

Hey Creek Family! As we open up God's word together today, I want to recognize the situation we are in. This virus has impacted the world, our country, our community, and our way of life so greatly - every day or two we get a new update and a new measure is announced, and the number of people impacted continues to skyrocket. It feels like we are standing on very unstable ground. In times like these, it is so important that we go to God's word and position ourselves on a firm and sure foundation that *has never* changed and *will never* change. The Bible says that God is the rock of our salvation, and when things in life are unstable and uncertain, he is a stronghold into which we can run! As we worship today, that's what we want to be sure to do. If you have your bibles with you, would you open them to Acts 2?

As you are turning there, I want to celebrate that we are privileged not just to have our usual church family joining us online these days, but that we have people joining us from all over the country, and even some from around the globe! If that's you, I want to say welcome - we are so glad you tuned in with us. We are in the final two weeks of a series called "317." 317 is our area code in Indianapolis, and what we have been saying is that we want 317 to be so much more than an area code; we believe 317 represents God's heart for us as followers of Christ here in Indianapolis. So as we are talking about our mission, vision, and priorities, we are doing it all through the numbers 317. We have a three-fold mission, which is to love God, love people, and make disciples. We have a singular vision, which is to connect people to Jesus. And we have seven priorities: so far we have talked about worship, gospel, kingdom, scripture, and identity, and today, we get to discuss our priority of community.

Community feels different to all of us right now as we are on lockdown, staying in our houses, keeping a social distance. It reminds me of a time about two months ago - on a Saturday afternoon, I was feeling the need to get out and do something. So I sent a message to my neighbors and some guys in my life group and asked, "Does anyone want to come over and shoot skeet in my backyard?" A few guys were free, so about an hour later we went out and started shooting...everyone, that is, except the one guy who didn't get invited - picture my one year old son, Hudson, looking longingly out the window. Poor kid. Now, we see that and might laugh a bit, but think about it: we've all been there at some point in our lives, haven't we? When we saw people doing something fun and we wanted to be a part of it...but we didn't feel wanted, didn't feel included, felt like we were left on the sidelines. No one wants to be in that place. We all want to be invited, we want to be included! Even the biggest introverts among us know the importance and value of being in *community*.

When I think about community, several different images come to my mind. First, I think about sitting at a table in a coffee shop with someone. A coffee table represents public space and it's a place where we can engage in casual friendship. Sometimes people meet for blind dates at coffee shops, sometimes people have first interviews at coffee shops, sometimes we even strike up conversations with random strangers at coffee shops. Obviously, we can't go to coffee shops right now because they are all shut down so no one else gets this virus (and some of you are twitching because it's been four days since you've had Starbucks). Coffee shops are great places

for connecting and having quality interactions, but typically, the sort of conversations and connections you have at a coffee shop only go so deep.

The second image is of a couch in a living room. If a coffee shop table represents public space and is a place for casual friendships, a living room couch represents personal space and is a place where you develop committed friendships. When you welcome someone into your home there is a higher level of trust and a higher level of vulnerability - you begin to let your guard down and let people see who you really are. You share the joys and burdens of life with one another. When you get into a home, relationships go to a new level.

The third image that comes to my mind is a little less familiar to us, but it is of an oxen's yoke. Farmers these days use big equipment like tractors and trucks, but for thousands of years, if a farmer had a field to plow, he would take two oxen, place a wooden yoke over them, and that yoke, though not too heavy or cumbersome, would keep the oxen next to one another, aligned, and working together toward the same purpose. Instead of doing their own thing, following their own interests, and working at their own pace, they would always be together, in sync, and laboring as one. Think about *that* as an image for friendship and community. The apostle Paul actually uses this language in Philippians 4, when talking about his relationship with the church in Philippi. In verse three, in the King James Version, he calls them his "true yokefellow."

The picture of an oxen's yoke takes us deeper than the public space or personal space - it's private space. Private conversations aren't for everyone, but just for the few people intentionally included. Private space allows for more than just casual or committed friendships to develop, it allows for *covenant* friendships to develop. Just like oxen that have been yoked together, a covenant friendship is one where two or more people can say: "God has called us to one another, God has brought our relationship together for the purpose of pursuing Christ together, for the purpose of mutual encouragement, and for the purpose of advancing his kingdom." Covenant friendships aren't just people you work out with at the gym (back when we used to be able to go to the gym!), or people you play sports with, or people you grab meals with or go shopping with, though you might do those things with covenant friends. The real quality of covenant friendships is that you can say: "Because God has called me to you and you to me, and because he has united us together, my life is fully open to you. Any question you want to ask, ask it. Any concern you want to share, share it. Any challenge you want to offer, offer it. We have complete access to one another's lives. There is nothing that's off-limits. And it's not just about character formation and having a Christ-like attitude and disposition; it's about the kingdom output of our shared relationship." Two oxen yoked together aren't just close to each other, they're not just good friends who know everything about one another, they do *work* together. Covenant friends are able to say, "God has joined us together for us to combine our efforts and our resources, our energy and passions, in order to bring him glory, in order to love and serve people, and in order to move the kingdom of Christ forward through our relationship."

Of all the gifts God can give us, the gift of these sorts of relationships are some of the most valuable, the most worthy of being treasured and cherished, and the most important to pursue. That's our heart at The Creek. We are making community a *priority*! We want everyone to be in a community like that, and to feel like they have been given a gift from God in covenant relationships with other people. That is God's heart for the church. Earlier I had you turn to Acts

2. When it comes to discussions about the church, Acts 2 is one of the best places in the Bible to turn to see what God had in mind for Christian community. Acts 2:42-47 says, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

What a compelling picture of the early church. Did you see the sorts of things they did? They were devoted to fellowship, they constantly met together in large, public gatherings for worship and in small, they met for private gatherings in homes for meals (again, this was pre-corona virus), they prayed with one another, they shared their resources with one another, they even sold large assets to generate liquid capital in order to meet one another’s needs. It was an expression of community that the world had literally never seen before. And what was the outcome? They were filled with awe, they saw miraculous signs and wonders, there were no needs among them, God was praised, they enjoyed the favor of all the people, and more and more people were being saved every single day. Just about every Christian I know would absolutely love to be a part of something like that. I think the equation is actually pretty simple: If we want to see what they saw, we have to do what they did. I told you it was simple! If we want to see what they saw, we have to do what they did. If we want to witness the awe and the miracles, the praise of God, the favor of people and the salvation of our city, we have to prioritize establishing Christ-centered, Spirit-led, Scripture-reading, love-infused, generosity-laden community, just like they did.

Listen to what we read in Romans 12:10: “Be devoted to one another in love.” As Christians, we are not just called to be devoted to Jesus. Yes, of course we are called to be devoted to Jesus, but also because we are devoted to Jesus, we are called to be devoted to one another.

If we go back to those three types of relationships I talked about before: casual friendships, committed friendships, and covenant friendships, I’d like to share with you as the pastor of this church where I think we are right now, where I think God is leading us to in the future, and the path he is laying out for us to take in order to get there.

Before I share, I would like to recognize that I know I don’t see everything. But from my vantage point, by the grace of God, over the past couple of years, we have seen a tremendous shift in our church from *casual* friendships to *committed* friendships. We have seen people move from handshakes and smiles and pleasantries on a Sunday into small groups where they are meeting in homes, eating meals together, vulnerably sharing the key parts of their story, developing sincere love for one another, and growing together in Christ. About two years ago only roughly 10% of our church was involved in a rooted group or a life group. Today, that number is well over 30%. Now clearly we still have room to grow - I think for a church like ours, that number should be around 75 or 80% - but we have seen great progress as many people have transitioned from casual relationships to committed relationships.

I think for a lot of people in our church, the next challenge is going to be seeing the committed relationships we have with people we have come to love, trust, and enjoy transition into becoming covenant relationships where we truly press into the deep things of God together, where we experience higher levels of sanctification and sacrifice, and more complete godliness and holiness than ever before. Where we live on mission, advance God's kingdom, impact eternity, and where we know - not just as a pretty good guess - but where we *know* beyond the shadow of a doubt, in the core of our being, that God is in our midst, that he is moving in our relationships, that he is pleased with our community. The community we experience down here on earth is a mirror reflection of the community God experiences up there in heaven, and that's where we want to go.

To highlight just how important a community like that is, I want to tell you the story of two of my heroes of the faith: George Whitfield and John Wesley.

In 1732, both George Whitfield and John Wesley were students together at Oxford, where they were a part of a small group that met for fellowship, prayer, studying the word, growth in holiness, and focus on the mission - all the things we've been talking about. It was such an intense, intentional community that people who were not a part of it but knew what they were doing gave it a nickname: "The holiness club." (Not exactly the sort of name that made all the young ladies on campus want to go on dates with them.) After they graduated, George Whitfield traveled to America where he started orphanages and began preaching in fields and public squares to large gatherings of people. Word began to spread about Whitfield. At first, Benjamin Franklin was a real skeptic about his ministry, but then after listening to him speak, Franklin agreed that in the open air, with no amplification, Whitfield was somehow able to speak to more than 30,000 people at once, and he noted that after he preached, there was a *change* in the town. Franklin said, and I'm quoting, "From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk through the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street." An incredible change. Whitfield was so committed to preaching that even when he was sick, he brought the word. He literally coined the phrase, "I'd rather wear out than rust out." He preached a sermon 24 hours before he died. By the time he finally did pass away, he had preached over 18,000 sermons to an estimated 10 million people. He is credited as one of the leading figures of America's First Great Awakening.

So that's Whitfield, now let me tell you about John Wesley. Wesley and Whitfield started that strong friendship when they were young, and they were committed to similar works. Wesley preached all throughout America, traveling over 250,000 miles on horseback. Think about that - most of us aren't able to get that many miles out of our cars, and he got that out of a few *horses*. He preached over 40,000 sermons - he even averaged 3 a day for a long season of his life. One of his most well-known sermons was actually his eulogy for Whitfield's funeral. He eventually passed away about 20 years after Whitfield.

So we have two men, contemporaries of one another and good friends, famous preachers and leaders of large movements, and shapers of the religious fabric of our country. And though I could focus on that small group they were a part of when they were younger that helped form them into those sorts of men, I want to give attention instead to the long-term impact of their

lives. Whitfield preached to larger crowds and to more people than Wesley, and as he preached he challenged people to give their lives to Christ and start attending church. That was his goal: conversion and participating in church. Wesley had two further steps: he not only wanted people to give their lives to Christ and join a church, but he wanted everyone to get in groups of 10-20 to learn more about the Scriptures. These were co-ed groups, attendance was tracked, and there were quarterly evaluations - almost like tests - to make sure you were coming, learning, and growing. And then there were small groups called bands: these were groups of 4-6 people of the same gender, and they also met once a week to focus on intense personal discipleship and spiritual formation. They asked each other eleven questions every week. They would begin with general questions like: "Are you confident that you are at peace with God? That you are a child of God? That you are walking in the love of God? Are you certain that your sins are forgiven?" After ensuring that everyone was on the same page with those issues they moved on to some rather specific, personal, and deeply revealing questions: "Is there any sin that has dominion over your life?" Question 6: "Do you desire to be told your faults?" Question 7: "Do you desire to be told of all your faults, plain and simple, without flattery?" Question 8: "Do you desire that every one of us should tell you, from time to time, whatsoever is in his heart concerning you?" Question 9: "Do you desire we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear, concerning you?" Question 10: "Do you desire that, in doing this, we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?" Question 11: "Is it your desire and design to be on this, and all other occasions, entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart without exception, without disguise, and without reserve?" Those are some intense questions! Clearly, Wesley stressed that, above all else, honesty, confidentiality, and trust were paramount.

Here's what I want you to see: Whitfield and Wesley did basically the exact same thing with their life - preaching thousands of sermons to millions of people. Whitfield was considered the better preacher and spoke to more folks, but his end game was just to get them to place their faith in Jesus and go to church. But Wesley got them in small groups to learn the Bible and even smaller groups for serious sanctification, personal growth, and life on mission. A few decades after Whitfield's death, there was very little traceable impact of Whitfield's ministry that remained. A few decades after Wesley's death, more than 34% of all Christians in America were worshipping in a Wesleyan church. *That's* the difference that community makes. The old adage is, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

At the Creek, we are making community a *priority*. We want to be devoted to one another and to love each other as brothers and sisters. We want to share our lives with one another, have true, deep fellowship, and we want to see Christ come to reign in more and more parts of each other's lives. Friends, we live in a society that is drowning in loneliness. People have thousands of online friends, but no one to actually share a meal with, no one to call on in a moment of need. One of the greatest gifts we have to offer the world is an invitation into a community that is real, that is genuine, that is loving, and that has Christ at the center.

Forming that type of community is hard. When you start sharing more of your life with others, when you are vulnerable with others, when you let them speak into meaningful places of your life, it's challenging. Why is it challenging? Because other people are weird and imperfect and

have a lot of quirks and issues. And so do we. Living in close community exposes the parts of our lives and the parts of other people's lives where we aren't fully like Jesus yet.

If we really live in the type of close, interconnected community God is calling us to, there will inevitably be times when someone's immaturity negatively impacts another person they are sharing life with, when someone gets hurt, when someone is let down, when someone gives bad advice, when a confidence is betrayed, when someone gives a cold shoulder and when someone gets a cold shoulder. And when that happens, we have a really, really important choice to make: we can recoil and draw back from community, protecting ourselves and punishing others, or we can follow the path of Jesus, and with love, grace, and patience we can ask for forgiveness from others and extend forgiveness to others. Instead of fighting *with* one another, we can fight *for* one another. Listen to what the Apostle Paul wrote in Colossians 3, to a group of Christians who were learning what it means to live in community with one another: "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

Community isn't easy. Community is the place you find people who you aren't like and who sometimes you don't like. Community is the place you find people who are sacrificial, as well as people who are selfish, people who are gracious, and people who are abrasive. Liberals and conservatives, people who talk so quiet you can't hear what they're saying, people who talk so loud you can't hear what you're thinking. People who make more money than you and live in bigger homes, drive nicer cars, take more vacations than you. People who don't make as much money as you, and who perhaps on occasion are in need of some of yours. There will be people who are less intelligent than you who just can't seem to get it. There will be people who are more intelligent than you who look at you like you don't get it. People who smoke. People who drink. People who swear. People who would never be caught dead smoking, drinking or swearing. That's community. But what does Paul tell us to do? To bear with one another! Which means though we may be constantly tempted to give up on each other, we stick with one another. When relationships get rough, we don't write each other off and move on, we press in and stick it out. We don't run away, we stay put. Christians aren't people who claim to make no mistakes, but like Paul said, we are people who forgive whatever grievances we may have against one another and put on love toward one another, so that when we do make mistakes, it actually pulls us closer together, not farther apart.

When you go and collect rocks, in order to polish them you put them in a tumbler with other rocks and a certain kind of solution. The tumbler spins those rocks round and round and round for a long time, and all the friction, mixed with that solution, results in beautiful, polished, shining rocks. God wants to take people with a lot of dirt, rough edges and ugly spots like you and me, and he wants to polish us into the sparkling image of Jesus - and we have to rub up next to each other in order to do that. There has to be friction and conflict and confrontation. We need people to challenge us on being loving, respectful, kind, and sensitive to our spouse, we need people challenging us on how much we drink, on the kinds of shows we are watching, on how much of our money we are giving to further the kingdom, on how purposeful we are being in connecting our non-believing friends and family to Christ. Those kinds of questions are intrusive and challenging and uncomfortable. I know I've asked questions like that before and had people say they don't want to be my friend anymore. Seriously, that has happened to me several times.

I've asked questions like that and had people say, "I don't want to feel judged. I want you to accept me just as I am." That is not the purpose of Christian community. Christian community says, "As an expression of God's love, of course I love you as you are. But also as an expression of God's love, I always want to see more of Jesus in your life. And I want you to want to see the same thing in me." God doesn't put us in community just to have friends, he puts us in community to make us more like Jesus. He knows we need not just casual relationships and committed relationships, we need covenant relationships! Like with polishing rocks in a tumbler, there has to be friction and contact, but there is also a solution, a mixture, that ensures that when the rocks bump into each they don't chip or fracture one another. And if you follow the analogy, that solution, that mixture - it's the love and grace of God. It's his love and grace that allows us the ability to interact on deep levels, to challenge one another, and ultimately end up with more of Christ in each other.

As a church we have a priority of *community*. We want to move from casual relationships to committed relationships to covenant relationships, and we want to do it for the sake of Christ. It's not going to come overnight, but as we establish community as a priority for our church, and as you establish community as a priority in your life, it will happen - we'll enjoy the rich benefits of community, and we will have an indescribably great gift to invite others of our city into. This community is not just for our good and for the glory of God, it's also *for the 317*.