

When God created you He gave you a set of strengths, gifts and abilities but He also gave you a set of liabilities; your own unique weaknesses, blind spots and short-comings.

You may look at those things as being a source of frustration but in reality they also are a gift from God. The fact is we are built to be dependent on others. First we were created to be dependent on God and believe it or not on other people.

You and I are absolutely dependent on our community to come into wholeness. You need them and they need you. This kind of interdependence is the goal of the church which is your spiritual community. It may mean sitting and interacting with hundreds on a Saturday or Sunday or it may be within a small group of people. Both are very important to your spiritual health and to the spiritual health of others.

In the first book of Corinthians the writer uses a favorite metaphor for the church: the human body.

The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. ¹³ Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit.

¹⁴ Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. ¹⁵ If the foot says, "I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand," that does not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear says, "I am not part of the body because I am not an eye," would that make it any less a part of the body? ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything?

¹⁸ But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where He wants it. ¹⁹ How strange a body would be if it had only one part! ²⁰ Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. ²¹ The eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you."

²² In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary. ²³ And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect those parts that should not be seen, ²⁴ while the more honorable parts do not require this special care. So God has put the body together such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. ²⁵ This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad.

*²⁷ All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it." 1 Corinthians 12:12-27
NLT*

The church is full of all kinds of people. Phillip Yancy in his lesser known book, "Church: Why Bother?" writes this description of the church: "As I look around on Sunday morning at the people populating the pews, I see the risk that God has assumed. For whatever reason God now

reveals Himself in the world not through a pillar of smoke and fire, not even through the physical body of His Son in Galilee, but through the mongrel collection that comprises my local church and every other such gathering in God's name."

We are called to be the body of Christ in this world. We are supposed to be the representation of what God is like, to give God form in this world. Martin Luther called us "God's masks" because the world could not withstand the direct force of God's glory. God uses human beings as the prime expression of Himself.

He goes on to say, "The Apostle Paul never seemed to get over the shock of this truth. He took the mundane issues at Corinth so seriously because he believed they reflected not only on the church but on God. For the watching world, we ourselves offer up proof that God is alive. We form the visible shape of what God is like.

When I look at that shape around me, I easily get discouraged, because much of the time we give a very poor representation of what God is like."

It was to this motley crew that made up this first century church, that Paul wrote this passage about being the body of Christ! The church is not perfect. We are a gathering of flawed people yet we strive for God's holiness and to be at our best for Him. It is into this context that we are called to be in community.

Personally we do not possess the assets and resources necessary to fulfill God's assignment on this earth. For this reason and others God invites us to discover the community of church and the hope and freedom it offers. It is not designed to be easy or even always smooth or pleasing. People are complicated and relationships with people usually signal messes. Christian community is defined by people's commitment to one another and to God.

While I unfortunately am not directly addressing the Corinthians passage in this sermon, I want to say a few things that I think are critically important for us to hear.

First of all there are people who profess to be Christians who think that they don't need church and that the church doesn't need them. They find it easy to not attend church and of course I realize that they are probably not here so these words might be considered wasteful.

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It is the height of arrogance and self-centeredness to divorce one's self from attending and participating in a local church body. If you don't like the one you are a part of then find one where you fit in as a working part of the body. It is Biblical. It is critical and it is not optional.

Marjorie J. Thompson's classic book entitled, *Soul Feast*.

She addresses very clearly why corporate worship is an essential and vital part of one's faith journey. She writes: "The reasons for gathering are many and important. Whether we are alone or with others, we need to experience our Christian life as rooted in the larger community of faith. Even our most personal disciplines need to be supported, broadened, clarified and sometimes corrected in the light of corporate theology and practice. Otherwise we become susceptible to privatized visions of spiritual truth. Moreover we need the prayers of others as they need our prayers. . .

While a worshipful attitude should permeate one's entire life, the role of common worship is crucial. We delude ourselves if we imagine we can live the spiritual life in total isolation from Christian community, for it is impossible to be Christian in solitary splendor. To be Christian is to be joined to the Body of Christ. . .

We gather for worship to remember who and whose we are. We come to recount the stories that shape our faith, stories that turn us from a collection of individuals into a community with a common source and vision . . . We are joined to that community in Baptism, tutored in faith through the interpretation of scriptures in preaching, and nourished at the Lord's Table in a *family of believers*. Life in church teaches us that we are made for communion not only with God but with one another in Christ."

Being a part of the church is critical. You need it and we need each other.

I want us to look at what this God ordained community offers. I want us to understand the benefits and empowerment that comes from the community of faith.

1. Community is stabilizing

Participation in the community of the church provides a stabilizing force when the winds of change and challenge blow through our lives. Our lives are susceptible to the ebb and flow of life. There will be times in all of our lives when we will long for and need the stabilizing force of community.

Doubt Discouragement Difficulty Disorientation

When these winds blow through your life ideally you should be able to rely on the community that you find in the church. It's not about the whole church knowing your need or about you but if you are in community and practicing community with others in the church you will find a stability that is incredibly supportive. The love of your community will bring stability to your soul when it's rocked by circumstances.

2. Community is interpreting

The church community can bring interpretation in the areas of our life that we lack awareness of. Often it is hard to make sense out of our life events but in theory our community should provide a large picture perspective often lacking within ourselves, especially when we are deeply involved in something.

There will be times in our lives when we need someone to walk alongside of us and help us interpret what is going on. It is in those moments that we realize our deep need to be in community with others.

3. Community is instructing

Humility includes the ability to receive instruction, and equipping from others. We are instructed to submit to one another within the church community. While you may know a lot about doctrine and theology there is no reason to think that you shouldn't be a lifelong learner in your journey of faith. Those who are serious about their faith will look to the community of the church to learn from.

The church world is possibly as weak as it's ever been in the area of discipleship and knowing, being and doing the will of God. We should find instruction within our church community and learn to walk in it. The church should encourage yet challenge you. The church should comfort and correct you. These functions flow to the extent that trust and humility reside in each heart.

4. Community is defending

Our lives are truly lived in an arena of spiritual warfare and yet we find protection and defense in the community that rises up to support us through prayer and perseverance. In the context of a healthy church we will find ways to support and protect one another from the enemy of our soul.

It is almost more than I can even believe at the sin people in the church will indulge in and think nothing of it. Marriages are walked away from when there are not Biblical grounds for divorce; it's just that somebody got tired of somebody else. Kid's feelings are ignored and life goes on as though nothing happened in their spiritual lives. The Christian community should stand up in those moments and speak up and defend the values of family and authentic Christian faith.

When our children make poor decisions I always take it personal and wish that parents would have been a little more supportive of making sure their kids were involved in the church community of Kid City and Student Ministries. You know why I think that's more important than any sporting event you take your kids out of church for. I'll tell you, it's because their faith is more important than any accolades or successes they may have playing with a little ball or doing something else instead of church. There was a time when the church community would stand up and say will play but we won't play during church activities. I feel jealous about it because I know that our goal as a staff is to do everything we can to lead your children into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ. It helps tremendously if you lend support to that notion by having some convictions about your faith.

5. Community is empowering

It is out of the community of faith that you receive your call to service. It is the call from last week to view your vocation or job through the lens of the Kingdom of God. Your church

community should be a place that helps you discover your place in ministry. I know that we do that outside the church and I believe in that totally but I also know how many ministry opportunities are available just within our local body of believers.

So how do we build community within the church? It's a great question and one that I can't fully answer in one sermon. It's about caring. It's about caring for others. It's about being aware of others and being very intentional about not letting anyone come into one of our churches and not feel loved and cared for.

Youth pastor Doug Fields talks about this in regard to his youth group and what he tells them. It was so good that I want you to see it. Just pretend he's talking to you about the church in general.

Video: Doug Fields

Have you ever tried to teach a child to tie their shoes? It's something most of us do so naturally and automatically that breaking down the process into teachable steps is a challenge. According to a number of pastors teaching people to extend Christ's radical hospitality to first time guests is no less a challenge. I am convinced that hospitality and community will not happen unless we are fiercely intentional about it.

I'd like to share five specific ways of bringing the radical hospitality target into better focus for our church.

1. **The 3 minute rule:** This encourages people to spend the three minutes just before and just after the worship service greeting those they do not know. So often people visit with those they know at church and believe that they have a friendly congregation. Yet when visitors come, their experience too often is that, other than ushers and greeters, no one speaks to them. So the "3 minute rule" reminds people to be intentional about greeting and getting to know someone they don't know during these two times.
2. **The 10 foot rule:** encourages persons to greet anyone they don't know within 10 feet of them. No one wants the entire congregation converging on them when they visit. Instead, those who are closest to worship guests take responsibility for introducing themselves and engaging them in friendly conversation.
3. **It's all about them:** this comes from a conversation I had with someone who moved a year ago and their family church shopped for a season trying to discern the right congregation for them. She said that during some of their visits, when people did speak to them – and they often didn't – "we felt like fresh meat in a lion's den." She said people descended upon them wanting her to work in the children's ministry and her husband to be on this or that committee. "We weren't looking for a job, we were looking for a church family." She went on to say that at one church a man started telling her all about their financial struggles and did everything but give her a pledge card. "I think people forget that visitors aren't visiting because they want to fill some

position or bail the church out financially.” “It’s all about them,” means that first time visitors should never be treated as the answer to the congregation’s needs. Rather, we need to explore with them how the congregation can be the answer to their needs. So, instead of trying to get our guests to help our church, tell them something you love about the church, try to get to know them a bit, ask what they are looking for in a church home and explore with them how the congregation can assist them in their journey.

4. **Help them make connections:** This has two parts. As you begin to get to know a guest and learn what they are looking for in a congregation, help them make connections with others who are like them and who can assist them in finding whatever they are searching for. If they have youth, introduce them to another family with youth or with the youth pastor. If they are retired from out of state, introduce them to someone else who is retired from out of state. If they are interested in missions, connect them with persons who are involved in missions in your congregation. You get the point. And the second part of “Help them make connections” involves receiving hand-offs well when people get introduced to you. Help them feel welcomed and make the connections for which they are looking. In other words, don’t just say, “Oh, hi,” and then turn back to your friends and ignore them like they are an interruption. Instead, be intentional about receiving them and helping them make the connections for which they are searching.
5. **Remember their names and use them:** It’s such a simple thing, but so powerful. There are two coffee shops in our city right beside each other. Besides the fact that the one will not automatically give you napkins or sleeves for your coffee, they also have no idea who you are, nor do they seemingly care. The other shop hires employees that work hard to know your name and what you normally order! Just that simple thing – which I’m sure they are trained to do – makes me feel more like I belong when I walk in the door. People are people, whether they are new at the coffee shop or new at the church.

So there you have it. Five strategies for bringing hospitality into focus:

- The 3 minute rule
- The 10 foot rule
- It’s all about them.
- Help them make connections
- Remember their names and use them.

Here’s why it matters:

Bill Wilson pastors an inner city church in New York City. His mission field is a very violent place. He himself has been stabbed twice as he ministered to the people of the community surrounding the church. Once a Puerto Rican woman became involved in the church and was led to Christ. After her conversion she came to Pastor Wilson and said, "I want to do something to help with the church’s ministry." He asked her what her talents were and she could think of nothing---she couldn’t even speak English---but she did love children. So he put her on one of the church’s buses that went into neighborhoods and transported kids to church. Every week she performed her duties. She would find the worst-looking kid on the bus, put him on her lap and whisper over and over the only words she had learned in English: "I love you. Jesus loves you."

After several months, she became attached to one little boy in particular. The boy didn't speak. He came to Sunday school every week with his sister and sat on the woman's lap, but he never made a sound. Each week she would tell him all the way to Sunday school and all the way home, "I love you and Jesus loves you."

One day, to her amazement, the little boy turned around and stammered, "I---I---I love you too!" Then he put his arms around her and gave her a big hug. That was 2:30 on a Sunday afternoon. At 6:30 that night he was found dead. His own mother had beaten him to death and thrown his body in the trash... "I love you and Jesus loves you." ...Those were some of the last words this little boy heard in his short life---from the lips of a Puerto Rican woman who could barely speak English. This woman gave her one talent to God and because of that a little boy who never heard the word "love" in his own home, experienced and responded to the love of Christ.

What are you doing with all your gifts and talents for Jesus? What are you doing to reach out in community to others in the church?