

iCommunity: Virtual or Real?

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God made us for relationships. Do you have any idea how much God longs to have a relationship with you? Do you have any idea how much he cares for you? How much he loves you? God created us to not only experience a relationship with him but to live our lives in a community of close personal relationships with other persons. Where do we find a community of persons who deeply care for each other? That is something we all long for. Throughout the scriptures we see examples of this kind of community. I want us to look at a band of brothers who experienced community.

¹ A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home.

² So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them.

³ Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them.

⁴ Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on.

⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

⁶ Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves,

⁷ "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

⁸ Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things?"

⁹ Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'?

¹⁰ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." He said to the paralytic,

¹¹ "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."

¹² He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Mark 2:1-12

Where do you find a community of close personal relationships? Have you found it in your family? Have you found it at work? Have you found it at church? Have you found it online?

How many of you use email? Text on phone? Are on Facebook? Twitter?
How much time do you spend during the day communicating with persons on-line?

Social networking via the internet has change the landscape of how we relate to one another. I want us to talk about the power of social networking to create community and also talk about some of the dangers we need to be aware of in virtual relationships. The word virtual means “simulated by computer software.” In other words, it is not actual or real.

A virtual community allows us to communicate in ways we never considered ten years ago. Have you ever listened to one of my sermons and had a question come to you mind and wish you could ask me that question? By the time church is over and you could ask me, you have forgotten the question or you are hungry and just want to get to lunch! This morning you will have an opportunity to send me your questions immediately. Text your question to the number on the screen. At the end of the message, I will answer as many as possible. To those at LakeRidge Praise, due to the delay in the recording, I will answer your questions by text this afternoon. This will help us create a little virtual community right here, right now.

God created us for relationships. God has revealed himself in the Scriptures as one God in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Even within the Godhead there is relationship. We are created in his image. In the creation story, God looks at Adam and says, “It is not good for man to be alone.” So he created a new and improved version which he called woman and gave to Adam

as a companion. God created the relationship between husband and wife. They would become one—connected emotionally, physically and spiritually.

We are social, relational beings. In spite of all the opportunities for community available to us, loneliness is pervasive in our world. God said that it is not good for us to be alone. We are made to be connected with others. Social networks seek to meet that need.

Social networking like Facebook and Twitter are changing the way we live. One in eight couples getting married met online. Fifty percent of the world's population is under the age of 30 and 96% of that generation is connected via social networks. The number of persons on Facebook makes it equivalent to the third largest country in the world.

I want us to look at a video that illustrates how social networking has changed our world.

VIDEO: SOCIAL MEDIA

Social networking possesses tremendous power. We can instantly connect with people anywhere in the world 24/7. This provides opportunities for many good things. Recently when the massive tornado destroyed much of Joplin, Missouri, churches across the nation sent messages via Twitter that mobilized hundreds of volunteers to offer assistance within a matter of hours. Through social networks people rejuvenate friendships that were lost over the years. Persons who are disabled or house bound, can stay connected with a network of friends. It helps them to not feel so alone.

Social networking allows us to have a large community. It is a status symbol to say we have hundreds of friends on Facebook. Because of this vast network someone is almost always available to communicate with us any time of day or night.

Social networking provides opportunities to encourage people. This past week I sent a text message to one of our members who was with an ill family member in another state. While sitting in a waiting room, they did not have to take a call, but they knew I was thinking about them and praying for them at that moment. Later they were able to respond and give an update on their loved one.

If you have your phone with you, I want to give you an opportunity right now to send an encouraging message to someone--text message or Tweet. We are going to take a moment to pray and ask God to put someone on our heart who needs an encouraging word or just to know you are thinking about them or praying for them. If you don't have a phone we have provided a blank space in the bulletin where you can write a low tech message. Then you can send this bulletin to that person with a note that explains how this came about.

(Prayer time and time for texts). Hundreds of persons, who could be anywhere in the world, were connected with people from this place in just a matter of minutes. Encouragement flowed into the hearts of persons because of technology. This technology can enhance and initiate experiences of real community.

Our church has a Facebook page. I hope you will visit it and post words of encouragement. Let me also encourage you to post on your social networks

positive comments about worship or your small group or ministry. Use those as tools to invite persons to come and worship with us. Let God's love and presence saturate the messages on your social networks.

While there are many positive aspects to social networking and virtual relationships, there are also some serious dangers. Online persons can pretend to be something they are not. They can post false pictures and information about themselves. Predators can use social networks to prey on children and the elderly. Unfortunately connections with old friends might include an old high school or college flame. Sometimes these connections progress to affairs and destroy marriages. Persons can become so addicted to virtual relationships that they spend excessive hours on the computer communicating with all their Facebook friends to the neglect of the family under their own roof. Viewing pornography provides a perverted sense of intimacy that undermines true intimacy.

A wide circle of virtual community can diminish the time we have to cultivate deep, quality relationships with a few people. Some persons post very personal information on the social network sights for anyone to see. This is information we normally would only share with a few close friends which builds a deep relationship. When we share our deepest secrets and dreams with everyone, then those who are closest to us feel robbed of being someone special in our lives.

Virtual community may interfere with our ability to function in real relationships. This comic strip from Blondie graphically portrays the issue for families.

PROJECT COMIC STRIP

How many times have you seen couples sitting at restaurant having dinner and one or both are talking on their mobile phones to someone else! I've seen young persons in a room together and rather than talking they are texting—each other!

Virtual community can enhance or hinder our experience of real community. We are created for real community which can only happen when we are fully present face to face with others in caring relationships.

We see this powerfully depicted in the story we read from Mark's gospel. The reputation of Jesus as a teacher and healer has been spreading throughout Galilee. Word got around rapidly without email or texts. Jesus is coming to town. The crowds followed him to the house where he would stay. They filled the house until no one else could get in. The rest circled outside windows and doors just to hear a word from Jesus.

There was one man who could not get there on his own. He was paralyzed. He could not move. He watched the people walking by him and heard their excited chatter about seeing Jesus. Once again, he would miss out on an important gathering of the town. He was overwhelmed with a sense of loneliness. Then all of a sudden several men from the crowd walking by approach him. They are his friends. They say, "You are going with us to see Jesus." Four of them pick

up his blanket and begin to carry him toward the house where Jesus is staying. The crowd is already overflowing. They ask politely for some of the crowd to make way for their friend to be taken to Jesus. No one moves.

These friends are not to be deterred by the rudeness of the crowd. They look for alternatives. One of them says, "Let's take him to the roof." Whether there were stairs or a ladder we don't know, but we can be sure that carrying a paralyzed man on a blanket up to the roof was no small task. They put their friend down on the flat roof and begin to dig with their hands through the sod roof. They open up a hole large enough for the man to be lowered down by ropes to the feet of Jesus. Jesus looks up and sees their faith. Then he says to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven." Jesus sees into his soul and knows that this man is paralyzed by guilt and regret. He needs forgiveness. So he sets him free from the source of the paralysis and then tells him to get up and walk. And he does.

What a powerful example of community. We experience things in the context of real community that we cannot experience any other way. The paralyzed man lived with his condition so long he had lost faith and hope. Jesus healed him because of the faith of his friends. When we are so discouraged that we have lost our faith, we need others to have faith for us. His friends gathered around him and had faith to bring him to Jesus. There are times in life when we need someone to stand in the gap for us. That happens in real community.

This man experienced forgiveness. Real community is where we hear the words, "your sins are forgiven." When we cannot accept God's forgiveness on

our own. When we struggle to forgive ourselves, we need a place where others can pronounce to us that the price Jesus paid upon the cross is enough to forgive all our sins. Confession, forgiveness and new beginnings are experienced in real community.

The man experienced healing in the context of real community. We need emotional, spiritual and physical healing. We pray and nothing seems to happen. We gather with others who pray for us and healing comes. I'm glad we have a healing prayer ministry every Thursday night. It is a place where you can experience real community. People connecting with you; connecting you with God so that you can experience healing.

Real community is where we experience love, caring, faith, forgiveness and healing. Virtual community can enhance those experiences. But they can never become a substitute for them. This is why I encourage you to become a part of a small group or ministry team where you have the opportunity to experience deep personal relationships.

God made you to experience real community. Beware of substituting virtual community for the real thing. How will you make room and time in your life for real community?

Time to look at questions on iPad.