

Fil-Am Community Church

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Key Verse: Hebrews 10:24-25

The Miracle of Community

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Hebrews 10:24-25

Welcome. We are so glad you’ve joined us today. If you weren’t here with us last week, we started a journey together of looking at miracles. We started a series called “Miracles from Heaven” based on the movie of the same title. This movie is still running in theaters. Some of you have seen it already. Some of you haven’t. Who saw it last week?

So, we began this series by looking at some of the miraculous moments recorded for us in the Gospels, but we also looked at the overarching miracle of God’s love in our lives—the ways God takes our commonplace, everyday lives and sets them apart as holy. Today we continue that journey as we look at the miracle of community.

And we begin by asking a question that may sound a bit strange at first, but bear with me. What are today’s greatest health issues? We hear news reports every day of new viruses spread by mosquitoes, of highly contagious diseases devastating entire countries. We hear of loved ones with cancer and those who died too young of sudden and unexpected heart or brain issues. Obesity and mental health issues are on the rise and in the news. But in a recent study, scientists have pointed to another serious public health issue that may seem less obvious—yet it’s

one we experience at epidemic proportions right here in our own country. What is this epidemic?

Loneliness.

A 2015 study in the journal *Perspectives on Psychological Science* found that, “The subjective feeling of loneliness increases risk of death by 26%.”

There’s an organization called “Campaign to End Loneliness” and on their web site they say, “Lacking social connections is a comparable risk factor for early death as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and is worse for us than well-known risk factors such as obesity and physical inactivity.” It’s ironic but true that although we live in a culture that is increasingly connected by technology and social media, we are increasingly lonely.

In fact, God created Adam because he was alone and he looked lonely. A story goes that Adam was wandering around the Garden of Eden feeling very lonely, when he heard a loud voice ask him, "What is wrong with you?" Adam said he didn't have anyone to talk to, and he was feeling very lonely.

Then the loud voice said he was going to give him a companion and it would be a woman. The voice continued, saying; “This person will cook for you and wash your clothes, she will always agree with every decision you make. She will bear your children and never ask you to get up in the middle of the night to take care of them. She will not nag you, and will always be the first to admit she was wrong when you've had a disagreement. She will never have a headache, and will freely give you love and compassion whenever needed.”

Adam thought that sounded great, so he asked “What would a woman like this cost me??”

The voice answered, “An arm and a leg.”

Adam thought about that for a moment. He thought that would be a pretty high price to pay, so he then asked, “What can I get for just a rib???”

The rest is history.

Women, that's just a joke, OK? I just want to point out that you pay a higher price when you're not in contact with someone. You could die early as the Campaign to End Loneliness says. You see, we need each other!

Not just to be near each other in proximity, although that helps, but we need deep connections with one another. While loneliness as an epidemic health issue may be new news, the fact that we need each other is nothing new. It's the way we were created—to be people of relationship and community. We need it physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Let me recite again Hebrews 10:24-25. It says, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Authentic community can break the cycle of loneliness and isolation. And as we experience community, we have the unique opportunity to extend this miracle into the lives of others around us.

God has created us to be part of the body of Christ. Romans 12:4-5 says, “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” How does knowing that we belong to each other change the way we live?

Let's watch this clip from *Miracles from Heaven*:

VIDEO: GODSEND

In that video clip, Annabel and her mom, Christy, find themselves alone in a busy place, in Boston. They went to Boston to see a famous doctor in the hopes of him finding a cure for Annabel's disease. They didn't have relatives or friends. In fact, on that day, they were turned away by the hospital receptionist because they didn't have an appointment. So, they must be really feeling alone and dejected.

They were having dinner when came along Angela, the waitress, who was full of life and energy. She befriended them and pretty soon they were hitting it off.

The next day, Angela drove them around and showed them the sights and sounds of Boston. She even showed them the tall condominium where Tom Brady lives. Anyone here a Patriots fan?

So, Angela, true to her name, was a Godsend. She came in the life of Christy and Annabel at the right time. She provided relief and joy and friendship to two lonely human beings.

While the situations you face may have nothing to do with being alone in a faceless crowd, the principles of community are the same. We each have opportunities every day to choose community over isolation. We can decide to accept the offer of community by someone. Or we can open our eyes to the needs around us. When we are willing to sacrifice our own comfort for the benefit of others, we can begin to create true community.

The Bible gives us various pictures of living in community. Jesus's disciples lived and learned together. For example, the early church in Acts shared all they had and cared for each other.

The miracle of community is that it turns the table on loneliness and isolation. It ushers us into meaningful, life-giving relationships with each other and with God. It doesn't immediately cure the underlying issues that lead to loneliness, but it opens the door to allow God to work in our lives. At the same time, God uses us in the lives of others.

This morning, let me share with you the three keys to community. These are three things we need to do in order to have a meaningful community relationship.

1. Be Committed

Nowadays, we don't find real commitment that's why many relationships are breaking down. Many don't last long. Lots of people experiment with living in with their partner because they're afraid of commitment.

And although some do commit their "I do's" at the altar they are not able to follow through and end up giving up on their marriage. Even in the world of sports, this is true. There was a time when players played for only one team. They were loyal because they wanted to help their team to achieve success. But it's funny how things are right now. It's like musical chairs because players go round and round and grab the first best team that offers them what they want. Like in Japan. I worked there in 1989. I was just 10 years old. Just kidding. Actually, I was in my late 20s and worked as a programmer at Chase Manhattan Bank in Tokyo. One of the things I learned from a Japanese friend was the very slow turnover rate of Japanese workers. Meaning, Japanese people worked for one company all of their lives. There's so much company loyalty! I imagine every one of them when they retired would receive a certificate of loyalty. No wonder they became a developed country faster than any other. But that friend of mine told me also that that loyalty trait seemed to be missing already in the younger generation. No wonder Japan's progress has been slowing somewhat. Commitment is important in any relationship.

Now, your commitment to another may be a momentary choice to come alongside someone in a specific situation. Or it may be a choice to commit yourself over and over to sharing life together, no matter the cost. You see, community always requires commitment to living with our eyes and hearts open to the needs of others. Community literally means "with unity." That means we can't do it alone. Ephesians 4:3 encourages us to "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." That is an ongoing process. And it's an effort.

Community isn't just about social events and having a good time. While those things are great and even important, community relationships go deeper. Galatians 6:2 tells us that we are to "Carry each other's burdens."

Jackie Robinson was the first black to play major league baseball. Breaking baseball's color barrier, he faced jeering crowds in every stadium. While playing one day in his home stadium in Brooklyn, he committed an error. The fans began to ridicule him. He stood at second base, humiliated, while the fans jeered. Then, shortstop Pee Wee Reese came over and stood next to him. He put his arm around Jackie Robinson and faced the crowd. The fans grew quiet. Robinson later said, that arm around his shoulder saved his career.

Folks, that's how being committed looks like. You stand by someone whatever the situation is. You're not just a fair-weather friend but a friend who sticks closer than a brother as the Bible says.

Need some practical ideas of how commitment looks? Romans 12:10-18 gives us just that: "Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

Folks, those are actions that are not always convenient. They require commitment. Now, the second key to community is

2. Be Selfless

Two men were out hunting in a thick forest somewhere in the north. Suddenly one yelled and the other looked up to see a grizzly bear charging them.

The first started to frantically put on his tennis shoes and his friend anxiously asked, "What are you doing? Don't you know you can't outrun a grizzly bear?" "I don't have to outrun a grizzly. I just have to outrun you."

That's the kind of world we live in today. People trying to get ahead of others. We live in a me-first society, where dog eats dog. Which runs counter to the idea of community.

But, hear me, community is not without cost, yet it is worth it. While we often try to combat loneliness by doing things for ourselves and getting ahead, God's truth suggests another way. In John 15:12-13, Jesus gives us this instruction: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." When we choose to lay down our own lives for others, we are obeying Jesus's command. And in doing so, Jesus said we become His friends. "You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:14-15).

The selfless act of choosing to love others brings us into closer relationship with Jesus as well as others. In fact, when we selflessly love others, we are showing our love for God. Listen to these words from Matthew 25:34-40:

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

Community calls us to love and serve others, especially those in need. And there’s a supernatural twist in doing so—a miraculous twist. God sees everything we do to others. He blesses them and counts them as love. He turns them into a blessing for us.

I remember the time I was training as a missionary in Hawaii. An international night was announced and so, all of us, who were from different countries became busy preparing for our own exhibits. In the midst of that I was approached by two young Germans, a boy and a girl, who asked whether I could help them with their exhibit. They asked me to draw a male German wearing their national costume. I did but the drawing looked like a Filipino. Just kidding. Actually, they gave me something to copy and when I was done they were so happy. Well, I think they were just being nice.

Days passed and then our leader asked us to buy a book that we would use for our class. I went to check out the book which was displayed at the foyer of the building where we were having our training. There was a stack of books actually on the table and anyone could pick it up for \$10. I counted my money and I had only a few dollars. The cashier looked with pity on me as I left. I haven’t walked far when someone called my name. It was the German girl who asked me to do the drawing for their exhibit. She said, “Rolly, I saw you at the table where the books

are but you didn't buy one. I figured you didn't have enough money. So, here's \$10." And she put the money into my hand.

Right timing? That was God's timing. As I said, God is aware of everything we do to others. And he honors that and blesses us.

Be committed. Be selfless. Now, the third key to commitment is

3. Be Patient

Finally, as you pursue community through commitment and selflessness, don't be surprised when it's not all warm fuzzies. Anyone who has lived in true community relationships with others knows this. Community requires patience. Community is not about perfection, it's about patience—patience with one another as we learn and grow together.

Jesus had many opportunities to demonstrate patience with His disciples. They were constantly misunderstanding His message, getting fired up at the wrong things, and falling asleep at important moments. But through Jesus's toughest moments on His journey toward the cross, they were there—not always doing things perfectly, not always acting as they should (even Jesus got frustrated with them at times), but they were there, together. Despite their flaws, Jesus chose the close community of His disciples over going it alone. Why? Because He knew that it's in relationship and community that His love is demonstrated. And His message is lived out before a world that He longs to draw into community with Himself.

When we commit to community, we commit to patience with each other. In 1 Thessalonians 5:14 the Bible says, "And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone." That's a tough calling, but just as we hope that others will be patient with us, we are required to extend patience to others. It's not complicated, and we don't have to do it perfectly, but community requires that we choose patience.

Let me share with you a traditional Hebrew story. It says, Abraham was sitting outside his tent one evening when he saw an old man, weary from age and journey, coming toward him. Abraham rushed out, greeted him, and then invited him into his tent. There he washed the old man's feet and gave him food and drink.

The old man immediately began eating without saying any prayer or blessing. So Abraham asked him, "Don't you worship God?"

The old traveler replied, "I worship fire only and reverence no other god."

When he heard this, Abraham became incensed, grabbed the old man by the shoulders, and threw him out of his tent into the cold night air.

When the old man had departed, God called to his friend Abraham and asked where the stranger was. Abraham replied, "I forced him out because he did not worship you."

God answered, "I have been patient with him these eighty years although he dishonors me. Could you not endure him one night?"

Let us be patient with others. Remember that God himself exercised patience with you and me. If he did not, we would have all been gone. The Bible says, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise (and this is with regards to exacting judgment on the world), as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

The Bible says that before we came to know him, before we accepted Jesus in our lives, we were on the path to destruction. We were going to hell. But God drew us to himself because he loves us. He saved us through his Son Jesus when he died on the cross. His patience made him save us.

Folks, in our world, loneliness and isolation come naturally. We have to work at community. But in our simple choices to stand with others, we open the door to the miracle of community.

When we stand with others, God promises He is there with us. In Matthew 18:20 Jesus tells His disciples, “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

One final story before I conclude. About a year and a half ago my dad was diagnosed with colon cancer. He was 79 then. He had to undergo chemotherapy for several months and, by the grace of God, he survived. The doctor declared him to be cancer-free. That was a miracle. But what followed was a greater miracle. You see, after a few weeks of being declared cancer-free, he started to show signs of weakness and lack of interest in life. It must have been the medicines, you know, the side effect. We didn't know exactly what but he was just depressed. I talked to my mom and she felt sad about what was happening to him. We tried to encourage him, lift his spirit up, but he wouldn't respond. He wouldn't eat, he wouldn't talk, he seemed like has given up on life. The doctor then recommended that he be placed in a hospice. And when you hear the word hospice, you know what it means. Fortunately, upon our request, my dad was allowed to stay home where a nurse continually monitored him. But, of course, my mom was there who was patient throughout and selflessly served him. There were my siblings as well and those who lived far, visited him every now and then. Until we noticed an improvement. He started to eat. He became more talkative. He wanted to get up and moved around the house. In time, he recovered fully. In fact, he and my mom traveled to the Philippines last year and he didn't even get sick while my mom became sick. Now, he is as healthy as a young man. He is now 82 and going strong.

That's what I call a miracle. I believe the loving care of people around him, their commitment, selflessness, and patience provided healing to his spirit. That's what community does. You see—in our presence with others, God is also present with us.

Community has amazing potential to be life-changing for someone who is lonely and struggling. It has amazing potential to be life-changing for you and me as we face our own loneliness and struggles. Community has amazing potential to be life-changing for us as it draws us into ever deeper relationship with our heavenly Father.

You can be a miracle in someone's life this week. Where do you see a need in the life of someone you know? Will you stand with that person and make the choice to usher in the miracle of community in the world around you?