

Be Community  
Acts 28:11-16

Games by their very nature are competitive. There is one winner and the rest are not. That's just the way it is. It doesn't matter if it's a game of Chutes N Ladders, Go Fish, Monopoly, Uno, Risk or whatever the game might be you're playing someone will win and someone will lose. Very few games, if any, are designed so that everyone wins.

Even in sports it's that way. Detroit fans can now turn attention away from baseball and on to hockey. Even if the score ends in a tie, teams skate off to the locker room thinking they lost, unless they're the underdog and they think that a tie is a win, because it kept the other team from winning and you from losing.

Whoever said that it's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game was full of baloney. We want our team to be winners. After all winning is big business. It's a boon for the local economy. There's profit to make off T-shirts and foam fingers and baseball caps and coffee mugs bragging that our team won. Whether sports minded or not, local merchants bask in the success of a team because it means more patrons and more profits as they ride the winning wagon. Our society likes winners and the rest can tuck their tale and run. While we say there is no "I" in team, someone certainly stands out as the leader in stats that got them to the podium; that got them to the pinnacle where they could hoist the trophy. There are winners and losers.

It's the same in business. While the rhetoric of any company is that we are all in it together the reality is that even in the work place there is a competitive atmosphere in which we can attest to "winners" and "losers." You're a winner if you get the promotion or scored better than a co-worker on your performance evaluation. If production is lower or customers decrease for any number of factors you can leave for the day or end the fiscal year thinking

that you're on a downward spiral, in a slump, about ready to throw in the business towel and cut your losses while you can. The cut throat competition of business, no matter what the sector, has its winners and those who come in second.

You're a winner if you wear the latest fashion or have the newest technology or biggest house. If you don't have those things, you might not be part of the in group, not part of that community.

Sadly, if you really want to admit to it, it's that way in churches or denominational circles as well. A church will compare itself with the church down the street or to make it less obvious to the church in the next town over. We're a success if we offer a full calendar of events for everyone or if the parking lot is full and no seats are empty. They inwardly want to be the benchmark by which other churches gage their success.

Pastors keep mental score as well. At seminars or other ministerial meetings we ask our colleagues how their church is doing in a sincere tone all the while calculating where their church stacks up in comparison to the other. We might compare degrees we've earned, books we've written or conferences we've spoken at. Given what they shared are we winning or losing?

There's a perceived tone of winners and those who come behind them even within Christendom. Paul reprimanded the church in Corinth for that spirit of keeping score that caused division when they compared themselves with others and the leaders of their little cliques. A competitive nature conquers and divides rather than builds and edifies.

A fourth grade teacher introduced a game to her class one day. It was called "Balloon Stomp." Each student had a balloon tied around his or her ankle. At the signal, the object of the game was for students to try and pop the balloon of everyone else while attempting to protect their own. You can well

imagine the mayhem that ensued. The last child with an intact balloon was the winner. Everyone else became the enemy and if you pop my balloon, you're a worse enemy than before. The end result was that if I win, everyone else was a loser.

It's survival of the fittest. Ten year olds play with vigor and abandon. Most were on a seek and destroy mission. The shy students attempted to protect their balloon by standing in the corner hoping to last longer in the game by not being seen, but they too were singled out and propelled to the sidelines totting whatever was left of their tattered balloon behind them.

Some pretended to enjoy the game, but inwardly were afraid of losing. At the end of the game there was only one person remaining with a smile. His head was swelled as big as the balloon with pride just as empty because while he alone stood as the winner with a Colgate smile everyone else was a loser. To them he became the most disliked person in the room.

A second class was brought into the room to play the same game. Only this time it was with a class of developmentally challenged children. Like the first class, a balloon was tied around their ankle and given the same instructions. An onlooker in this experiment recalled wanting to spare these children from the pressure of the competitive brawl. He didn't want the experience to warp their sense of esteem. As the game unfolded something entirely different and unique happened. Given too quickly for the children to grasp, instructions were misunderstood. The only idea that sunk in was that balloons were supposed to be popped. They didn't understand that they were to protect their own balloon from the other classmates. They thought they were supposed to help each other pop balloons. It was later described as a "balloon co-op stomp." One boy was getting frustrated because the balloon he was attempting to pop wouldn't so the little girl to whose ankle it was attached bent over and held

her balloon while the boy smashed it. Then in turn he held his balloon so that she could stomp it. That's how the game proceeded for this group. At the end when the last balloon was popped, there were no sad faces, no losers, no tears for being put out of the game, only loud cheers because from their perspective everyone was a winner. To them winning only resulted when there was cooperation. Their shared experience turned into a community like event rather than competition.

Turn in your Bibles with me to Acts 28:11-16. This message flows neatly with the last week's message where we learned that we are to be caring. The book of Acts is a historical record of the beginning and ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in establishing the church. His work didn't end at the completion of this book but is continuing today. In today's message we want to take that notion of being caring to another level, take it a step further as we note in this passage that the church is to be a cooperative community.

A church community is not a group of people who look at each other in competition against one another but rather as teammates working to help each other become the best they can as Christians. We shouldn't be in competition with other churches but rather seek to be in cooperation as we pursue the same goal of seeking the lost for salvation, developing Christ like character, and anticipating the coming of Christ's kingdom. When that happens there are no winners and losers, but rather we are all winners because we are out to achieve the same end result. Unfortunately over the centuries along the continuum of church history there has been a lack of real community. In many respects we have segregated even alienated ourselves from others with whom we share the unique dynamic of community through one God, one Savior and one Holy Spirit. Yes, doctrinal differences strain the unity that otherwise should exist. Where the saving grace of Christ is taught there should be unity, there should be community.

In this passage there are some lessons we can learn about community, about what a church does. I would suggest to you today that when you look at the word community it is unity that anchors its definition. Without unity there is no community. Biologists define community as a group of interacting living organisms sharing a populated environment. Sociologists say it is a group of people who share common values and beliefs that provide a sense of cohesion and unity. There is a shared identity through intent, beliefs, resources, preferences, needs and even risks that are taken as a group. Community is more than a shared geographical location. We might call that an association. Community is tighter because of those shared values. German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies claims that the difference is in what he calls “unity of will.” It boils down to a matter of choice and decisions and intentions.

Community is what should exist in the church. We can casually read through this passage and miss some important truths about community that existed then and should carry through to today. The church isn’t just a building or a schedule of events. It’s not the location of where our building is located or the summation of what we do in that building. It is a community of individuals meeting together with a shared set of beliefs who provide a sense of security for one another that supports each other during the ups and downs of life because of those beliefs. It is centered in Christ. Those shared values and beliefs shape the core of our community so much so that they shape our assembly into a caring community. We see that vividly demonstrated in the early church from our reading of chapters 2 and 4 when believers met daily to learn and grow in their faith. Something unique happened in the process of their spiritual growth. As they gathered they became more acutely aware of physical and material needs and set out to meet them. Community offers a strong sense of belonging, something that’s worth gathering together for.

From this passage note with me these three truths about community and its implications and applications for us today.

A community is inviting.

A community is involved.

A community is inspiring.

#### I. A COMMUNITY IS INVITING – v. 11-14

The 276 survivors of the ill-fated voyage to Rome spent three months on the island of Malta until it was safe enough to travel again by sea in early spring. Luke indicates that it was an Alexandrian ship most likely carrying a cargo of grain to Rome. He also states that it was a ship bearing the images of the twin gods Castor and Pollux. Greek mythology claims that the god Zeus enticed a mortal by the name of Leda who was married to Tyndareus who was King of Sparta. On the same night both Pollux and Castor were conceived. Pollux was said to be the son of Zeus and Castor the son of Tyndareus. Pollux was immortal and possessed great strength. Castor was mortal and had great ingenuity. As it happens to all mortals one day Castor died. The bond between the two twins was so strong that Pollux pleaded with Zeus to share his immortality with his twin brother and so was born the constellation Gemini. The constellation was revered by sailors as a sign of good fortune if it was seen by them during a storm.

How ironic that the ship bearing the likeness of pagan deities would be carrying the Apostle Paul who bore the image of the living God as he carried the good news of Jesus Christ.

From Malta they traveled to the east of the island of Sicily under the boot of Italy where they anchored at Syracuse. From there they crossed the channel to Rhegium in the toe of Italy. Favorable winds blew the next day which took them part way up the western coast of Italy to the seaport of Puteoli, about 130 miles south of Rome. Notice again what

verse 14 says: “There we found some brothers who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome.”

For some unknown reason the ship was docked for a week in Puteoli. Showing unusual kindness to Paul, Julius the centurion allowed Paul to leave the ship and seek out fellow Christians. I suppose the question arises as to how there would be Christians in Italy since Paul had not traveled that far west with the gospel. Turn back to Acts 2:8-10 and notice. “Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Lybya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism)..”

You will recall that on the Day of Pentecost when the Jews had gathered to celebrate this festival that the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles and Peter preached a message of hope and salvation in the risen Messiah – Jesus Christ. Jews from all over the Roman Empire had travelled to Jerusalem. On that day as Peter preached 3,000 people were saved and in the days to follow, many more believed in Christ for salvation. Among those saved were people from Italy who took the gospel back with them to their homes and villages. A church was already in existence in Rome. Believers were scattered throughout the country even in the capitol of Rome itself. There they are and Paul along with his companions found them and we see that this group of believers invited these travelers to join them.

I like invitations. There is a sense of belonging, a sense of community that permeates through the group that is inviting. Though they were strangers upon their meeting they were made to feel at home, welcome, befriended. The commonality between these two groups was the union they shared in Christ. Wherever we go, wherever our travels may find us, make the effort to seek out those who are of

like faith to join together in Christ. After all it was Paul who wrote earlier both to the Romans and to the Corinthians that through faith in Christ we are all part of one body. We should be able to find a community of believers wherever we go. That’s what Paul and his companions found in Puteoli – a group of believers who welcomed them into their assembly. They took them in as one of their own.

A spirit of community should prevail and permeate from us that welcomes any and all who come through these doors because of the common element of Christ that we share. Being an inviting assembly is more than just exterior affects like paint and landscaping; it’s more than just programs and scores of people; it’s more than the order of service or what’s in the service and I would go so far as to say it’s more than just friendliness. Being an assembly that is inviting resonates from a growing walk with Christ. It stems from a heart that walks with Him and invites others to journey along, arm in arm pursuing the same goal of Christ likeness. A walk with Christ is inviting.

As a local community of believers assembled regularly to worship the Lord are we inviting to others or do they see us attempting to stomp the balloons of others? For us to be a true community we must be inviting. We must be seen as a group not in competition with one another but in a spirit of cooperation seeking to assist one another in physical, emotional and spiritual ways. When we are at school or in the local stores or our neighborhoods are we inviting? Now I don’t mean are we inviting others to attend church or some event at church. I’m wondering if our character is inviting. Does it compel people to ask why we are different and how they can have the same spirit that emanates from us? Do they want to know the Christ we say we love and serve? Be inviting. Notice in verse 15 the next point.

## II. A COMMUNITY IS INVOLVED – v. 15a

From Puteoli they began the inland trek toward Rome. We're not told how long it took to travel by land. They were traveling along the Appian Way, a well-built road leading to the capitol. They were only about 40 miles from Rome when they came to the town called the Forum of Appius. It was a town known for its wickedness. But it was there that a group of Christians journeying from Rome met Paul and his companions. Continuing toward Rome they got about another 10 miles closer when an additional group of believers met them at the town of the Three Taverns. It was so named for the three shops that were in the town designed for aiding travelers. Built near a marshland there was a general store, a blacksmith's shop and a refreshment house. They were not the kind of establishments we think of when we hear the term tavern. About the Three Taverns Horace, a Roman poet, wrote complaining that the waters around the town were bad, rooms were crowded and expensive and travelers could not sleep because of the noise of frogs and the sting of mosquitos. It was in these two locations that believers from Rome came to meet Paul and help him on his way to Rome.

The term "to meet" as used in Greek literature was in reference to an entourage coming out of a city to meet an official going to the city. Paul uses that term in I Thessalonians 4:17 in reference to our meeting the Lord in the air. In the Septuagint, the translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek, the term is used to speak of people who go out to help someone who is in distress as a way of encouraging them.

We don't know how many were in this group. We don't even know who they were. Romans 16 lists the names of individuals to whom Paul desired to greet. Some of them may have been part of this group. We aren't even told why they came out to meet Paul. Maybe they knew the reputation of the city well enough to know they needed to ensure Paul made it to Rome safely. Maybe they knew of the difficulty Paul had experienced in Jerusalem

and the ensuing hazards of the trip. We're left only to speculate about why they travelled to meet Paul, but it's important to understand that they did. They came out to encourage him. They took an active part in involving themselves with care for the Apostle.

Someone has said that the church should be a place that meets us where we are. How true that was for Paul in a physical sense. They went out to meet him; they didn't wait for him to arrive. Is that the kind of reputation we have, the kind of care we show? Do we meet people where they are? Do we accept them as they are? Too often the expectation is that should instantly become like us before we'll accept them or greet them. We need to be mindful of going to meet them where they are and help them complete the journey they have begun as together we journey toward Christ like character.

We need to be on the lookout for travelers, those who are weary from the journey and go out to meet them and help them along the way to their destination. Folks all around us are carrying some heavy burdens. Are we involved enough, caring enough to meet them where they are at and help them along? Again let me stress from the example of the early church how everyone looked out for the needs of others and in tangible ways demonstrated Christ's love by providing for those people who had needs. That's community. That's unity. You don't get that by sitting around at home. To be involved you need to get involved. Real community exists when you are active in the lives of others.

Hebrews 10:24-25 "Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of His return is drawing near." (NLT) The word motivate or spur means to take responsibility for. Neglect is to ignore or disregard, to fail to care for. We cannot care for others if we neglect to meet. Burdened people need encouragement.



If the Lord has laid someone on your heart, go out and meet them where they are to encourage them. Don't assume that they're okay or that they don't need help or that someone else will help them or that you don't have the time or the energy. If the Lord is prompting you to help someone then get up and do it, if not Scripture is clear that it is a sin.

As I did last week I want to again challenge each of us by taking the prayer sheet for more than just praying for individuals. Read through it and ask how we might get involved in that person to encourage them, just as Hebrews 10 exhorts. Now that passage says that we should motivate others to do acts of love and good works. When we do good works, when we show His love to others by being involved God is glorified. This should be a community that meets to care and share for one another as we put on more of the character of Christ. A community is involved.

What happens when a community is both inviting and involved? A community is inspiring.

### III. A COMMUNITY IS INSPIRING – v. 15b-16

When real community takes place, God is praised. Everyone say praise God.

At the sight of these believers who took time to come out and meet him, Paul was encouraged and praised God. Two things here:

*When we are encouraged by someone – praise God.*

*When we are able to encourage someone else – praise God.*

In either case, praise God. Give Him thanks.

David wrote this in Psalm 111:1 “Praise the Lord! (Everyone say praise the Lord.) I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.”

Call it whatever you want – assembly, church, community, congregation – when we're together as one under the banner of the cross – praise God.

When we meet in community, when there is unity, praise God. There won't be any competitive balloon stomping, we'll be working together toward a common goal of becoming more like Christ in character and when we see what God is doing in us and for us and through us, God will be praised. There will be an excitement and enthusiasm when we gather because of our involvement in the lives of others. We'll look forward to getting together just to review God's goodness to us in the past week that will echo in an anthem of praise as we thank Him for all He has done either for us or through us.

As I strode through the right field fence at Tiger Stadium when I ran the Detroit marathon knowing I had only a 100 yards to the finish line I got choked up, and tears filled my eyes. It was the culmination of an 18 week journey preparing to run that race. People I didn't know cheered me on to the finish line. I was overwhelmed with emotion that I had finished the race. I was overwhelmed with emotion seeing the stadium from the field. I was overwhelmed with emotion by the cheering of spectators and race volunteers who encouraged me to finish. As I ended the journey of 26 miles I thanked God.

What these Roman Christians did inspired Paul to pause in thanksgiving to God for His care over him. It must have been an emotional time for Paul realizing that he was nearing the end of the journey God had promised he would complete. It must have been an emotional time for Paul to see that there were already believers in Rome that could encourage him. It must have been an emotional time recalling all the events that brought him to that moment.

How about you? Is your faith inviting? Does it create a desire to be involved? Are you inspired to give God praise in worship? Someone you know may be looking at you to see if your life is inviting or if you are involved or if you inspire praise to God. Will you meet them where they are and encourage them to finish? Let's be the community they are longing for.