

Called to Sacred Community

[Ephesians 1:3-14](#)

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The longing for community is great today. Maybe there was a day when people felt confined to their villages, but not anymore. Now we are free, and even encouraged, to leave home and chase our dreams. A hundred years ago, no one was asking children what they wanted to be when they grew up. Children grew up to do whatever their parents did. Fifty years ago, no one spent the week in and out of airports. They spent all day, every day, in the same office or factory with the same people. Ten years ago, no one looked for friends on the internet. For better or worse, our friends used to be the people we knew.

For quite some time now we have lived in a society that teaches us to define the individual apart from community. "Be yourself," we said. "Do your own thing. Follow your star." The Army used to tell us to, "Be all you can be." Now they are telling us to be, "An army of one," which as individualism goes, is a little over the top. Now, having spent so many years trying to figure out who we are and what we want, having finally reached the bottom of ourselves, what have we discovered but that we are lonely.

So there is a lot of talk today about community. New homes are being built with porches again. (Kids, those are things you sit on in order to talk to your neighbors.) Employees are turning down promotions that would cause them to move. People are abandoning long lonely commutes from the suburbs and returning to the city neighborhoods. TV shows keep coming at us that depict friendships because the hunger is so great. Starbucks has made a whole lot of money selling not just coffee, but a place where you can have conversation. And some people are coming back to church in search of community.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul wrote about what can find in the community called church. What he describes in this letter is not the communities of the 1950s, nor is it a contemporary support group where we come to talk about the stress of living successful but solitary lives. Paul's idea of community doesn't have that much to do with finding friends or even a place where everybody knows your name. What Paul has in mind is something more sacred than that.

Paul begins his discussion of community by claiming that the real reason we long for it is not because we are looking for friends but because we are made in the image of God. There is a created imprint on every one of our souls that makes us long for God. We may not know that the longing is for God, but that is only because we have so distorted his image in our lives that we no longer recognize it. Since God, by his nature, is communal, we long for community as a way of finding him.

God has always existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in a perfect triune community. At times I have called this the true Holy Family. It isn't a broken family, a dysfunctional family, or a needy family. But out of the perfect love they enjoyed came the decision to extend their family through adoption. This is where you and I come in.

As Paul says in verses three to six of the first chapter of Ephesians, you were chosen to be adopted by the Holy Spirit into the beloved Son's relationship to the Father. There you were given every spiritual blessing of heaven. Now I would like a show of hands here. How many of you feel like you have received every blessing heaven has to offer? No one? But that is exactly what you have been given. God the Father "has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." This doesn't mean that you will get everything you want. It means that you were chosen to be brought into the family of God, and made an heir of God -- joint heirs with Jesus Christ. In other words, everything Jesus has by rights, you have received by adoption.

You are chosen! Do you remember how good it felt when you were chosen for something. Remember when you were picked for the team as a child, or picked for a dance, or admission to college? Or when the prospective employer said, "We have selected you for the job." Or when someone with starry eyes said, "I love you." Paul is telling us that you were chosen by God! And like a parent who picks a child for adoption,

you were not chosen because you were just so cute or because of your promise for future success. You are chosen because the Son was dying to love you.

This is at the heart of the Presbyterian doctrine of Predestination. Before we get all hung up on who's going to heaven and hell, this wonderful doctrine proclaims that the Son of God was predestined to come to earth to find us. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit to die for our sins and bring us home to the waiting Father.

This brings us to verse seven: "In him, [Jesus Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us." In the process of trying to find ourselves as individuals we have made a lot of mistakes, committed a lot of sin, hurt a lot of people, and hurt the image of God imprinted on our souls. So I believe the thing that people are really searching for in community is absolution. Grace. We have tried managing our sins. We have tried denying our sins and protesting our innocence. We have tried running from our sins into something else. But none of that has worked too well, has it? No, the only thing that will work is to be absolved of our sin.

There are some things that an individual can do alone with God, like pray, read the Bible, choose to accept Jesus Christ as the Savior of your life. But when it comes to hearing that we are forgiven for our sins, we all need a priest to do that. This is a critical role of the Sacred Community. We do not give absolution, but we announce that Jesus Christ has given it. To be absolved of sin and forgiven means to be made free. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be free from guilt and shame? Wouldn't it be wonderful to be free from trying to get life right on your own?

In the words of the Early Church Father Athanasius, "The church is the place where access to the Father through the Son is grounded in space and time." This is your space, and this is your time, as the church places itself in worship before the open Word of God to hear what only the church community can proclaim. "In Jesus Christ, you are forgiven." It has been "lavished" upon you.

To come to the church is not primarily to find a social experience. There are other places where you may find people you like better or who you know you better. But to come to the church is to hear the wonderful news in Christ, you are forgiven and brought home.

So the sacred community of church proclaims you are chosen. And it proclaims you are forgiven. Then in verses nine and ten, Paul says in the sacred community of church we hear, "the mystery of God's will...a plan...to gather up all things in him."

We lose a lot of things along the way in life. Sometimes it feels like we are losing everything. Recently while trying to carry too many groceries to the counter, I dropped the loaf of bread. While reaching to grab it, I dropped the orange juice and the cheese. Then the limes fell out of the bag and went rolling down the aisle. A woman walking by me said, "It's a metaphor." She's right! As we reach for a job, we lose time with family. As we stretch to grab them in time, we lose our volunteer commitments, our promotion at work, our spare time. And then because we are trying so hard to hold it all, our sanity starts to roll down the aisle away from us.

The hardest thing to lose is not your job, your health, or even your loved ones who die. The hardest thing to lose are the pieces of your heart that get cut away each time something else is pulled away from you. The mystery of God's will, the plan of the Holy Spirit, is to gather up all the pieces of your heart you have lost and restore them. The sacred community proclaims that broken families can be restored. Your created purpose and mission can be restored. Even innocence can be restored. Every spiritual blessing of heaven can be restored to you in Christ.

Thus, the sacred community of the church has to be about the task of repairing broken lives. The church does that not just through its many programs and mission projects, and not just through its pastoral care and counseling. Primarily, the church gathers up the broken heart by calling you home to the family of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What Paul is writing about in Ephesians is an identity issue. He is inviting you to come home where you

remember who you are and whose you are. You are not lost. You are not a victim. You are not on your own to make a life. Come home, Paul says, where your identity is made clear.

At home, we remember that it is never about us. It isn't about what we have done or what we have left undone. It is about what God the Father has done in choosing to adopt you. It is about what God the Son has done for the forgiveness of your sins. It is about what God the Holy Spirit has done in gathering all of your life into the family. Your role, my role, is to learn to live as a beloved child in the Triune Family.

By your Holy Spirit, O God, bring us home like prodigals who return to the Father who is running down the road for us with open arms. We ask it only by the blood of Jesus Christ. Amen.