

Rob Mathis
Sermon:
Christian Unity
and Community

February 16, 2025

For those who have not been here lately, or are a new visitor to Rose Hill Church, I want you to know that we are in the midst of a wonderful and sometimes challenging sermon series called, “Practicing the Way”. This series is based, in part anyway, on the book of that name by Christian author John Mark Comer. In his book, Comer challenges modern-day Christians to do and become three things;

To be with Jesus

And in being with Jesus, to become like Him,

And, in becoming like Him, to develop ways to live as He did in the world around us.

The focus this week is on building up and living in Christian Community. As I am using this concept, let me just say that I am using it interchangeably with the idea of unity. Let’s look at what I think is a pretty good starting place for any discussion on unity and community amongst

Christians. This passage is from the Gospel of John, the 17th Chapter, and is part of what has become known as Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer", given on the night He was betrayed and brought to trial: Listen now, as I read:

²⁰ "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me, and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— ²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

Jesus' prayer is for unity, through community, and this unity is to eventually lead people to faith in Jesus Christ.

Before we go any further, let's pray:

In today's message we are going to look at why community is important, look at some of the historical challenges to unity in the Body of Christ, and then talk about what I think God's answer to Christian disunity is.

Truthfully, though, this is a tall order. If you don't think it is challenging to pull together into a cogent message what Christian community means in the 21st century, think of the following facts;

First, the history of our faith stretches from the time of Jesus's initial ministry to the present, which is about 2,000 years.

Second, There are more than 200 different Christian denominations in the United States alone, with over 45,000 denominations globally, amongst around 2.5 billion adherents alive today.

Third, As the renowned English academic and Christian historian, Dr. Diarmaid MacCulloch says, "there has never been a united Christianity" from even the start.

So, let's take a stroll down history lane and look at our faith's story;

- **The Early Church era was from about AD 27, with the start of Jesus' earthly ministry, to AD 325, the date of the Council of Nicea. During this roughly three-hundred-year period, the church was divided not just by the sheer geographical expanse of it, but**

also by differences in theology that started from the time the Apostles began spreading the Gospel. There were major conflicts between Jewish Christians and those who came to Christian faith from non-Jewish backgrounds. There was a brand of Christianity that developed in the late first century, called Gnosticism, that valued secret and esoteric knowledge and created lots of divisions in the Church. Later, in around AD 300, a priest by the name of Arian developed the belief within Christianity that Jesus was “less than” the Father, like a “junior God”. The belief is still around today, called Unitarianism.

- **About a thousand years ago we had what is called, “The Great Schism”; where the Eastern Orthodox Church split from Western Christianity over the proper way to take Communion, with an included disagreement on whether priests could or should marry. As if this wasn’t bad enough, roughly 300 years later, there was the “Western Schism”, where three men fought over which one of them should be the rightful western Catholic Pope.**

- **Beginning in the early 1500's Christianity saw the Protestant Reformation, a world-changing movement begun primarily by the German priest, Martin Luther.** As many of you know, his focus was the radical notion that people needed and should be allowed to practice a personal faith, not just a dictated and controlled faith of the church, and that believers had a right to access the Scriptures themselves, called the "priesthood of all believers".
- It was this Reformation that allowed the explosion of denominations and church splits that we live with today.

I could go on with disagreements about which Scriptures are considered "within Canon", about divisions over how to take Holy Communion, when to baptize believers, and on and on, but you get the point.

- **Beyond these historical divisions, today, in 2025, let us add the fact that the American Church, especially evangelicals, are deeply divided racially, politically, economically, and**

**socioeconomically, and of course, as I mentioned,
denominationally.**

**So, why do I bring these facts into my discussion of the imperative
that we walk in Christian unity and Community?**

Well, truthfully, I kinda think we, at least in Western Christianity, particularly Evangelical Christianity, are a hot mess, and my hope is to help all of us realize that first, our Triune God desires that we be unified (remember Jesus's prayer I read at the beginning). And second, we ourselves are not able to accomplish this on our own. By that I mean by using our natural mind alone to work through our differences and disagreements.

Okay, so having thrown you a whole bunch of seemingly ruinous history, you might be asking, "What's the use"? And saying, "Christian Unity is unattainable". And quite honestly, on our own, you are correct. **But remember, Jesus Himself said, "Apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). It is only through the power of the Triune**

God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, working in each of us, that we can become “the all of us” Jesus prayed for.

But let us not despair. Let us not throw our hands up. Let us not give up! Instead, let us look at God’s plan for us. **Let’s take a look at the ancient Psalm of David, Psalm 133, said to have been written by David about one thousand years before Christ’s birth.** I believe that in this Psalm we can find some keys to help us develop hearts that can live in real Christian community, grow our faith, and live out our faith in the world around us:

To start, let me read Psalm 133:

**¹ How good and pleasant it is
when God’s people live together in unity!**

**² It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron’s beard,
down on the collar of his robe.**

³ It is as if the dew of Hermon

were falling on Mount Zion.

For there the Lord bestows his blessing,

even life forevermore.

In Leviticus 8:10-12 we see that Moses poured oil on Aaron's head, so that he was consecrated for the Lord's work. That oil flowed down onto his beard, his clothing, and so on. This is about God's Holy Spirit being poured over His people, then and today; the coming down is emphasized, as the blessings come down from Heaven; Second; it is like the dew coming down from Mt. Hermon; the highest peak in Israel; it would be dry and parched in the lowlands, but the mountain was cooler and creeks and rivers flowed out of it...and dew was generated and came down to bless the lowlands as well.

David's use of these metaphors is about unity, protection, the interweaving of God's blessings with human beings' openness to love and support one another. Bingo! Herein lies the key to not only uncovering how to live in Community with believers, but also how to live out all of our life here on earth in ways that Jesus desires.

It is this; Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) And He promised to send His Holy Spirit to teach us all things. Paul teaches us that the Fruit of the Spirit are; Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-Control. Against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23).

If you look at each of these 9 fruits of the Spirit, you will see that they really have to do with community. They have to do with how we view each other, how we care for one another. Nowhere in Scripture does it say anything at all about being of a particular political party or political persuasion. Nor does it say we must look a certain way, dress a certain way, or even fit into any mold at all.

Instead, I believe that Community, Christian Community, is not about these earthly things; money, status, fame, possessions, politics, or even what religious persuasion one has. Rather, Jesus told us that we must, “Love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind; and love our neighbor as ourselves” (Luke 10:27). Period.

And we can only do that by the infilling of the Holy Spirit; allowing the dew from the Mount Hermon of God's throne to so pour over us, fill us, cleanse us, and renew us; this is how we will be able to live in community one to another.

And that leads me to our final points here; how do we live out the prayer Jesus had for us to live as one? How do we allow the Holy Spirit to so touch us that we are transformed into the image of Jesus Christ and are able to live out His desires for us on this earth?

Well, as John Mark Comer says, Community, Christian Community, is essential to our faith walk. In fact, he says that we cannot truly follow Jesus alone. He maintains that it is not possible. We were created to be in Community, just as the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are in Community. We need each other. Remember the Apostle Paul talked about us being members of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). And all the parts need each other. As Comer says in his book, "Community is like the incubator for our spiritual formation." The reason that is so is we desperately need one another, not just for support, but to help mold us and shape us and rub the rough edges off of us. You see, God is preparing a

people for His own possession, to live together with Him forever, as it says in I Peter 2:9. Folks, that is a tall order, but it is God’s will and desire for each of us to be unified with each other in Him. And, amazingly, this unification happens primarily in the context of the church, His Church Universal. **Dr. Joseph Hellerman, quoted in Comer’s book, puts it this way, in talking about the community created by the church; “Long-term relationships are the crucible of genuine progress in the Christian life. People who stay (in a church body) also grow. People who leave do not grow”.**

Comer says true Christian Community has the best opportunity to happen in the setting of the church; whether church is a mega-church or several folks meeting in a home church. Because what church means to God is family. Let me say that again; What church means to God is family. A people to be God’s people. And this is the most basic, essential, and important thing happening in the world, or that has ever happened in this world; that God is building a family. And that comes by way of His adoption of each of us into His family, a family that spends time together, works through differences, and lives by the Holy Spirit in love.

In conclusion, hear these words from the well-known Canadian Presbyterian pastor and writer, Tim Challies, who puts it all together quite well;

“God’s people today, like God’s people in that day, have been given his gift of unity. It was objective reality for them, and it is an objective reality for us. God poured out his Spirit on the great and final High Priest, Jesus Christ, who is the head of the church. Like oil flows from hair to beard to collar, the Spirit flows from Head to body, from Christ to church. And oh, how good it is when we embrace that unity, when we practice it, when we foster and treasure it. The lesson of Aaron’s oily beard is a lesson of unity. It is so good, such a blessing to us and such a pleasure to God, when we diligently and deliberately live like children of a common Father. How good and pleasant it is when {sisters and} brothers dwell in unity” by God’s grace, through the power of the Holy Spirit, in this place, the local Body of Christ.

Let’s pray: