friends this guy had. Instead of becoming bitter and angry to the point of isolating himself even further, this guy developed friends who appear ready to do almost anything for him. And what about those friends, guys who were willing to look past his limitations and include him in the group. This group was the fellowship of the mat. The reality is that we all have mats in our lives. Mats of brokenness from sin, from the effects of living in a fallen world. Too often we hide our mats or disguise them or even worse try to ignore them. Everyone's Normal till you get to know them. Then we start to see there quirks. Think of the tenacity of these friends.

House is full—no one was willing to allow them access through the door. No handicap entrances in that day. I could just see these guys already hot and sweaty from caring this guy from where he was to this house. They call a group meeting—what are our options--after a few minutes one guy says—“hey lets make a hole in the roof and lower him down---there was probably silence for a while as the other guys are trying to come up with a less drastic approach---but finally they agree to do it. Now houses in that day would have most likely had flat roofs with a thick clay layer on top supported by wood cross beams with mats of branches.

The power of the Lord was present for healing---according to the passage. People were pressing into the house to see the display of power and to probably try for there own healing.

We all have mats in our lives. Do you have friends who are willing to break through a roof to get you to Jesus---Do you have friends you're willing to intercede for and break a hole in a roof to get to Jesus—if you do, you're on your way to community.

Think of your mats, of your vulnerable areas that very few people know about---healing takes place in community—where there is support—where there is accountability, where there is love. **The brokenness of our lives**—our mats often become barriers to community---we hide our weaknesses and disguise them—leaving us longing for connectedness--

You know there was another group of people present in the house where the paralyzed man was healed. The Pharisees and teachers of the law. Instead of seeing the wonderful event of healing—they were in the mode of trying to discredit and suppress Jesus and his crowd popularity.

If mats are a problem for true community—then **masks** are sometimes even more of a problem. The phoniness of the Pharisees is shown over and over again in the gospels as Jesus goes about his ministry. They hide behind the traditions of men and the appearances of holiness while the world of Jesus day was suffering and in need of the Messiah.

Jesus in **Matthew 23:25-28** really goes after the religious leaders of his day who were appearing holy and righteous yet inwardly were full of hypocrisy. Let's read what he said about them.

Read passage Matthew 23:25-28:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”

If you've ever wondered just how the religious leaders of Jesus day got angry enough to have him killed. Just imagine being one of those guys when he railed on their hypocrisy. We may not be as complete in hypocrisy, but masks will keep a church of believers from becoming a community.

Why is it that Sunday mornings seem to be so difficult for families to arrive at church without a fight or stress? I can remember growing up how there would be times that I'd be going at it with my brother or sister and then as we turned into the parking lot---our parents would give us the look that meant—get it together—you're the pastor's kids and you've got to get this right before we meet folks. Sometimes I had fun in Huntsville just

watching couples and their kids go through the Sunday shift as they parked and walked to the building. I'm exaggerating the issue, but you're getting the idea of what I mean. People can go to church for years and never let others into their world. When someone asks how they're doing or what's going on in their lives, they look for the safe and generic answers. Community can not be built with a group of masks wearers. **Phoniness is a hindrance to community.**

Jesus knew that, he had a way of getting through the masks—to the heart and bringing healing. Once, a group of masks wearers gathered around Jesus trying to trick him with a situation where a woman had been caught in adultery. Let's read the passage in **John 8:1-11.**

Read passage John 8:1-11:

“But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, “teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Jesus saw through the masks of the Pharisees and he shined a mirror into their hearts that made them recognize just how far they had fallen. **Mirrors** can be a hindrance to community. You may be wondering how, but the reality is people will do just about anything to not look honestly at themselves in the mirror. How many of you enjoy the morning stroll over to the mirror. **Avoiding self evaluation will hinder community.** In the Spotsylvania Mall there's a store called Stride Rite that I should buy stock in. My wife is always taking me there for our kids' shoes. How many of you have been by the store. I don't mind going too much because on one side of the store is a warped mirror that can really make you look different. It seems to fascinate the kids and me and we sit in front of it seeing how many different ways we can distort our image in the mirror.

We really get a look at ourselves by the way our friends interact and respond to us---and whether are not they provide accountability or indulgence. Think of your closest friends, do they shine a mirror into your heart and show you things within yourself that you've been blind to, or do they agree with whatever's going on with you and seek to keep you

comfortable and happy at any costs. If you have some honest friends, you're on your way to experiencing community.

Jesus had a way of turning a mirror toward those he was around---helping them to see weaknesses, but—He also showed them much more. Look at the story of the women caught in adultery. Jesus turned to the women who really did have big issues in her life—and he turned the mirror toward her and said I see what you've been doing. How you've been wrecking your life and your families and others—but I also see something else, I see my grace being sufficient for you—go and make a change from this point forward to leave this sin.

Jesus used a special mirror that saw the reality—but also saw the potential. Community is happening when believers come together holding each other accountable—but also spurring each other forward to the overcoming life in Christ.

Mats—brokenness in our lives

Masks—hypocrisy

Mirrors—avoidance

Keep us from community.

I have 6 continuums that I'd like you to consider today. Write these down as we go through them and at the end I'd like you to plot your location today on which side of each pair of words you find yourself. These 6 groupings of words are in no particular order, and one word is not necessarily the right answer and the other wrong. This is simply a way I'd like you to evaluate where you are in these groupings as they relate to Community.

The first is alone and together

In order to be healthy and active in community life there needs to be a balance of aloneness and togetherness. We begin to lose community when a person veers too far in a direction. How do you feel you would rate yourself in that area?

Next is giving and receiving

Again healthy community requires a balance. Do you find it easier to give than to receive? The reality is that until you're able to do both of these, you haven't; made it to full community.

Transparent and guarded

Do you find it easy to be transparent? Or perhaps it's easier to be guarded. It's important to learn when and where to be transparent and guarded. I would hate for everyone to leave this message with the idea that they should be totally transparent and open about

every emotional state they go through regardless of context. Part of becoming mature in community is to know when and where it's safe and acceptable to become transparent.

Intentional and unintentional

Are you intentionally trying to become a part of community? I hear folks sometimes say they just don't seem to be connecting at church—yet attendance for them is sporadic and they often avoid opportunities for fellowship. Sometimes it takes intentionality to connect.

About 10 years ago Stephanie and I had the opportunity to spend a Christmas in a house—instead of the apartments we had lived in for years. We decide we would decorate the outside of the house with strings of lights all around the house. I went and purchased dozens of strains of lights and we set out decorating the house. I thought it was neat that the lights would allow you to daisy chain –or connect strains together to create really long strings of lights. We plugged in the long strings of lights and man did they look beautiful. As we admired our handiwork. Strings of lights started shorting out all over the place. I had over loaded the capacity with the long runs and I was burning out the lights. After I read the instructions, I figured out what had happened. Community is in many ways like a string of lights. You can't just add church events on top of an already overcrowded schedule and expect to find full community. Community takes intentionality. There are also other times when we unintentional find community, but from my experience this is one continuum where it might not be bad to slide toward intentionality.

Friendly and friend

There is a difference between being friendly and being a friend.

July 4 fancy hotel----friendly is the crew getting you to your room—tip three guys to get to the room---hail a cab--tripping over themselves to help me.

Being a friend is deeper. Do you find yourself settling for friendly conversation at church, or do you have friends. Friendliness can lead to friendship but only if you're willing to commit to it.

The last pair of words is

Bonding and bridging

Bonding is connecting that is made easily do to similarities or circumstances. Bridging is where we overcome differences or circumstances and are still able to make a connection that leads toward community. Jesus was a bridger. Think of the disciple team that he put together varied backgrounds---fisherman, tax collector, he himself was most likely trained in carpentry. Look how he reached out to outcasts, to Samaritans, to the underprivileged. Jesus understood that His mission required that he bridged the gap.

This is a danger point in many churches---they bond together and create community among themselves—and they forget to bridge to the rest of the community they live in. I want to challenge you to continue to bridge with your neighbors, your co-workers, new visitors at Horizons. Leave room in your relational quota for new folks.

1 Corinthians 13 is the chapter that details what love is. There's a verse that I'd like us to read.

Read passage I Corinthians 13:12:

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

The passage is discussing how incomplete our vision is to the full image of God in this life and it reaffirms that for eternity we'll be in community with God.

I'd like to share a story this morning to close the message about John Gilbert. John lived in Paradise, CA. At the age of 5 he was diagnosed with MS--attacks the muscles destroys. He ended up living for 25 years and each year after his diagnosis he would lose the ability to do something. He wrote about his experiences shortly before he died. One year he lost the ability to run, the next the ability to walk straight. Eventually he lost the ability to speak.

He wrote about how isolated and detached he felt as he went through his middle school years. Kids humiliated him in the lunch room, bullied him, until he was afraid to even go to school.

He wrote in his later life" what a silly species we are. We all need to feel accepted ourselves, but we constantly reject others"

John did have a few bright moments in his short life. He became a CA representative for kids with ms and he had an opportunity to travel to Sacramento to be a part of a fundraiser for his disease. He got to meet several NFL players, the governor of CA, and several other notables. The highlight of the evening was an auction that was held to raise money. One item up for bid was a NBA basketball signed by all the players on the Sacramento Kings. That was John's favorite team and in the excitement of the bidding, John even managed to get his hand in the air—until his mom gave him the eye—letting him know there was no way he better keep bidding. The item was by far the most popular auction item and bidding continued feverishly for several minutes until a guy in the back of the room raised the bid to such a high number that everyone stopped and the auctioneer stopped the bidding. The room fell quiet as everyone in the room watched the man go forward to claim the prized possession. After the man received the ball, he immediately walked over to John and handed him the ball and walked away. The crowd erupted in applause as news traveled through the crowd about what had happened.

Community is a blessing from God. When's the last time you bought a basketball and gave it away. All it takes for community is for people to start caring, to start noticing---

Horizons Community Church—it's in our name.

Let's become the community of believers that God wants us to be.