

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
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“A Sacred Community”
4th in the series *Church Matters*
Philippians 2:1-11; James 5:13-16
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We’re a few weeks into this series now, where we’re asking ourselves... why church matters... and not just to us, but why it matters in the life of the world.

In a day when more and more are leaving the church and not coming back, we’re being humbled, and we’re having to own up to fact that often the church has been a mixed bag of blessings and pain in peoples lives.

And so we’re trying to unpack various matters of the church and do some fresh thinking and imagining and remembering about what is there...at the heart of all this that is so important...

that’s still worth cherishing...

and giving ourselves to...

that’s still worth making a priority in our calendars and in our lives.

What is at the heart of the church that matters enough to anchor us in the shifting tides of culture and church life.

We’ve named a few of them already.

The Sacred Rhythm we were created for... the invitation of Sabbath, to be gathered together and be re-centered in the one true God who sets us free from all the other things that try to make claim on our lives Monday-Saturday, week after week. The church keeps inviting us back into this sacred rhythm we were created for.

And the church is the place where we are invited to **the feast**... to **the Sacred Meal**... that guides us into experiencing and knowing the deepest mysteries of God’s love and God’s life flowing into us. The sacred meal helps us to know and to remember that God doesn’t primarily come to teach us. God comes to feed us...

to meet our deepest hunger...

and the hunger of the world.

But there is more that happens when you’re part of a church... and it doesn’t just happen on Sunday mornings. You become part of **a Sacred Community**... a unique people... a peculiar people, it says in 1 Peter.

And if you’ve been in church very long, then you know just how “peculiar” we all are. Who else takes hanging out at a friend’s house so seriously that they use a special word when they invite you over, **“Do you want to come and fellowship with me?”**

Talk about creepy, right?

And that's not the only strange way of talking around the church, is it? We've got our whole sub-language, don't we? You've heard it before, and probably used some Christian-ese, along the way, haven't you? I know I have.

String some churchy phrases together, and you get a pretty confusing mess.

**"Let me come along side you... when you backslide,
to carry that Burdon,
and we'll feed on the word together,
and by the blood of Jesus,
we'll hold a revival,
and get saved again,
or rededicate our lives
we'll ask Jesus in our hearts,
so we can lift Jesus up,
Now, with every head bowed and every eye closed...
Thank you Jesus. I see that hand."**

Peculiar, indeed.

Of course it's not just the catch phrases that get used around the church, that make us a little different, is it? Sometimes it's our choices. Like living in a smaller house, so you can give a tithe to the church's ministry each month.

Or using a week of vacation to go work yourself to the bone fixing up someone's house in the Appellation Mountains of West. Virginia?

Joanne told me she turned down a trip to Europe this fall, to help us put together our capital campaign coming up that I asked for help with... and somebody in her life has got to be thinking, Europe? or a Capital Campaign?

We are a peculiar people. Becoming part of this sacred community has that effect on you after awhile. Your values start to change. Your perspective shifts because you're in relationship with different kinds of people.

So, if you're looking to find a way to live differently,
to not follow the norms of every new fad,
or the peer-pressures of your neighborhood,
then the sacred community in the church might be exactly what you need.

Ann Lamotte, in her book *Traveling Mercies*, writes about why she makes her 7 year old son, Sam, go to church. And this is what she says:

"I make him because I can. I outweigh him by nearly seventy-five pounds.

But that is only part of it.

The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want—which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people with a deep sense of spirituality.

They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith.... They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.”

That’s what being in this sacred community can be like at times.

The church is not like anything else in your life. It’s not just another group you belong to. It is the community, the relationships with each other that change you on some of the deepest and most meaningful levels.

But that’s not because everyone in a sacred community is fun to be around, or your best friend. Being part of a community is also one of the hardest, most challenging things about church. It’s a whole lot easier to watch a worship service on TV or listen to sermons on-line than being part of a living-breathing church,

with people that are just as messed up as you are,
who are likely to get on your nerves at some point,
or even be down right offensive at times.

As Rachel Held Evens puts it, **“The good news is you are a beloved child of God; the bad news is you don’t get to choose your siblings.”**¹

Of course, some will try. If they don’t like the way you vote, then they’ll go down the street looking for a church where everyone votes like them...which they might find... and be happy there, until the church picks an ugly color of carpet in the next building campaign. Maybe they’ll try to overlook it at first, but that bright pink flooring is just so distracting that eventually... they’ll go looking somewhere else.

And then... they finally find it. The right place, that fits their needs, and they join, and they get involved, and get on a committee... which is great. They’ve got something good going... until someone new comes along and messes the whole thing up, because this new person is just so darn hard to be around.

And they go home talking about them to their spouse and can’t help but think, **“Why can’t we find a place where people “get it” ... like us. What’s wrong with all these churches?”**

When the answer, of course is staring them in the face every time they look in the mirror. ***What’s wrong... is the narcissism that wants everyone to be like us, that wants community life to be easy.*** The church community isn’t supposed to be easy... or perfect. It’s supposed to be real... which means it’s messy.

It’s always been that way.... even since the very beginning.

¹ Rachel Held Evens, *Searching for Sunday*, 15.

And so, the Apostle Paul is sitting in a prison somewhere when his old friend from Philippi shows up to visit him, Epaphroditus. Paul was sure glad to see E-pap, (that was Paul's nickname for him, you know).

And after they caught up and E-pap gave him the gifts the Philippians sent, Paul finally asked, ***“Well, how are they?”***

E-pap knew exactly who he meant: Euodia and Syntyche. They were always at each other's throats, butting heads about anything and every thing. And it seemed they could take the church along with them... stirring up trouble.

They were the kind of people that you hoped a visitor didn't meet on Sunday, because chances are, if they did, that visitor isn't coming back.

And so E-pap told Paul, ***“Sometimes it seems like we do more damage control from those two than we do ministry in the world.”*** And that's when I imagine Paul tells him that this is exactly how the church works. This is the work of ministry.

“Ah, E-pap, don't you see, the church is a sacred community not because it's easy, but because it's where we get to practice grace and humility. In the church, we offer forgiveness, and we ask for forgiveness. This is what we do. This is how we become like Jesus.”

And so that night Paul sat down with parchment in hand and began to write those words we heard read earlier in his letter back to the Philippians.

“Do nothing out of selfishness, but with humility think of others as better than yourself,” he writes. ***“Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. Take on the same mind as Christ Jesus... who emptied himself... and took on the form of a servant... and became obedient to death... even death on a cross.”***

Paul's trying to help them to see just how profound the work of relationships with each other can be. Our relationships, our sacred community, is the first place where we get to practice the ways of Jesus... where we learn how to take on his journey, his path of emptying ourselves in love for one another.

It's the hardest part of community life... the emptying of ourselves, the humbling of ourselves. But that's when we move from a club you can join, to a community being formed into the likeness of Christ... to a sacred life-giving community.

Sometimes it looks like practicing forgiveness and grace.
Sometimes it looks like being honest about just how broken and in need of grace we all are.

James says that when we confess our sins to one another, there is great healing available. Something profound happens. One of the greatest gifts that the church can give the world, is for us to practice being honest about our pain.

I remember the first time I experienced that was in college. I had a group of guys that I met with in a bible study... where they started practicing being honest about the sins in their life. And for the first time in my life I was able to admit to someone about the struggles I was having with pornography at the time.

And being able to name that aloud, in a safe community, was so healing for me. It was the first time I didn't feel alone... and I had support in that struggle... because I was learning that in the church, grace triumphed over judgment, and honesty was valued over image.

It's why some have said that the church is at its best when it starts to function **"like a recovery group, a safe place where a bunch of struggling, imperfect people come together to speak difficult truths to one another."**²

It's one of my hopes for our Community Groups... that we can create pockets of safe and open community, where we care for one another and celebrate with one another in meaningful ways.

Brueggemann says, **"Churches should be the most honest place in town, not the happiest place in town."**³ ...which turns our usual ways of approaching each other upside down. Doesn't it?

Because... it's not easy to do. For some reason we have this notion that we have to fix ourselves up... and clean ourselves up... before we come to church, or to be worthy of church, rather than letting the sacred community be the place that helps us along the way.

It's sort of like that temptation to loose a few pounds *before* you start your gym membership... because you'd hate to embarrass yourself in front of everyone else trying to get in shape.

Rachel Held Evens says it's, **"the same impulse that kept my mother from hiring a house keeper because she felt compelled to clean the bathroom *before* the Merry Maids arrived (so as not to expose to the world the abomination that is a hair-clogged shower drain.**

Nadia [Boltz-Webber] refers to it as the 'long and rich Christian tradition which in Latin is called, 'totally faking it.'"⁴

² Rachel Held Evens, *Searching for Sunday*, 67.

³ Quoted in Rachel Held Evens, *Searching for Sunday*, 66.

⁴ Ibid, 69.

This is our temptation, despite the fact that Jesus insisted again and again, “**I have come for the sick, not the healthy.**” And when you look at the community that gathered around Jesus, it was obvious he meant it.

Tax collectors, prostitutes, demon possessed, down and out, those that were hungry for new life. What brought the followers of Jesus together wasn’t a common social class, or ethnicity. And it wasn’t a perfect agreement on who this Jesus character was: prophet? Messiah? Rabbi? Son of God?

No, what brought them together was their shared sense of need. “**Only those who know they are sick can be healed. Only those who listen to the rumblings in their belly can be filled. Only those who recognize the extent of their wounds and their wounding can be made well.**”⁵

And together, they formed a sacred community... not a perfect community, but a sacred community where they experienced something healing... where prayers were powerful, and singing was full of joy, and sins were being forgiven, as James describes.

You see, the church is not a sacred community because it’s made up of good people. The church is a sacred community because it’s made up of resurrected people.

And when the church becomes a **resurrection community**,
we become a great gift to the world.

Prayer:

O God, we give you thanks for every time we’ve experienced church to be a where we don’t have to be perfect, and where we can be honest. As we keep seeking you, practicing peace, and creating community, help us to have the courage and the grace to be the Sacred Community for one another... and for anyone who would walk in our doors.

We ask these things in the name of the One who taught us to pray, saying... “Our Father...

Reflection:

There’s a Jewish wisdom teaching that says, “**A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet. It can be meaningless. Or it can be part of a great meaning.**”⁶

⁵ Ibid., 92

⁶ Quoted in Ann Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, 100.