



Called Into the Mess

TEXT
1 Corinthians 12:4–31

October 23, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Hallie M. Hottle

I had a plan for this service today. For seven weeks, we've been talking about community. So seven weeks ago, I began to imagine what we might do to wrap up this series of community talk. Art project reveal, children and youth singing, multiple voices reading this text — and a message that would tie it all together.

I had a plan for how this might go today, but then early in the week, I received a text from one of our young adults. She lives here by herself and had the flu and a fever that was unrelenting. So I quickly threw together all the essentials: Nyquil and noodle soup, Gatorade and vitamin C, and went to make sure she was okay.

Then we realized that in this busy church, we had double-booked our kids. We planned for them to sing in here, while there's also an event happening for kids and parents in another room right now — planned long before this service moved to 5 p.m. It's a good thing to be in a busy church. But it's a hard thing to plan around too.

And then later, another young adult called, in need of some time. Starting a new family is hard, and nothing prepares you for the struggles that can come

during that journey. And sometimes, you just need time.

Then I met with some young adult moms on Wednesday morning, as I do every week. And I told myself I couldn't stay as long as I usually do — because this particular week, I was now running behind. But new people came; and conversation began; and Bibles opened; and prayers were said as stories to one another; and time passed.

And then we needed to put together this art project. And while my gifts don't lead me to being the most helpful where electric saws and nails are involved, I am quite good at showing up with pizza and giving a lot of opinions to those using the saws and nails. And music played, and laughter camouflaged the hours growing later.

This afternoon's blessing of the pets was a little longer than I expected, and required my third clothing change of the day, stealing even a bit more of my time. I had planned to write a message this week to neatly wrap up this conversation about community. But this week just didn't allow me to do that as planned.

And perhaps that's the point. I forget sometimes that community is a mess. It will not succumb to even the best-made

plans. Community doesn't fit within the hours allotted for it. To do community well, it will spill into every area of your life, any hour of your day. It will keep you up when you need to sleep. It will break your heart, and it will mend it again.

Community is a mess of a thing. And the more we try to mold it and shape it, the more we try to control it and fit it into our well-managed schedules, the less able we will be to actually experience it. And to not really experience it, the whole mess of it, is to miss the beauty of community altogether. Maybe we need to remember today, as I've needed to this week.

The beauty is in the mess. And that's what we're called to. For when Christ asks for all our life, he means it. And it's never as neat and tidy as we plan. I have to relearn this more often than I'd like.

A few years ago in Miami, Florida, I had some young people who were certain we had to live our faith differently. And some of them had tried, at various points in their life, but it wasn't until they connected to one another that it actually began to take shape. Slowly, over weeks of talking and praying and eating, a community began to take shape.

Then one man quit his job and rode his motorcycle from Miami to the Arctic Circle and back, with the goal of raising funds for any ministry that wanted to participate. He connected with PCUSA churches all along the way, and in the midst of our greatest season of denominational divide in my lifetime, unsuspecting congregations became united by the crazy guy on the motorcycle. And my world became a mess of radio interviews, a crash course on motorcycle maintenance for packages we had to send him along the way, and endless conversations with others who were inspired to do the thing they had always wanted to do.

Then there was one young woman who desperately wanted her older brother, recently divorced and never churched, to come to church, to connect with her again, to bring his children back into her life. He was baptized that year, and he and his children found themselves in worship every week. And I found myself in a mess of logistics and safety standards in order for him to pull off a new nighttime food ministry to the homeless who live under Miami's bridges.

Then there was another young woman, experiencing a divorce too soon, surprised by her husband's abuse and relying on this community for strength and safety. And my phone rang at odd hours, and my couch became her bed. And scheduled appointments were missed for all to come together for the sake of the one in need.

These became the people I called on when trailer parkers were shot up, and our elderly members called in fear for their broken windows and rattled hearts. Together we walked a Mexican desert because God wanted us to connect with a border ministry, and we stayed up late to care for women in the sex industry — because God loved them too.

And in the years that community formed, I slept less. I found myself in messy, even dangerous situations way more often than I should have. And the strangest things began to happen. That church began to grow and change and flourish in new ways. Committed to one another and all the mess that comes with it, the whole body began to dance again.

I was hired in January to create this Young Adult Ministry here, and in the beginning, I was having some false starts. We tried some things. We tried some other things. People came. People went. And by June, I knew the problem: I was trying to create a program, instead of a community.

You see, *program creation* is much easier than *community cultivation*. It involves calendars and timelines and carefully planned lessons and somewhat predictable outcomes. But community requires time. It's messy and unpredictable and risky. It requires your whole heart. I know this — and I forget this — and perhaps I am even afraid of this.

So it took me five months, but I put out a call for young adults to come and meet at a

brewery and read a book by German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer — a book called *Life Together*.

Bonhoeffer lived in a time where he had a unique vantage point as to just how important community is. When the church you love begins to hang swastikas in her sanctuaries, you do some reflecting on community. So he wrote about this, Christian Community, in a way that is more honest that we're often willing to be. He talks about how hard it is; how it requires work and commitment. He begins the book talking about the disillusionment we will feel with one another, and how that is both expected and OK. It is Christ alone that holds this kind of community together. The rest will all be a mess.

So I told these young adults that if we were going to do this, if we were going to read this together, we had to practice it too. We had to be willing to risk putting our lives on the table and sharing with one another. We had to care, and we had to know disappointment would come, and we'd have to show up anyway. To my surprise, this small group of young adults who had never met one another — most of whom had never met me and were not part of this congregation — came back the next week ... and the next. And they began to know each other.

Jobs were needed, and that was hard. And parents had become landlords, and that was tricky. And for those things, we prayed, and we asked, and we helped one another make connections that led to jobs and new

roommates. Nieces and nephews were being born, and we worried and prayed for their safety. Complications from a previous diagnosis with leukemia emerged, and we came forward together for fundraisers and text check-ins and prayers that didn't cease. Grandparents passed away, and we grieved together and brought baskets of soup and blankets.

And this past Wednesday, one of them saved me. In a week that was too busy and too full of stress and grief, one of our new young women told a story. She told us how she had been on a bike ride this week. She's just getting to know Kansas City and was riding around to know it better. She had reached the end of the Trolley Trail and was turning around in a parking lot when an elderly woman almost ran her over.

This young adult could have done a number of things, but looking inside the car and noticing this older woman noticeably distressed, she stopped. She got off her bike, and she asked the woman if she needed help. The woman was lost, and she needed to go home, but wasn't sure how to get there.

So the young adult pulled out her phone and gave her directions to get there. But she realized that the confusion on the woman's face was about more than directions. So she asked her to move over, put her bike in the trunk and set herself to drive the older woman home.

The woman was 92 and lived alone. And as they went, they came to a church — and that confused woman sat up and

suddenly knew where she was. This was her church, she said, and she'd come here every week for her entire life.

So the young adult pulled over and let the woman back into the driver's seat. The woman drove off, knowing her way by the landmark of her own Christian community. And the young adult put her bike back together with the help of a passerby and made her way back — but she called the woman later to ensure she arrived home safely.

I say her story saved me this week — because even in the midst of the mess of community, I forget that it's that mess we're called into. It's not the scheduled and easily identified and mapped-out stuff. It's the unpredictable moments: the right now; the risk of being accused of kidnapping an old woman in order to save her moments. That is where the holy lives. And we find those, *only* when we are in intentional Christian community with one another.

God did not make us to be alone. And Christ did not call us to follow alone. And our world today really wants us to try — because the body will remain weak when all the pieces refuse to work together. Cultures will not shift. Churches will not grow. Hate will not lose. The body will remain weak, *unless* Christ's people decide to get together and offer our lives to one another. And when we do, when we put ourselves and our neat and orderly plans away and begin to hold on to one another — not because we like each other; not because we have

things in common; not because we even think we know where we're going, but because we're all part of this bigger thing, and we trust that Christ is in it — anything can happen.

This young adult community we've started here, I don't know what it will become. But I am grateful that these people have been willing to try it, without really knowing what they're trying. And this worshiping community we've re-created, I don't know what it will become. And I am grateful that you all have been willing to try it, without really knowing what you're trying either.

Christ's body in the world today doesn't need more of us to concern ourselves with the *knowing*. It desperately needs more of us to jump in the driver's seat and save the lost. It desperately needs us to actually answer the call that Christ placed on us — not one to practice our faith in a way that fits in the lives we've ordered, but the one that says to lose our lives completely and totally; to pick up a cross and follow.

So the end of this series on community doesn't have a neat bow to hold it all together. It's actually ending on a fairly risky note. Community isn't going to happen to you. You have to do it. You have to commit to it. You have to get messy and be tired and do things you don't have time to do. It's a call that requires an answer every single day — an answer that is lived. And when you have a million reasons to not do it, and Jesus remains the only reason to do it, you'll know you're in the right spot.

Friends, after seven weeks of contemplating community, if you hear nothing else, hear this. It's a mess. And it's worth it. The body is stronger when all the pieces hold on to one another. It's how we were made. It's how our faith lives. It's how Christ calls us to be. And you'll forget and mess it up. And your community will mess it up. And you'll mess it up again. And there is grace in all of it. So let's keep finding ways to do life together, in order to lead this body into all kinds of new, holy and messy things. This is where the Holy lives.

Let us pray: Holy God, it's all a mess. And you're in it. And we're glad. Pull us into it, too, and help us to find new life among the messiness of this call to be your people. Amen.



This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.