

“Fostering Community”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – May 29, 2022

Acts 16:16-34 and John 17:20-26

This past week, I wrote a perfectly good sermon about fostering community but in the wake of the Texas mass shooting, I have had to rework what I wanted to say to you today. On this Memorial Day Weekend, we have yet another thing to memorialize. It is a complete breakdown of community itself. Our country is a series of pockets of communities, but we have lost our sense of national community. You can blame it on politics, religion, or the lack of religion. You can blame socialism, communism, capitalism, or whatever “ism” you like. You can blame this president or the last or the last dozen presidents, senators, or congresspersons.

For many of us, the biggest hurdle to peace in our lives currently is the angst we are feeling over the many issues that are pressing before us. I don’t know about you, but for me, a lot of what is troubling are the significant divisions we are seeing in our country as people rally, sometimes viciously, behind their long-held beliefs without being willing to be openminded enough to talk with each other instead of at each other. So, if division is a source of anxiety in our lives, then unity, community should be a source of peace. Jesus said, “I PRAY THEY WILL BE ONE, FATHER, JUST AS YOU ARE IN ME AND I AM IN YOU.”

There can be no doubt that the divisive political environment in our country is a big problem right now, but I think it points to something much deeper. The kind of hate-filled rhetoric we have heard from candidates and their supporters doesn’t just happen in a competition for political office. This comes, I believe, from a complete breakdown of community. Too many people have had powerful platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to post hate. Before these platforms, people who shared likeminded views had a harder time finding one another and the majority of the population put it off as extremes. Now it looks to be more mainline, and the middle ground is the extreme.

Perhaps you have heard of the “back deck phenomenon,” which simply points out the fact that we have gone from building houses with expansive front porches (as we did in the early 20th century), to building homes with no front

porches, but with back decks surrounded by privacy fences. We can all tell stories about remembering a time when we knew all our neighbors and interacted with them, their dogs, and their children on a regular basis. But such familiarity is gone, and in its place has arisen suspicion.

I wish I knew WHY community has broken down. But I don't know that we have any good answers. We can speculate—maybe it's because crime rates have risen. Or maybe it's because having the latest breaking news right at our fingertips has made us more aware of the bad things happening in the world and in our communities. Perhaps the problem is that TV, computers, and other electronic devices have caused us to turn more inward. I don't know. But the simple fact of the matter is that disconnecting from one another has also made our lives more worried and anxious.

Just think about those times in your life when you really felt like you were part of a tight-knit community. For me, it was my college years. There was a group of six or eight of us. We first connected on orientation day, when we were sitting out on the lawn eating some lunch. We took classes together, we spent our weekends together, we helped each other study, we laughed together, we cried together, we got mad at each other and confessed our sins to one another. I miss those day-to-day interactions with those folks so much, but here's the thing; I know that was true community because what we shared was more than just friendship; it was sacred; it was holy.

And that's why fostering community in our lives is so important when it comes to experiencing peace. Community is special, it's sacred, it's a way that we connect more deeply not just with one another, but with God. Really, this is why Christ prayed for the unity of believers. The kind of unity that Christ had in mind is one of mutual dependence and trust. What if we looked at every relationship we have as one that connects us more fully with God? How much more would we seek out community? How much more would we work toward building healthy relationships in our lives?

Community matters because community helps us experience God; community helps us connect with God's peace. Whether in relationships with spouse and family, or friends and neighbors, each of us can look at certain times in our lives when our connections with other people were nothing less than life-giving; and sacred. We know how important this is. We feel the loneliness and emptiness

when we move, or life-circumstances cause us to lose such friendships. We should be doing everything we can to build community; not just in our own lives, but also in the world around us.

Certainly, this is no easy task. I guess there have always been challenges to developing the sort of relationships that build strong communities, but it seems that at this point in history there are more roadblocks than ever. The “back deck” phenomenon and the rise of technology mean that we are interacting face-to-face with people less and less.

I have also noticed that the use of technology and social media seem to enable a kind of hostile rhetoric that didn’t exist before. In other words, it’s a lot easier for us to say something mean to someone from behind a computer screen than it is to say that same thing to their face. And so, we log in to our computers and we just start attacking, criticizing, and tearing down everyone who doesn’t agree with us. Then, because we get so used to doing that on social media, and we watch it all the time on the news media, it becomes a lot easier to get out in the world and do the same thing there to strangers and people who don’t look like us, which brings us to this place where we are now, seemingly only interacting with one another in hurtful ways. We become numb to it, so when something big like a school shooting occurs, we are no longer outraged, we are just numb.

- We settle for thoughts and prayers instead of real change.
- We have stopped demanding that our political leaders represent us instead of corporations.
- We stop expecting that our lives have the value that some want to place on a fetus that cannot live outside the womb.
- But let us also call it for what it is, pro-birth and not really pro-life.
- If it was pro-life, then we would have safer schools.
- We would have those who love children more than guns.
- We would put some restrictions on who can own guns and really question does the average person need assault-style weapons and body armor?
- We would have better mental health resources for those who need it.

- We would no longer have food deserts, homeless and hungry people, and hate crimes.
- We would start seeing each other for what we really are, children of God.

To fix what is broken, we need to look at society as a system. No one answer is going to fix it. It is not either/or, but rather a yes/and type of solution that we need. Banning all guns is not the answer.

- Restrictions yes.
- Mental health funding, yes.
- Anti-bullying programs, yes.
- Corporations out of politics, yes.
- Look for anti-social signs in people, yes.
- People taking responsibility for their own actions, yes.
- But we too need to take responsibility on how we treat people and be willing to listen and respond when others are acting out of the norm.
- We must get away from the code of silence.

I honestly, truly, believe that the reason there is so much anxiety in the world right now is because there is so much hate. And we have allowed ourselves to get caught up in it; every single one of us. We don't easily and readily forgive; instead, we hold grudges and harbor resentment. We approach people with fear and suspicion rather than friendliness and generosity. We get caught up in the name calling and mudslinging—even if it's behind closed doors, it's still a hate-filled mindset that contributes to the wider problem. And here's the thing, we are all a part of this system that is undermining our unity in Christ and tearing apart our communities.

As Christians, we must begin to model something different. Jesus says, *“I’VE MADE YOUR NAME KNOWN TO THEM AND WILL CONTINUE TO MAKE IT KNOWN SO THAT YOUR LOVE FOR ME WILL BE IN THEM, AND I MYSELF WILL BE IN THEM.”* Love is central to who we are as Christians. It was because of God's love for us that God gave us *“HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON.”* And now Christ prays that this same love will be in each of us. But here's the thing: not only should Christ's love be

in us, but it should also flow out of us in all that we do, especially in the ways we treat other people. We can't be caught up in the hate that fills our world right now. If we want peace in our lives, then we need to be guided by love for others, and not just Valentine's Day love, but deep, abiding, risky, sacrificial love. Instead of sitting behind a computer screen and spouting off hateful rhetoric, we need to be out on the streets, in our neighborhoods, in our communities; getting to know people, listening to them, learning their hearts.

- When people wrong us, we need to offer genuine forgiveness.
- Rather than seeking to push Muslims and Mexicans (or whoever) out of our communities, as Christians, we have to be on the forefront of finding ways to celebrate our diversity.
- Instead of criticizing and bullying people whose lifestyles are different from our own for whatever reason, we have to let them know that they are loved and valued; a special, unique, and wonderful part of God's creation.

This is tough stuff, I realize that. But we are seeking peace in our lives. If peace is what we really want, then this is what we have to do. There is no peace in broken communities and broken relationships; there is only fighting. So as Christians, one of our many tasks is to foster a community that is founded in the very love of Christ himself.

I think Paul sums it up pretty well in his letter to the Colossians. He says this, *“BE TOLERANT WITH EACH OTHER AND, IF SOMEONE HAS A COMPLAINT AGAINST ANYONE, FORGIVE EACH OTHER. AS THE LORD FORGAVE YOU, SO ALSO FORGIVE EACH OTHER. AND OVER ALL THESE THINGS PUT ON LOVE, WHICH IS THE PERFECT BOND OF UNITY. THE PEACE OF CHRIST MUST CONTROL YOUR HEARTS—A PEACE INTO WHICH YOU WERE CALLED IN ONE BODY.”*

May the love of Christ guide us and direct us on the way to peace. Amen.