Better Together Phase 2: 40 Days of Community

Session 3: Togetherness God’s Way

Why we need each other/Putting Humpty back together again

How would you sum up your faith – the things most important to you about the way you live your life? What is being a Christian all about?

What would you have people do if you wanted to make this earth a bit more like heaven – more the way God intended things to be? What would you change or add?

It’s easy to look around the world and see things that are not the way God intended them to be. Sometimes it’s clear that something negative is present when it shouldn’t be, but sometimes it’s more about something being absent that you know God would have in place.

(CLIP – Kermit the frog reporting on Humpty Dumpty).

Most of us would agree that just like poor old Humpty, the world is broken and needs putting back together again. This message, as we open our series looking at our community and our role in it, gets us to ask the same question. Because being a Christian is about more than just what I understand about God – it’s about what difference that makes to what I do and how I act out there in the real world. So when we ask ourselves what being a Christian means to us what we’re really asking is what it means to be a Christian in the world we live in – how can we make a difference to something that is clearly broken?

In Mark 12:28-34 a man asked Jesus a very similar question. He asked Him to sum up what was the most important commandment.

The answer was to love God and to love others. The man was very pleased as he agreed. “I know it is important to love him with all my heart and all my understanding and all my strength and to love my neighbour as myself. This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law.”
What happened next is very important to us as we start this series. Mark tells us “When he saw how much the man understood, Jesus said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

We live in a achievement oriented society! Right from the start of life we learn how important it is to get things right – to achieve, to succeed. We are under constant pressure to get things right, achieve the best, do everything well. Its easy to look at our Christian life in the same way and think that being ‘good at’ being a Christian is about things like learning great theology, being an amazing preacher, running a great kids club or whatever. It can feel like so much more than we’ve got time for! In fact though Jesus had a simpler message of what is really important if we want to try to recreate a little bit of God’s kingdom here on earth.

If we’re honest, most of us are motivated in our Christian life by the fact that when we see Jesus we see a better way. We see hope in a world where there isn’t much hope – we see a better way of doing family, friendships, relationships – we see guidance and ideas that make sense. We hear Jesus talk about the world the way God intended it to be and it awakens something in us – a longing, a yearning for something better. We look forward to the day He will redeem the world and establish his kingdom here on the earth. But the truth is that as Christians we have a chance to bring something of that world – the kingdom of God – to the world around us – literally around us – to our community. In fact it’s more than just a chance – we are told this is our job here on the earth – because we have seen the light and others haven’t.

See Eph 5:8 “For you were once darkness but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.” and 1 Peter 2:9 “you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

How often do you look at something going on in the world – in the newspapers, in life going on around you – and feel that God driven pang of sadness because it just isn’t the way he designed things to be. This series is all about how WE have a chance to turn things around and make a difference. The world – like Humpty – is broken – but we have the chance to start to put things back together again!

Its all about community ...

Look at what Jesus said to that man. He had grasped that the most important thing, more important than all the complicated rules and other things going on – was to love God and to love other people. He said that man was very close to the Kingdom of God. So that is what The Kingdom of God is – its a place where people love God, but also love each other and put other people’s needs as highly as they put their own. It’s a place where there is real community!

We don’t have that world here today. We talk about a community but really that means an area where people live. What this series is about is how we can bring real community into this area we live in – how we can make sure that every day there are little flashes of light in the dark. This is about hundreds of thousands of situations where something has gone wrong – gone away from Gods design – and where we can help to start to turn it back.

We cannot make the kingdom of God on earth, but we can get very close to it! So ...
Why is community so powerful? 1 - We were designed to be connected!

We’ve just spent 10 weeks looking at our relationships in the church and how we can care for each other here. Why, because we were not designed to do this alone. We need each other. Genesis 2:18 – not good to be alone(isolated, separate, disconnected) – remember what this means? Note it is different from the word used when people make a decision to go to a lonely place (eg Luke 4:42 – the word used here means solitary)

“Our language has wisely sensed the two sides of being alone. It has created the word, loneliness to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word, solitude to express the glory of being alone” Paul Tillich (theologian and Philosopher from early part of this century)

We were designed to work in connections with other people. As we step outside the world and do the work at this stuff people see that we’re offering something different and they are drawn to it – because it is something they instinctively need! Look at the things which are drawing people now – internet, social sites etc – why? Because people need to connect and in this world where it is so hard to do it in a real way, we have to find other ways of doing it!

Should connections be things we need to work at? Our world teaches us that friendships and relationships should be really easy, something that happens without any hard work. In fact forming good relationships – the kind God calls us to make – takes work! Look at what our culture does to relationships - if we look at different cultures, or even our own many decades ago, we can see so many things that have improved – got better. But we have lost that natural sense of real community. It used to be that we existed in direct connection with other people and had to work to make ourselves isolated. Now our natural state is one of isolation and we have to work to come out of that isolation. Although with progress we have gained a lot we have also lost something of what God had in mind for His world.

Loneliness is a big problem – isn’t even an issue in more connected societies. The same is seen with problems like depression which are much more common than they used to be. We are people designed to need connections just like we are designed to need air. And without those connections we start to suffocate. We feel lonely not because we are bad or are failing in life – though its easy to feel that way in our world which teaches us that we should be able to be self-sufficient. We feel lonely because we have an inbuilt need for other people. Its part of our DNA – you cannot be human and escape that need!

NB - Real connections = not just being in a room full of people! This is why small groups work so well and are so important! If you’re not in one then why not grab the chance as part of 40 days to give it a go and see Phil to ask him if you can be linked with a group. Make opportunities to connect!

Why is community so powerful? 2 - There is always a second chance to experience what God had in mind!

Romans 12 talks about the way that we can be involved in this second chance to experience a flash of what God had in mind for us here on earth – this glimpse of things to come. Paul says ‘I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice ... don’t copy the behaviour and customs of this world but let God transform you
into a new person. Don’t just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong, hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection.” (Romans 12: 1-2, 9-10 NLT)

The Message translates this last bit “Love from the centre of who you are; don’t fake it. Be good friends who love deeply.”

The word ‘love’ in this passage comes from the Greek word philadelphia – from philos (beloved) and adelphos (brother) – the NIV translates it as ‘be devoted to one another in brotherly love.’ So this ‘Philos’ love is the kind of love that you have for a family member – a brother or sister. It is the kind of love we are more used to seeing in families – that’s how the people reading this letter would have been used to using the words Paul uses. The early Christian church – much like ours today – brought together a load of people who would not have been used to mixing, never mind making friends – Greeks and Jews, people of different classes and backgrounds – men and women. Paul therefore challenges them to start to see each other in the same way as they would see other members of their family – to start forming these kind of real connecting friendships. This was an opportunity they wouldn’t have had anywhere else – and even now it is rare for us to get this chance outside – or even inside – our family!

The concept of Philos – family love – is hard for some people because actually their family has not taught us about what family love is really designed to be like. Perhaps you were lucky and your family did give you that experience. Family love is totally giving, loving you for who you are. It is reliable, always there, even if you don’t see each other for a while. It knows your history, knows your faults and strengths together and loves you for both of them. Philos love means you know you can always rely on someone – they will always be therefore you if the chips are down. This is really being connected – this is the kind of community God really had in mind for us on earth.

This is also the kind of love that God intended for families – but many of us have not experienced that. If you didn’t get the kind of family life God would have wished for you be encouraged – friendship is a second chance to experience that the way God intended - Pro 27:10 “better a nearby friend than a distant family” (msg). Proverbs 18:24 “friends come and friends go – but a true friend sticks to you like family” (msg). Philos love is about belonging – and when we form friendships like this we get the security of knowing we belong and are valued by the people around us as well as by God. We get a second chance to experience family – and ultimately that is what real community is – its extended family.

Why is community so powerful? 3 - Because through us people see the image of God!

This is perhaps the most important reason. Where is God in our society today? How do people see God? The answer is that we are the main way that most people have an opportunity to see a glimpse of God today. We are made in His image (gen 1:27: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female, he created them.”) We carry that image with us every day, every moment, everywhere that we go. Or at least we have the opportunity to do that!

So what is it about the way that we act/react that shows people a glimpse of God? John 13:35 tells us ‘Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.”
Eugene Peterson (he who translated the Message) says ... “God is nothing if not personal. If God is revealed as personal, the only way that God can be known is in personal response. We need to know this” (in ‘Christ plays in a thousand places’)

So our relationships with each other – if we get it right – can mirror something of who God is – like the scent of a flower in the air or a glimpse of a colour or few notes of a tune. They remind us of who God is – they call to our minds the bigger picture of who God is. As Jesus says “Whatever you did for one of these brothers of mine, you did it for me.” When we do things for people we do them for God because through what we do we are God to those people. As St Theresa said in the 14th century ‘God has no hands but our hands to do his work today ...”

So what if we do not place this importance on forming relationships, on caring for one another?

If we are the main way that people who otherwise would have no connection with God, see God, what happens if we don’t do this stuff? 1 John 3:17 has a chilling warning for us “This is why we ought to live sacrificially for our fellow believers and not just be out for ourselves. If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God’s love? It disappears. And you made it disappear.” (The Msg)

That’s why Philippians urges us ... Phil 2:1- 2, 4 “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” – its because through us doing that, other people get the chance to catch sight of God where otherwise they wouldn’t get to meet Him.

Why? We do this because God did what he did for us! Our experience of God should spur us on to be some whisper of that to other people. What did Jesus do – he cared, he was there for people, he talked to them when they were lonely, he listened to people who were outcasts, people who had messed up in their life – he gave them time and space. He linked people up, introduced them to friends, started small groups. He ate dinner with people, provided wine, socialised! Why? Because he was driven by this in-built need to connect with people and to see them connect with each other – because that echoes something key of the heart of God.

Why is community so powerful? 4 - Remember the potential of synergy!

You will remember me speaking about 8 weeks ago all about SYNERGY – how we are designed to work together with each other and with God to make this amazing team who can do so much more than if we tried to work all alone. If we work together we can achieve amazing things!

Illustration – Stockport Railway Viaduct. 33.85M (111.1 ft) high, one of western Europes biggest brick structures. Its big! So what is it built of – huge bits of steel, massive structures? No – just bricks. One brick after another, on top of another – in total around 11 000 000 bricks, built with 600 workers in shifts day and night. It opened in 1842 and at the time it was built it was the largest in the world of its construction.

If we work together we can achieve something amazing! Remember – we work together with God (1 Cor 3:9) – and if we do that we can bring about good things! (Romans 8:28). What if our biggest
part in bringing God’s Kingdom here on earth is all about the work we put into forming relationships with people – caring for people – making real community?

We can help people to see that the God we worship is not irrelevant or out of touch – He’s here, He’s real, and He cares about every one of them.