

Scripture: Mark 3:20-35
Message: Authentic Community
July 30, 2017; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON
Pastor Jack Van de Hoef

This past week at SERVE, the theme was Authentic Community. The word for community that we heard a lot was *koinonia*. That's a Greek word in the New Testament that is often translated as "fellowship." It's a very rich and meaningful word. One way to define *koinonia* is to say that it is a family community, a family where we are genuinely known and genuinely know each other.

When we talk about this kind of *koinonia* in a faith context, we could say that it is a community in which God genuinely knows everyone. God is the head of this family. God created us and knows our hearts and desires. He calls us to recognize and accept our place in this relationship with him. Then we also come into that *koinonia* relationship with each other. In our church family relationships we are genuinely known and genuinely know each other.

But that's where this can get very interesting, or even somewhat awkward. Let me give an example.

Last week Saturday our group of five of us from Bethel arrived in Thunder Bay. We were met by a stranger in the airport who was wearing a bright yellow SERVE Host Team t-shirt and said he was taking us to the school where we would be staying. We had some nice chit-chat about our flight and the weather as we drove to the school. At the school we registered, moved our suitcases to our assigned classrooms and set up our air mattresses. Being the first to arrive, we hung around and checked out the school a bit. Eventually other youth and leaders whom we didn't know arrived and moved in. We said 'hi' and looked at name tags. At supper we sat together with our own group because that felt safer and we didn't know anyone else there.

That night, after worship, we met together in our small groups for the week. I met the 6 youth who were to be part of my small group. Again, hesitant and awkward hello's were spoken. We went through a bit of introduction, stating some facts about ourselves and expectations for the week. All very safe and not too personal.

Over the next week, each small group ate breakfast and supper together, drove together to their work sites, worked together for the day, and had a discussion together after

the evening worship. It didn't take long before these youth, former strangers, were playing games together, sharing stories and laughing together. It was an example of building koinonia: being genuinely known and genuinely knowing each other.

Now, there might be some things that you don't want people to know about you. There might be some things you don't want God to know about you. And yet there is something freeing about being genuinely known, and being accepted for who you are. It's freeing to not have to worry about keeping secrets; no fears about "what if they find out." It's wonderful to be accepted by others, even when we are genuinely known. It's comforting and freeing to know that you are a dearly loved child of God.

Koinonia invites us to consider what it is to be known and to know others from God's perspective. That means we do not demand perfection, but we live in a spirit of forgiveness. That is how God loves us: God calls us from a life where we are separated from him by sin into a life of fellowship or koinonia with him. The call of God comes through the gospel of Jesus Christ: every sin is forgiven (see Mark 3:28). That gospel is the good news of salvation, the good news of forgiveness of sins. In Christ we can have fellowship with God.

In Christ, we are genuinely known by God. You are a dearly loved child of God. That's an amazing comfort. Sometimes it's hard to believe it or accept it. We sometimes think we have to prove ourselves to God. Or we want to hide something or fix a problem before God finds out. But the truth is, God knows us genuinely and he loves and forgives. You are a dearly loved child of God.

We have a harder time living that koinonia with each other. We can be quick to draw conclusions or feed off of stereotypes. That can lead us to reject someone, without getting to know them.

It was a challenge some of us faced while on SERVE. While we were helping to serve lunch at Shelter House or The Gathering Place or Grace Place, it was easy to label the people who were there. "Of course they need help....look at them." Or it might be "What are they doing here...they just need to get a job and not be so lazy."

Or we could choose to welcome them honestly, offer food cheerfully, and initiate a conversation. We found that they were appreciative of sharing conversation. They accepted us for who we were and we were invited to accept them, to experience fellowship with them.

Koinonia invites us to consider ourselves from God's perspective. We are accepted,

forgiven, a loved child of God.

Koinonia invites us to consider others from God's perspective. Accepted, forgiven, a loved child of God.

Over the week at SERVE, we read several stories from the gospel of Mark. One in particular is found in Mark 3:20-35. It's a curious story in some ways. Jesus' family is there because they care for him. They want to bring Jesus out of the crowded house but cannot get close to him. So they send him a message.

The reply which Jesus gives to his family invites us to see life and relationships from a radically different vantage point. "Who are my mother and brothers?...Here they are. Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

Jesus is not denying his family relationship. He is extending it. In other parts of the gospels we know that Jesus cared for his family, even asking one of his disciples to care for his mother after he died. But family relationship, koinonia, extends beyond blood relatives.

Jesus draws the circle of family wide. Family includes those who are forgiven and who follow him. Our speaker this past week emphasized these two things: 1. You are forgiven. 2. Follow Jesus. If you mess up on #2, go back to #1.

We are invited to consider ourselves and others from God's perspective, from the relationship of forgiveness and the commitment to follow Jesus, to walk with God and with each other.

How are you going to do this? We may do this in different ways, according to the different gifts and interests and abilities that we have. We may express this koinonia fellowship by encouraging or praying or caring or visiting or helping someone. We might be called to stretch ourselves and go into new areas, to build fellowship with someone outside of our usual group of "acceptable friends". Then we experience a unity among one another and others which is a reflection of our fellowship with Christ. We forgive as Christ forgave us. We love as Christ loves us. We follow Jesus together.

When you walk out of the sanctuary after the service today, you have the option of going through the centre doors which lead into a big room we call...the "fellowship hall." It's the koinonia room. It's a place for conversation, getting to know one another and knowing each other.

I invite you to break through some barriers and talk to someone you have not spoken to

for a while. Maybe you don't know their name...then introduce yourself and ask their name. Maybe they told you their name last week or a few weeks ago, but you have forgotten it. Well, that's part of being genuinely known: admit that you forget names and have to ask again. And if someone asks for your name, don't get offended. It's part of genuinely knowing one another.

In your conversations in the fellowship hall this morning with new people you meet or with those you know well, try practising some koinonia, some authentic community. Share with someone about how you experienced God's presence in worship today, either in a song or from the message or a prayer or in some other way. Share something personal, taking the risk of being genuinely known. Or share with someone what it means to know that you are a dearly loved child of God.

This isn't easy. I'll admit that. I was nervous this past week when I first met the youth from my small group. But I also knew that we would only work together well if we grew in trust with each other. And that happens by sharing from yourself. So that's what I started and we had an amazing week together. We became a safe place to talk honestly and personally of challenges and the joy of knowing we are known and loved by God.

In fact, on Friday night we had our last small group time together. There were tears as we stood in a circle, holding hands, and praying together. A couple of youth commented that a week ago we were strangers, and now we were friends.

Authentic Community. We experienced a taste of that with a group of 60 youth and adults this past week. We reached out into the Thunder Bay community so that others could also experience this kind of community, a family where we are genuinely known and genuinely know each other.

But this is not just a one week, special activity kind of experience. We committed ourselves to take this to our home church and community, to build authentic community here.

Experience this koinonia with God, who knows you genuinely. Build this koinonia with each other, where we are genuinely known and genuinely know each other. Express this kind of community, koinonia to your neighbour to bless them with God's unconditional love.

You are a loved child of God. You are forgiven in Jesus. Follow him.

Amen.