

Collins Street Baptist Church
Sunday May 8, 2011
10.30am

Sharing Life Together: The Practice of Community

Acts 2.37-47

The word 'community' has been described as '*an aerosol word ... sprayed into discussions, giving a sweet scent and a hint of mist, but clouding analysis.*'¹ I reckon that's true. It's certainly true in the church. To call the church a 'community' might smell good, but what does it really mean?

The truth is, the aerosol can of community is misused in all sorts of ways. In churches of extraordinary dysfunction the word community is sprayed around liberally to cover the stench of what's really there. The can is also used by those who stridently critique the church, as though they alone possess the secret ingredient for the church's success: 'If only you would let the church as institution die,' they say, 'and be a real community of faith,' holding their can aloft.

The truth is, if we are live this business of community, the first thing we have to do is to put the can away. We have to be done with pretending and with talk of secret ingredients. The most elementary truth is this: we *are* a community. The readings from this past week say it over and over again: you *are* the body of Christ; you *are* the household of God; you *are* the family of faith. There's no need for pretending and no need to go hunting for the secret ingredient to make it happen. It just is. Just as Paul says 'now work out your salvation,' (Phil 2.12) so our responsibility before God is not to create community but to live the community that's already there. If we are the body of Christ, let's live like it; if we are the household of God, let's do what households do; if we are the family of faith, let's practice it.

¹ Hake, A. (1989). Theological Reflections on 'Community'. Theology in the City: A Theological Response to 'Faith in the City'. A. Harvey. London, SPCK: 47-67.

The danger of trying to create community is the image of what we are trying to make can be hopelessly romantic. And, let's face it, romantic images of what should be are often the death of what is. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, *'He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter.'* Be on guard, Bonhoeffer is saying, lest your image of what community should be gets in the way of what's already there.

A few years back I read Bill Metcalf's book, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality*.² Metcalf gathers the stories of intentional communities around Australia, 'communes' formed around religious, political or social visions of what life should be like. They are inspiring stories, stories of people making extraordinary sacrifices to live their convictions. But the sad reality is the majority of these efforts ultimately failed. Why? In the end, they were driven by a vision that was their undoing. Community is not something we create. It is what we are. It is a spiritual and practical reality for the church. There is nothing utopian about it. It's real and it's now.

Of course, read the early chapters of Acts and you'd be forgiven for thinking that utopia was alive and well in Jerusalem. Talk of sharing all things in common, caring for the least and the needy, eating and sharing life under one eternally blue sky. But the epistles that follow the book of Acts tell the story of these same communities as they matured. Obviously, the sun didn't shine for long. In these later stories it's all struggle, tension and disagreement. Paul spends most of his time addressing the churches' failures rather than cheering their success.

But that's life. There's nothing utopian about Christian community. It's not all beautiful aromas and families perfectly formed. It's much more real than that. In effect, our life together as the body of Christ is a bit like this lump of clay. All the ingredients are there. Truth be told, though, it doesn't always look pretty. We may be ugly, misshapen and malformed, but we are the body of Christ. The

² Metcalf, B., Ed. (1995). *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality: Co-Operative Lifestyles in Australia*. Sydney, UNSW Press.

invitation is to work with God in the shaping and forming of what's there. And it's a practice we have to choose into each and every day. Choose it or not, and we are still a community. The question is, are we prepared to get our hands dirty?

There are any number of ways we can choose to practice community, any number of ways we can sink our hands into this stuff. I want to suggest just three.

Choosing to gather: the discipline of meeting routinely with the community

One of my mentors in life is a man called Robert Banks. He's an Australian scholar of the New Testament, an Anglican who resigned his ordination in favour of a more grassroots expression of church. Lots of years back he wrote a book in which he explores the character of the early church. Robert describes the essence of church community as this: 'a group of people who hang out together.' Every time I hear that definition, I find myself hanging on the last word waiting for the punch line: 'so that ...' 'in order to ...' But that's it. The point he makes is that a very large part of being in community with people is just being together, showing up. Of course all sorts of things flow from it, all sorts of things are a consequence of the gathering, but if you don't show up, if you are not there, those things can't happen.

Church life surveys here in Australia demonstrate that 'regular attendance' at church is now once every three weeks. There's lots of good reasons for that; we've gotten over the legalism that used to govern our lives; we've discovered other parts of life too long neglected. But one of the consequences is that we can be a relatively different community here at CSBC every Sunday. Get everyone here at once and we'd be quite a crowd.

The things about the practices of the Christian life, the thing about spiritual 'disciplines' is that they require discipline. You have to choose them. They will not always be the thing you want to do. But by choosing to gather, you choose

community. Let me prod you very gently this morning. What if, every Sunday morning at 10.30am or every Sunday evening at 5.00pm, CSBC was your first priority? Not your only priority, but for two hours each week it had first call on your time? What difference would that make to the health of this lump of clay, if every Sunday you came and pressed into it along with everyone else?

Choosing to contribute: the discipline of gifting the community

The New Testament has two favoured ways of describing the church, first as a body and second as a family. As the body, the church is made up of body parts, each one with a particular gift to contribute: the ear, the eye, the foot, the knee, the little finger. If the foot refrains from making its gift, the body does not stop being a body. It simply means the body will limp rather than leap. So too with a family. Each family member has a gift to give. That gift may be given freely, grudgingly, or not at all. Either way, the family remains a family; functional or dysfunctional, thriving or imploding.

As a body or as a family, the church as a community requires a choice on your part. To practice community means being prepared to contribute to its life. To practice community means pressing our hands in the clay of this body of Christ, this family of faith, and making whatever small contribution we have the gift to make. The choice is ours.

Choosing to share: the discipline of preferring the community's interests over your own

Today's story from Acts 4 is a story of extraordinary generosity: 'there was not a needy person among them' as they laid their resources at the apostles feet. But this is no utopian story. It's a real story of a real community; it's a story of choice. These early Christians chose to practice their faith and at considerable cost. They chose to share what they had with each other. But it was never a choice once for all. Instead, it was a choice they would have to remake over and over again. So it is with us. As a community of Jesus followers, we are called to

live different, generously, interdependently, to share not only our gifts and abilities, but our resources. Pressing into the clay of who we are as a community of faith is about sharing what we have for the sake of others, bearing one another's burdens both spiritually and materially. That costs. That hurts. That requires far more than showing up and singing a hymn. It requires a deep sense of God's presence and call upon our lives. It is a choice, a choice to practice community for that is, after all, precisely what we are.