

Community Church of Issaquah
Sunday, October 13, 2024

Building Community
A Message by Rev. Vincent Lachina

I'm going to let you all in on a little secret. I don't tell people this because they find it hard to believe, especially after they've heard me speak. But I did not only study religion in college and seminary. My college degree came with a double major in religion and English, and I have a master's degree in religion and education. I know. Surprising huh? You would think with all that training I would be eloquent and polished, but sadly, that just doesn't seem to be the case.

Even though I knew from a very early age that I wanted to be a minister in the Church, I also had a secret desire to be a famous writer, like William Faulkner or Ernest Hemmingway or Eudora Welty or Carson McCullers (and if you don't know those writers, they're all Southerners). I took three years of Latin, studied grammar and creative writing and had very high aspirations. It probably hit me that I would likely never attain those goals when my creative writing teacher told me, "Vincent, you should write about what you know, and I'm not sure exactly how much you do know." There went my Pulitzer Prize dreams out the window. So, I've settled to just being a minister and that has been more rewarding than I could have ever imagined. But to add insult to injury, my brother, a retired physician has written and had published six murder mystery books and two non-fiction book about the big

questions in life. I, on the other hand, write sermons. Sad, huh?

But in my fixation about English grammar and my Latin connection, words are very fascinating to me. One word in particular has lately implanted itself in my brain and I have become overly conscious of its use. The word is ‘community.’ Since most of our spoken and written language is derived from the Latin, you should know that community comes from the Latin word ‘communitas’ which is a combination of the word “com” meaning together and ‘munus’ meaning shared. In other words, a community is something shared in common. We use the word community all the time, like in the name of our church – Community Church of Issaquah.

My older sister and my brother, both now retired from highly professional positions in the medical field. have a great deal more financial resources than their humble minister brother. They each have large homes, condos on the Florida coast, new Lexus cars, and the ability to take cruises at the drop of a hat. I, on the other hand, think I’ve made a beautiful water journey if I take the ferry to Friday Harbor. One thing my siblings have in common is that their homes are in gated communities. I find it very strange that the common element that forms their “community” is a gate.

I asked my sister once while I was visiting if she knew very many of her neighbors after we had input the secret code and the gates opened to allow us entry. “Well,” she said, “I know my next-door neighbor. We speak whenever we’re

out in the yard at the same time.” I find that odd, to call yourself a community when the only common bond is a gate. ‘Gated Community.’ Seems like a contradiction to me, doesn’t it to you?

Think about it for a minute. How do you use the word, and when? Let me give you just a few examples of how we use the word “community.”

- The name of our church – Community Church of Issaquah is the most common use of that word to us.
- There’s the community center where folks gather in different mixes for a host of activities, meeting, exercise programs, children’s functions and more. We all know what a community center is. I used to go to the community center in my neighborhood for a senior’s exercise program, but they cancelled it after a few years since so many of the attendees had croaked.
- I heard someone talk about their neighborhood and made the comment, “I love being in this community.” It’s a way to describe the area of town or even the city where you live. That’s your ‘community.’
- While I was chatting with a neighbor at the dog park recently, she made the comment that she could not wait for Spring so that the community farmers market would be back on Saturdays. I’ve been there many times. Hundreds of people from the Mill Creek neighborhood ambling past different vendors selling a variety of goods. The chances of seeing people you know is remote, but it’s a community market because we are all participating in a common focus for a day.

- My friend Terry Kylo is a Lutheran minister who works feverishly in his ministry with the ‘Muslim community.’ Certainly, these are people with one common purpose who come together to practice their religious traditions. That’s a different kind of community.

The use of the word ‘community’ is so often used that we don’t give it much thought now.

If indeed we are a “community” that gathers here in this building once a week or more, we are tied together by three things – our identity, our practice of our faith, and our place in society. If we were to do an in-depth study of all the churches that the disciples and apostles helped to establish, those three things would be at the core of their work. Paul worked tirelessly to establish churches that were identified as “Christian” even though that word had not been used often during his life. That is what distinguished them from others who practiced other faith traditions, especially the Jews.

The evidence of how they practiced their own faith led to the enormous growth of those who chose to follow Christ. But at the same time, how they practiced their faith bore some persecution and often led them to practice their faith in private for fear of their lives. Now what about their place in society? Early believers held a unique place in the society that incorporated Romans, Greeks, Jews, and much more. But they had a place in society.

I want to share five building blocks that can form a remarkable 'community' here in this space. These are things that can bring you together in new and exciting ways if you let them. They can move you beyond the status quo to some pretty remarkable experiences of personal and congregational growth. But like all messages from every minister or rabbi in the world who speaks or preaches to a congregation, these are just suggestions. You take them or leave them. Here they are:

- 1) **Intent.** This congregation has a mission statement like every other congregation. Like most churches, there are some common elements in a mission statement. Churches want to create a welcoming and loving community that cares for others, inspires spiritual growth, promotes justice, and encourages lives of integrity, joy and service. That is the intent of this organized body of followers. As hopeful as it is, it is only an intention. We know that old saying, "The road to you know where was paved with good intentions. . ." And we have all said at some time, "I intended to do that, but I just forgot."

We begin building community when we make sure that our intent is something we know, accept and put our effort into. How well are our intentions being accomplished? How closely do our actions follow our mission statement? The churches founded in the times of Peter and Paul work incredibly hard to make sure that what they intended to establish, actually happened. That was their powerful intent, and history records that they were very successful. Their histories

are recorded in our Bible for us to follow their examples.

- 2) **Belief.** It would be difficult to say there is only one common belief system here. Each of us brings our own history, our own personal beliefs. But that's not what I mean by the word 'belief.' I want to ask you what you believe about each other, not about a belief or absence of belief about your God or your faith tradition. Southern Baptists, American Baptists, and so much more. What I am asking is do you believe in the equal worth of every person who chooses to either visit or join this congregation? I've been a minister for a very long time, and I can tell you from experience that the concept of equal worth is very difficult for congregations to practice.

Think about what the church of the year 50 AD must have been like. People from all over the Middle East, from different paths of religion, from different ethnic groups – it was an incredible mix of people who came together for one purpose, to worship Christ. That is what a community of faith seeks. That is what we must be engaged in striving for. I believe we are all equal in the sight of God, and it is that belief that I hope we always address in building our community

- 3) **Resources.** Have you ever heard someone say, "I'd love to do that, but I can't afford it." Trust me, I have said that more than once. And so do churches. Do you know why? Because we most often think in terms of **financial** resources. But our lives and the life of a

congregation is not totally dependent on finances. The more important resources we have don't have anything to do with money. The most important resources we have are people. Yet I know very few groups of people –whether it's a church, a social group, a school, or whatever – who make full use of the resource of humans. Your sitting here this morning are the greatest resource CCI has, and yet some of you haven't yet been plugged into your place of usefulness. We are missing you as a resource to build the best community possible. I truly believe that every person who ever enters the doors of a church has an amazing gift to contribute to that congregation. Let me ask you, are you using your own gifts as a resource for this community? It's a huge building block in the construction of a true community.

- 4) **Need.** I will be the first to confess. I need other people. I need to hang around with people who make me feel good or people I can irritate. And sometimes I need to be around people I can try to inspire. But I need people. We all do. We need to be in community with others. We need to belong. The trick is that churches forget to recognize that every single person who comes to a worship service, a social event, or anything that is part of the program of a church, comes because they need to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Surely the most difficult part of congregational life is meeting the needs of the people who are a part of that organization. How do we – that means you and I – go about knowing and helping meet the needs of people? Do you know what makes it so

difficult? People are reluctant to admit that they come here to this place with needs and are even more reluctant to tell you what their needs are. The bottom line is simply that we need to be in community, whether it's this congregation, a book club, a senior group or whatever. Then recognizing that need and creating a community based on our common need to be together becomes the hard work of building up this congregation.

I believe in my heart that those who chose to start and build the churches of the New Testament time desperately needed to be together not just to worship but to build a family where they could belong. They wanted to be in a community, just like us.

5) **Risks.** If you stack up all these building blocks or pieces for building a community, and you put the one called 'risks' at the top, it's the block that teeters and sways and makes us think the whole structure is falling down. No church, including this one, will build the best community without taking risks. And yes, I know it's easier to leave things as they have been for years. We don't like change, and the older an individual or a group gets, the less change is appealing. If I had a dollar for every time I heard someone in church say, "But Pastor, we've always done it this way," I'd be sending postcards from my vacation in Cancun.

Change. I don't like it and I'm guessing you don't either. It's hard for us. What about a morning when

we are taking a risk singing a new song or taking a risk on changing the order of service. Those are small risks and more than likely, the only downside is that a few folks will complain about it. But there are really bigger risks that congregations need to think about. The risk the early Christian church took was to be public about their new faith in a world where persecution was prevalent. We don't take that kind of risk. The bigger the risk, however, the bigger the reward. Get over the idea that risk is a bad thing. It never has to be. Risk can be the challenge that causes all of us to stand up and try something that might be scary or hard. So, I will repeat what I said a minute or so ago, you cannot build the best community without taking risks.

When you explore the etymology (aren't you impressed that I know that big word?) of the word 'community,' you will find at its core the concept of "common ownership." If you get nothing else from this message this morning, I hope you will go home with the truth that building a community here at our new space in Faith Church requires you – yes, you – to own the work of building a community. Believe me when I say this, it will never happen without your owning it. You can call this a congregation or church or gathering or anything you like, but it won't be a community unless and until you are the owner.

I am well aware that I am a fairly new minister here, though in my heart, I always feel like this is my spiritual home. I love this congregation. And it's from that deep concern for you that I try to offer some words of wisdom

that might help us grow to our full potential. The words I speak come from my heart to your heart. Just know they come with a huge dose of love and respect. Perhaps I might not have the right to challenge you, but understand that if and when I do, it's because I believe in you and know there is a desire here to stretch and be more than you ever imagined you could be.

And that's the end of my sermon.