

Community: It Starts Here!

Encourage One Another

Ephesians 4:17-24

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I want to ask you to use your imagination with me for a moment. I'd like you to imagine a thriving, healthy, robust community of faith that loves one another courageously, prays with and for one another intentionally, worships together, and celebrates all of the ways God is active in the world through this community of faith. Now imagine Prince of Peace as a community faith that is purposeful about being the light of Christ for others, a community that encourages each other to live with open hearts, a community of faith that practices generosity and seeks ways to "learn Christ" by reading scripture, and then gathers together to study and learn in large and small groups. Imagine Prince of Peace as a community of faith that actively steps away from old ways of living life that do not build up the community of Christ and courageously steps into ways of living in a community that renews, restores, and reconciles us as the body of Christ. Imagine Prince of Peace as a community of faith that measures the individual's good by holding on to what is best for the entire community – that puts the needs of the community above and beyond the needs of the individual. Imagine Prince of Peace as a community of faith that acknowledges that while there is undoubtedly a great deal of brokenness in the world, the faith community of Christ embraces the call to generate momentums of love and respect, which creates a different kind of world through love and service in Jesus' name.

If I were tasked with writing a manifesto for Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, that would be it. What we've just done together is imagine a remarkable way for any community to live. But there's nothing new here. The reality is that this vision that we've walked through of a courageous Christian community is exactly what the Apostle Paul described in the book of Ephesians. Which raises a couple of important questions. First, How close to that vision are we? And second, What would it take for us to be there?

We're in a new series called "Community...It Starts Here!" And during these weeks, we'll be exploring how

to develop ourselves into a healthy, vibrant community of Christ-followers who love and encourage one another, who bear one another's burdens, and forgive and honor one another. We'll explore how that kind of community starts right here.

But there's a tension, because there's always a tension, right? The tension, of course, is that while community in the context of the Kingdom of God is a core value, our culture, our wider culture, celebrates individualism. The faith community wherever it is lived out always presses back on that. The Bible is filled with the Apostle Paul's language about the "Body of Christ," the community of believers. Paul used phrases like "each other" and "one another" to emphasize the community over the individual. There are many commands in Scripture that provide both the framework and the details of what it means to live in community, a community of brothers and sisters in Christ. The truth here is that we can't be *for* one another if we're not *with* one another.

Last week Pastor Jason talked about how all of this begins with love; how love is the prime directive of the Christian faith. Today I want to talk about community, how it starts here with encouragement. Living life fully, wholeheartedly with one another takes a great amount of courage. This is why it is so essential that we intentionally encourage one another. When we encourage each other, we are building one another up, providing the best context for the Holy Spirit to grow courage and confidence in the hearts of others. Encouragement isn't a matter of falsely inflating others. It's a matter of reflecting the image of God we see in one another. That encourages! And don't we all need a little bit more courage in our lives?

The Apostle Paul has this to say about the way the Ephesian faith community could live into this. I'm going to read Ephesians 4:17-24:

And so I insist—and God backs me up on this—that there be no going along with the crowd, the empty-headed, mindless crowd. They've refused for so long to deal with God that they've lost touch not only with God but with reality itself. They can't think straight anymore. Feeling no pain, they let themselves go in sexual obsession, addicted to every sort of perversion.

But that's no life for you. You learned Christ! My assumption is that you have paid careful attention to him, been well instructed in the truth precisely as we have it in Jesus. Since, then, we do not have the excuse of ignorance, everything—and I do mean everything—

connected with that old way of life has to go. It's rotten through and through. Get rid of it! And then take on an entirely new way of life—a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you.

The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

It's with these words that the Apostle Paul encourages Christ-followers in every age and in every time, which leads to some important questions for us today.

- “What one specific step can we take to encourage one another as we move ahead into the fall season?”
- “What specific step will you take to help create a courageous community that loves and prays for one another, learns Christ together, and creates a different kind of world through love and service in Jesus' name?”

Let me peel that back just a bit. The Apostle Paul raises some important issues that are helpful for us to notice here. First, Paul clearly challenges a community to reconsider its inner compass, to do the necessary work of self reflection. Any community of faith that gravitates toward – as Paul writes, “going along with the empty-headed, mindless crowd,” is a community that has lost touch not only with God but with reality itself. Ouch! Paul was never one to mince words.

Second, the Apostle Paul reminds Christ-followers that they are a community that has “...learned Christ.” They are a community that has paid careful attention to Jesus, and because of that, the community has taken on an entirely new way of life, what Paul calls a God-fashioned life, that is renewed from the inside and working itself out into their lives, producing God's character within them.

As we continue moving into the fall, we want to ask ourselves, What does that community look like, and how do we continue to create that community here? The exercise using our imaginations that I did with you when I began comes out of this passage from Ephesians. And there are many ways to get there. But perhaps the most effective way to create that kind of community here is by encouraging one another to invest in spiritual formation in all of its expressions here at Prince of Peace or wherever we're worshipping today.

We've developed an extensive list of community groups that are available here at Prince of Peace. There's a lot to choose from when it comes to engaging in the life of our community. There's adult ministry, there's young adult ministry, there are small

groups and support groups, there are opportunities for volunteers and parents and seniors. We have groups of Bible studies and opportunities to wrestle with issues of peace and justice. We also have Mission Outpost, and the community resource center and the dental clinic. There is literally something for everyone. But here's the challenge. We will not grow as a community of faith if we're not encouraging one another to be involved in the community of faith. So let me encourage you with this. This is about taking the next best step into the community's life together.

I want you to hear from one of our disciples who has experienced a great deal of encouragement in his life, in his experience with his small group. Jim LaDoux and his wife, Gina and their family have been a part of this community of faith since 2001. Jim has been active in middle and senior high school ministry and family ministry. He's advised and consulted with us in a number of areas in our life together. Now, Jim is currently a part of a men's small group that meets weekly. Welcome, Jim, good to have you here.

(video)

Thank you, Jim, that's an important and impressive way to look at what it means to be in community life together.

Well, friends, let me take you back now to the manifesto. It might go something like this.

We believe in creating a healthy, thriving, robust community of faith that loves one another courageously, prays with and for one another intentionally, worships together, and celebrates all of the ways that God is active in the world through this community of faith.

So I want to leave you with two important things -- a challenge and an important question.

- Challenge: We can't love one another if we're not with one another. And if we're not with one another we can't encourage one another. That leads to this important question.
- Question: What one specific step will you take to help create a courageous community that loves and prays for one another, learns Christ together, and creates a different kind of world through love and service in Jesus' name?

Let's pray.