

Good morning and welcome to The Creek! We are excited to be able to worship God with you online and can't wait to be back in our buildings with you - two weeks from today!! I feel a little like Punxsutawney Phil coming into the light - will I see my shadow and run back in for six more weeks or do I get to come out to stay?

I believe it was on March 12th that The Creek decided to start working from home and the decision to stop meeting on Sunday mornings first was announced. A lot has changed between then and June 15th, when we started working in the office again. I suspect all of our lives have changed, to some degree, during the quarantine. Some have slowed down a lot, others have been more busy, some businesses have flourished and many have lost their job and/or substantial income, we have watched the world pull together and care for each other, celebrating frontline workers like never before, and then watched riots and protests in our very own city and communities brought on by a racial divide that has separated many for hundreds of years. We have been asked to pray for people and our country more than ever, and we've listened to hate filled debates over who is to blame for all of this and who continues to mishandle our country moving forward. I suspect 2020 will be a pretty thick chapter in our great grandchildren's history books.

I think it's pretty safe to say this season has been hard on all of us, in one way or another, but it is through perseverance that our hope is found. Paul tells us in the book of Romans, "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." So, to help avoid coming out of all this suffering without change, we are in a series called "The Things That Matter" - we are exploring things we have learned *really* matter during the past few months. Last week Dan and Darnell talked about equality, and this week we're going to talk about friendship - or community, as we would call it in church world.

Community was announced this year as one of The Creek's seven priorities. We define it as being "devoted to one another," or explained a bit deeper, "we value relationships and build our lives together as family."

Will you pray with me?

The quarantine's effect has been incredible. I heard a story of a local chiropractor who had a patient come in for an adjustment, when the doctor put her hands on the patient to begin working on him, the man began to cry. He had not had physical contact with anyone since the beginning of the pandemic. That is what quarantine has felt like for many.

Isolation has caused a spike in alcohol sales, pornography usage, substance abuse, domestic violence calls, Netflix usage, and social media usage has increased at least fifteen minutes per day per person, on average. We have all experienced, whether personally or observed, some sort of loneliness during the pandemic.

I was probably thirteen years old when my family went camping with some of our cousins. It was a fantastic trip. The camp we stayed at had a lake and a few boats on shore that we could hop in and ride around the lake, so we spent many hours on those boats and swimming off them. One day one of my cousins and I decided to take a canoe out, and my brother and another cousin took out a rowboat. On our way to the lake we asked our parents if they wanted to come, and my mom, who's such a good sport, decided to play along.

She rode out with my cousin and I in the canoe, and after riding around for a bit my brother and our other cousin came over to us and asked if they could trade us boats. We said sure, why not? So we handed the oars to my brother, David and I climbed from the canoe into the rowboat, and then, with just a split moment to react, rather than my brother climb into the canoe, we pushed my mom off, without any oars or sails. It was just her, a canoe and lots of water...

We laughed and laughed as we saw my mom float aimlessly around the lake - but that wasn't enough, so we rushed back to shore, ran to our camp, grabbed our dads, our aunt and one cousin who had stayed behind and brought them to the lake to see mom floating around in the water, all by herself. People were close by, she could see us - she just wasn't *with* us. She was all alone. How many of us have experienced this sort of loneliness?

Many of us have experienced this long before the pandemic. Community or friendship is something we have desired for a long time. It's not something new to us. We have heard stories and statistics of how loneliness affects a baby's ability to thrive, how not being held as a baby has even been linked to death. How loneliness has been proven to reduce our quality of life, shorten our lifespan, impact our performance at work - we could go on and on.

Some of us come to church for community. Sure, we come to sing worship songs, to be challenged by the word of God, to serve others, but really what we are looking for is community, people to "do life with." But sometimes when we come into church looking more for community than for God, we are easily offended when, upon stepping over the threshold, we do not find the perfect community we long for.

I want to look at scripture and see what it tells us about community, about doing life together. Would you turn to the book of John with me? We are going to be in chapter 15. The book of John was written by John, one of Jesus' apostles, and is one of the four gospels. It is a first-hand account of the life of Jesus. This chapter is part of what many consider the "Farewell Discourse." Jesus is preparing his disciples for his exit from the world in human form - and in this passage he is dealing with three relationships: the disciples' relationship with Jesus, their relationship with each other, and their relationship with the world. Jesus knows these are the guys who will go on to start the church and he is preparing them for what is yet to come. We aren't going to get into the section on their relationship with the world, but I want to hit on the first two. Here's what Jesus has to say about our relationship with God:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain

in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."

Here are some things I believe we need to take from this passage:

- Jesus is the most important relationship you have.
- God is the source of all things and the way we connect with the Father is through the Son.
- As our relationship with Jesus strengthens, we will go through tough seasons; in those seasons we are being pruned, or made stronger.
- We are not saved because of our work with others, we are saved by Jesus, but instead the investment we make in others is blessed because it is God working through us.
- We are unable to have life-giving relationships if we are not in a life-giving relationship with Jesus.

It is through a vine that a branch is able to generate fruit, and being from a farming community, his disciples know this very well. Jesus is instructing his disciples to recognize that the only way they will achieve the great things he has in store for them is by staying in close relationship with him. There is no other way. Jesus doesn't say there are many paths to get there, or that you just need to be a good person - Jesus says the *only* way all this works is the way God has designed it: through close relationship with me. And when we do that, he does great things through us. He uses us to raise up leaders, to teach others about Jesus, to lead congregations in worship, to lead children in kidustrial park. These things that we do are not the way we find lifelong relationships with Jesus - it's our relationship with Jesus that makes these things life giving.

Then Jesus turns his attention to relationships between us:

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

Here are a few things that stand out to me:

- Jesus loves us, a bunch!
- Jesus wants us to live in his love, and the way we do that is by doing what he teaches us.
- If we live in his love, we will find that "thing" that satisfies our soul!
- Jesus tells us the highest expression of love is to forfeit your life for a friend.
- Finally, Jesus clearly states his instructions - get ready for this: "love each other!"

See, Jesus is giving us the formula for incredible community when he gives us his instructions for life: love one another. When we were hosting the 3:17 prayers in the parking lot at each campus, we had a gentleman at Shelby Street that reminded us all, each day in his prayer, that love wins - Jesus tells us to love each other.

When we love others, we win because we remain in his love and others win because our efforts to love them is blessed. It's an incredibly efficient way of doing things! If we remain in Christ's love, he loves us, so much that he laid down his life so that we could live - and how do we remain in his love? By loving others! See, *love wins*.

It is in living this way that Jesus promises to satisfy our souls. He promises to "make our joy complete" when we are walking in complete harmony with him. He doesn't promise that our joy will look the same way we anticipate it to, but he promises to make our joy complete.

It doesn't really make sense to us, because we feel like we know what will make us happy - yet Jesus, God in the flesh, savior of the world, Lamb of God, tells us that he will make us happy. But for some reason we don't believe it, so we acquire things to make us happy. We find things to generate community, and these things become an obstacle to our relationship with Jesus, which becomes an obstacle to us being in community. If we loved others the way Jesus does, the usual response is that we will have incredible community.

See, God wants us in community; we see that all through scripture. There are fifty-nine "one anothers" in the New Testament. *59 times* we are told to care for one another, love one another, pray for each other, encourage one another, forgive one another - we are told over and over again to make caring for others an important part of our lives.

In Philippians chapter 2, Paul says, "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

In today's society where we are taught, from a very young age, that it is all about "me." It's all about what *I* want, what *I* need, what makes *me* more efficient...whatever it is, the attention is on *me*. That is the opposite of what Jesus is teaching us! Jesus says that the way we remain in him is by caring for others. I think about things like Netflix and social media - not that either are inherently bad - but they have encouraged us to snuggle up on the couch and look inward instead of outward. I'm afraid that somehow we have convinced ourselves that by "liking" someone's post about social justice or "sharing" someone's meme about loving Jesus that we have loved our neighbor. But let me assure you, laying down your life for a friend takes a lot more effort than "sharing" a post. Plus - and I read through them all - not a single "one another" in the New Testament was about "liking" a post.

In verse 17 Jesus summarizes his thoughts into this, "This is my command: love each other." That sounds a lot like what he said back in chapter 13, "A new command I give you; love one

another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Love God and love others - could it really that simple? It's simple, yes, but easy...not so much.

I want to spend a few minutes giving some practical suggestions for how we can get into relationships that illuminate Christ. Just like within community, it doesn't always go perfectly, neither does getting *into* community. Here are three ideas to help you take some steps towards getting connected:

1: Pray

Shouldn't this be our first response to everything? St. Augustine says it like this: “Pray as if everything depends on God and work as if everything depends on you.” God wants you to be a disciple, and part of being a disciple is investing in the lives of others. He wants people in our lives, so ask him to show you who those folks are. Perhaps these people are already in your life, or maybe they are friends yet to be met; regardless, including Jesus in that pursuit seems to be a very wise response.

And we must be diligent in our prayers - we can't pray this tomorrow morning and expect that by tomorrow night our new best friend will be sitting on our porch when we get home. Jesus is patient with us, so we need to be patient with him. He knows what he's doing - much better than we do! Set aside time every day to pray and set aside time to listen to him - be still before God and over time you will begin to hear him speak to you. This takes practice, just like walking or driving a car - the first few times will be awkward, but over time you will strengthen the discipline. As you continue praying and listening, you will hear him better and better.

2: Identify what is stopping you

There are really only two things that are stopping you from being in community: time, or yourself.

We're allotted 24 hours each day, which adds up to 168 hours per week. How do you spend your hours? If your schedule is so full that finding an hour or two per week to invest in your community is difficult, then start looking through your calendar for low hanging fruit and clear a couple hours off your schedule. You can't create more hours in the week, so you have to find that time somewhere. Most people who I meet that believe they don't have time for community have created time for other things - they go bowling every week, or they take their kids to eight practices per week, etc. These are not bad things, but they have filled their schedule with so many things that don't bring them into community that they have no time *for* community. Find *two hours per week*.

If it's not time that is preventing you from finding community, then it's you. Sounds worse when I say it out loud - but it is what it is.

I'm not suggesting there is something wrong with you, but you are the barrier.

Maybe community has never been a priority to you. You're sort of a loner, and you like doing things your own way, in your own time, so connecting with people sucks the life right out of you. I get it, I have gone through seasons where I have felt this exact way - but you are missing out on some incredible friendships. Find that person, find that activity that connects you with others, keep searching, and find the thing that gives you life, rather than settling for being alone. God created us for community. Don't deny him the opportunity to prove himself right.

Maybe you believe the only friends you will connect with are those who look exactly like you. They are the same age as you, the same color as you, the same income category and have kids like yours. There are 330 million people in the United States - do you honestly think the only people you will be able to be friends with are the ones who have the same limited view of life as you? Get creative, get open minded, and start a friendship with someone who looks nothing like you and see what God teaches you in that relationship.

Maybe you have emotional scars that impact you in a serious way. Maybe you have trust issues. Maybe you were molested. Maybe you have been beaten, abused, lied to, cheated on, stolen from. Maybe you were brought up being taught that certain races or nationalities are dangerous, or unworthy. If this is you, I am sorry. I am really, really sorry. I have baggage too, and so does the person you are sitting with and the person you work with - we all do. It's a broken world and we're all a little jacked up because of it. But don't settle for life alone because of it. Get help, so that whatever "it" is is part of your story, and not the barrier to what God will do through your community.

3: Do something

The same quote we referred to regarding prayer is significant here, too: "Pray as if everything depends on God and work as if everything depends on you." Starting all the way back in little league sports, I have learned that success follows hard work. I cannot think of anything I have done that is worth celebrating that hasn't involved some amount of work - yet many times we have a false belief that our relationship with Jesus doesn't involve any work. If I pray to God and sit on my couch watching Netflix and scrolling through Instagram, then somehow community will find me on the other side of one of those screens. How on earth did we start believing that? We will sacrifice something in order to find real community - that is a fact. We may have to sacrifice our favorite television show, some of our hours at work, our eight-year-old son's chance at the big leagues by not having him in private batting classes, or some relationships that separate us from God rather than draw us closer to him. You see, the cost of community is high - but the cost of no community is higher.

And community is going to take work! People are broken and have made mistakes before you met them that impact their lives today. People have been hurt by others, made insecure by past relationships, they have been abused, they have embraced a sinful lifestyle. These are the people God will bring into your circle of friends, and you know what? He's putting all that baggage you bring into their lives, too. In real Christian community we must learn to be patient, compassionate, forgiving, honest, loving...sounds like Jesus' command, doesn't it? "Love one another."

I want to jump in here and share a few opportunities The Creek has to help you “do something” towards getting into community:

- Join a Rooted group
- Attend *Welcome to The Creek*
- Serve on-campus
- Serve on a short-term mission trip
- Serve on a consistent (weekly, monthly) basis with one of our ministry partners

All of these opportunities help us get off our couch and into relationships with others - so check out our website (thecreek.org) for this and more information on ways to connect.

There is another group I'd love to talk to for a moment - those of us who are *already* connected. Those of us who have been at The Creek for a while and know a lot of people, who are in a life group, who serve somewhere and call this place home. Friends: make everyone feel at home here! This is a great church - it's not perfect, and it never will be because those of us who serve here a./re not perfect people - but it *is* a great place. Let's make more friends who we can go to church with, who we can serve with on Sunday mornings.

Our mission is to “love God, love others and make disciples.” Our vision is to “connect people to Jesus.” How wonderful is it to help someone feel at home here so they can get into community and grow in their relationship with God?!

There was a day when we were the new guys, when we didn't know everyone on staff, or didn't recognize that someone sits in that seat every week. Help others find community! We're family, right? We're a church family!

How can you make someone feel welcome? Is it a simple hello? Hold a door open? Ask their name, hear their story? Do you notice someone who slips in and out each week who you can start speaking to? Invite someone to lunch or to Mrs. Curls! Tell someone about your experience in Rooted, or come back and facilitate a group. If you serve in Kidustrial Park, invite someone you sit near to start serving with you in the classroom. Get to know the names of the folks who sit around you. This is your church! Don't you feel welcome here - don't you want others to experience the same thing?

Community is a wonderful thing. Friends are great, and community shouldn't be the main reason we come to church, but it is certainly a great benefit of being here. I believe every one of us can find the type of community that brings us closer to Jesus, when we love God and love others. There is a final story from the book of Luke I'd like to look at before we finish up today. It's a story about community, *real* community, *Christ-centered*, *sacrificial* community. Would you turn to Luke 5:17, and hear what it says:

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 your mat and go home.” Immediately he stood up in front of them, 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.”

I love this story! This story has so many lessons to learn from it, but I want us to notice these friends - the paralyzed man's friends. I don't know what they were doing that day. Did they have chores around the house, were they playing basketball with their kids, maybe watching a Vikings game on TV or were on a date with their wives? In this moment, they had a buddy who was in desperate need of help, and these four friends came together to get him that help. They didn't have the ability to make him better, but they *did* have the ability to get him to the one who could. When they arrived they found out that a lot of other people had the same idea - many others had come to experience Jesus - but they decided their friend was too important to give up, so they went up on the roof, removed a little bit of roofing, and lowered their buddy down to the one man who could change his life forever. *That* is loving your neighbor! *That* is loving like Jesus. Do you know how to have friends that love you like that? *You* have to love like that.

What will you do today, and what will you do tomorrow, to develop community like that?