

Community.

It's something that we know we all need, and, yet, it's getting harder and harder to find.

People are experiencing the ramifications of the lack of community in the form of loneliness and isolation, so much so, that Vivek Murthy, the Surgeon General, calls it an epidemic. We are living through an epidemic of loneliness.

More and more, we've replaced true, deep connection with others with shallow interactions across social media feeds. And I don't mean this to be an individual critique of any of our respective online practices. Rather, it seems that the structures of society that allowed for community to form are just not as readily available as they were in the past.

I mean think about it. When you're in school, you have friends who are just there, the same with college, or maybe even grad school, but as adults, it gets harder and harder to make connections with other adults who might become friends, even more so as more of us than ever before are working remotely. In fact, it has become so hard to organically make friends, that there are now online friendship sites that function the same way as dating sites except the goal is to connect with someone who might become a friend rather than a romantic partner.

One place that historically has been a place of community, social connection, and friendship has been church. And there are many of you who found your community here in this place – something that I'm so proud of in terms of who this church has been and still is, and if you're new, I believe if you give it a chance, you can find your community here too.

But that experience of finding friendship and belonging and community through congregations is becoming increasingly rare, in part, because churches and church leaders like me haven't always done a good job of creating the kind of community that feels authentic and meaningful to people. Study after study has shown that many who have left organized religion have done so because they feel the church is judgmental and hypocritical – that it's not authentic.

And yet, while the critiques of organized religion are valid and something we'd do well to heed as a faith community, nothing has really replaced the role of congregations for social connection. Derek Thompson of the Atlantic wrote about this dynamic, saying:

*As an agnostic, I have spent most of my life thinking about the decline of faith in America in mostly positive terms. Organized religion seemed, to me, beset by scandal and entangled in noxious politics. So, I thought, what is there really to mourn? Only in the past few years have I come around to a different view. Maybe religion, for all of its faults, works a bit like a retaining wall to hold back the destabilizing pressure of American hyper-individualism, which threatens to swell and spill over in its absence.*

In spite of all the failures and shortcomings of the church, I believe we still have something essential to offer. When we are at our best, this is a community where you can belong – just as

you are, a community where you can grow in your faith and grow as a person, and a community where you can engage the world in good and meaningful ways.

Over the next four weeks, I want us to imagine together how we can be this kind of community where people find love and support, where people can make meaning alongside others, where people can ask the hard questions of life and faith without fear of being judged, where people can discover that God loves them unconditionally. In this series, we'll highlight four key traits that I think we need to live into as a community – being humble, being courageous, and being forgiving. But we have to start with being authentic. Because more and more, I'm convinced that if we're not authentic, if we're not real, the rest doesn't really matter.

Jesus seemed to think so at least. There are plenty of passages where Jesus had little patience for those religious leaders whose hypocrisy shown through. But today, I'd like for us to think about what authentic community looked like for Jesus with the story of Jesus feeding the crowds in the Gospel of John.

First, did you catch why the crowds were following Jesus in the first place. The Scripture said it was because of all the things Jesus was doing for those who were sick. They weren't really following him because of what he was saying, but it was because of what he was doing. Authentic community is not really about what we say. It's about what we do. And it's about making sure that what we say is true to what we are doing.

And even as Jesus taught the crowds, he was concerned that they have what they need. They needed to eat and, at first, the disciples were overwhelmed. "There's no way we can feed this many people." And they weren't wrong. They were only a few of them and a whole lot of mouths to feed. But a little boy offered what he had and from those gifts a feast was prepared for the whole community. And so we learn that everyone who is a part of the community has something to offer the community, even those we might least expect, even those like this young boy. Authentic community is a place where we see every single person as not only a person of worth but as a person who has gifts that our community needs. Every one of you has something that this community needs in order for us to be at our best.

And finally, after everyone was fed, there was a big mess. The disciples went around and picked up baskets and baskets of leftover food – bread crumbs and pieces of fish. Community is messy. It isn't about everything looking just right or always going according to plan. It's about everyone receiving, everyone knowing they belong, everyone enjoying the feast and trusting that the mess just means it was a good time.

All of these feeding stories in the gospels, foreshadow Jesus' last meal where he established Communion. In fact, in most of the feeding stories, they use the same words – "took the bread, broke it, gave thanks," that were used in the early Christian Communion, something we still celebrate 2000 years later.

On the first Sunday of each month, we celebrate Communion together. We trust that God welcomes each and every one of us to God's table. As we receive the bread and the juice, we give thanks for all the good gifts God has offered, gifts from the Earth, the gift of friendship and acceptance, and even the gift of God's very self.

Now anyone who knows me knows that I have a few strengths and some glaring weakness. And one of those weaknesses is that I'm not the greatest at making things look nice. And that's pretty obvious every time we have Communion. After we receive the bread and juice, the deacons bring back the trays and the cups, and they hand them to me. I can never figure out how to put the table back together in a way that looks nice.

A bread tray might be over here and then I'll put a juice tray here and there's no longer any room for the offering baskets so I'll just put them up here and I've probably spilled a little bit of grape juice on our nice white table cloth.

I mean this table's a mess after we have Communion.

And I have to tell you that I have come to love that mess. And here's why: It reminds me of special occasion family dinners when I was a kid...dinners like Thanksgiving where my mom and grandmother would cook such amazing food and set an immaculate table. Everything looked so nice and it tasted even better. But by the time we had passed the dishes around and had second and third servings, the table was a mess, the room was a mess. Someone had inevitably spilled crumbs on the floor, dishes were no longer neatly ordered but set wherever you could find a place. Dirty plates and glasses were stacked on top of each other in the sink. And no one was really bothered by any of it. In fact, the mess just meant something that we all knew to be true – it meant we had eaten good, it meant that we had a good time talking, laughing, telling stories; it meant that the community gathered around the table is why my mom and grandmother prepared the whole thing in the first place.

What started as an immaculately prepared table ended as a big mess because community happened.

I think about that every time we have Communion now and I've come to love our messy table. I'll even tell you a secret, sometimes, I even make it a little more messy on purpose these days. Because if there's a mess, that means the food is good, the community is strong, the love is unconditional. It's like those baskets the disciples picked up after Jesus and the little boy fed the crowds.

You see, authentic community isn't about having everything just right. It's about enjoying the goodness of God and the gifts from God in such a way that everyone knows they belong.