

Communities for the City

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We named our church City Life because we believe Jesus compels us to give not take life from the city, to exist not for ourselves but for the city. How do you do that? *Through communities*. It takes a community to renew a city, lots of them. Disconnected individuals won't do. This prayer shows us God sends, keeps, and sanctifies communities for the sake of the world.

God Sends Communities

In his novel, *The Book of Strange New Things*, Michel Faber tells the story of a Protestant missionary sent to minister to a colony on the planet Oasis and to spread the gospel to its resident aliens. Purring with excitement, Peter naively boards the shuttle. But something is off on Oasis. After he arrives, he starts to realize the planet is driving people mad. And that's just the beginning. He has no idea what he's gotten into or the challenges he will face. He just knows he's called. The disciples, all Christians, are sent on a mission into a foreign and hostile world. They really have no idea, despite all the teaching, what they are stepping into. But they know they are called, sent, as God's missionary band to carry the gospel into all the world. Jesus knows what they're getting into, *so he prays*. And his prayer isn't limited to the disciples. He says in v.20, *I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who will believe in Me*. God the Son, prays to God the Father, for his fledgling church: "I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world" (9). Why doesn't he pray for the world? Because he knows what the world needs—a faithful, missionary community. **Jesus sends communities not individuals into the world.** Why a community and not individuals? Because it takes a society to reflect God's love. Love requires community. Why? Because it's the very nature of love to seek, not your own agenda but the interests of another: *Love is patient, love is kind, love is not self-seeking*. Love came from that kind of community, the Trinity, a divine community of persons who seek the joy of one another. *And if we're to thrive as communities, we need the love and oneness of God*. So Jesus prays: *that they may be one even as we are one* (11).. True community requires love and love unifies. Say there's a group of people who want to serve the city some way. You go around asking each person what they want to do, and each wants something totally different from the others. What will happen if everyone goes their own way? There won't be much community. There will also be reduced impact. When we insist on our own interests, we reinforce division and lack substantive relationship. *Nobody has to love*. But when we lay our interests down, seek the other, the group begins to unify, love flows, and community builds. You get closer and make more of splash. Now some people will say, "That's fine, I just connect with God in my own way. I go to church only when I really need it." But do you see how self-seeking that is? If God is the one we're connecting with, shouldn't He be the one to determine how we know his love? *God says his love is known when we come alongside people different from us, and subordinate our interests to theirs, seeking them allowing his love to flow through us*. In the Vine & Branch analogy how fruitful would a single branch on a long, winding vine be? You wouldn't want wine from that vine. But if the vine is full of branches, connected and thriving in the Vine, that will produce wine people want to drink. Are you making great wine? Take a look, not at the other branches but at your own first. Jesus wants this: "All

mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them” (10). He looks ahead to the community they will become, the communities they will create and says, I am *glorified in them*. How? In the beginning of this book, God’s glory was located in one place, “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*” (1:14). Glory in one person, but now his glory will be in a community of persons. **God puts his glory—his grace and his truth—in the church for the world.** When we lose sight of this, we short our relationships on grace and truth. Division creeps in because we refuse the discomfort of telling someone the truth, or extending them grace. Church becomes something we neglect, community something we criticize. When forget we exist to bring the glory of God down into our city, we stop making good wine. But when we love one another, grace and truth flow thru us, out into the city.

God Keeps Communities

Next Jesus prays, “*Holy Father, keep them in your name* (11). Now why would he do that? Because he knows there’s a threat. What’s the threat? He’s mentioned the threat of the world. Further on, he’ll mention the Evil One. The two are interrelated. The Evil One is a name for Satan. Satan is described as the god of this world (2 Cor 4:4). Sheila Nevins is one of the most influential people in documentary film making. And in an interview she was asked about her work on disreputable people. And she comments that they too are interesting, “*like ISIS is interesting, like horror and evil and terror is interesting. Where does it come from? We all evolved into this thing called human, and yet some of us are completely inhuman.*” Secular worldviews have a terrible time accounting for evil. Satan accounts for it. There is real moral horror and he prompts it. Jesus prays for God to **keep them** from evil. What kind of evil? The word keep means to protect. But not in the way many people pray today. People often pray for “traveling mercies” and good health. But we don’t find Jesus praying that a lot, and that’s not what he’s praying for here. Jesus prays for God to keep them “*that they may be one.*” He’s praying against disunity. Atrocities are committed when a society divides, racism, genocide. And if He can pit sister against sister, trick a community into being a society of self-seeking individuals, then he’s ruined love marred glory. So Jesus prays against that. He prays that the church would be known by its love and for its unity. And that starts right here, with us, with your community. And Jesus prays it would happen **in his name**. His name is synonymous with his power and character. God of glory, God of love. We’ve got everything we need. *So the real threat* is drifting from that community, fashioning a life apart from the church, attending when you feel like it, abandoning the place where his glory dwells. On Oasis, Peter’s new alien disciples build a structure and call it the church. They consider it so sacred that they rarely go into it. But Peter insists, “*But you—all of you, gathered here today...are the real Church that God built...What St. Paul says is that once you’ve heard the word of God, it doesn’t matter how foreign you are, how far away you live. You become part of the community of Christians.*” You are the Real Church God built. Kept by the “**Holy Father.**” This is the only time he uses it. It’s a striking combination. *Holy* reminds us of God’s utter transcendence, his unapproachable glory power and might. So mighty that he controls the events of history, predicts and permits Judas, the son of perdition, to betray his very own Son, “that the Scripture might be fulfilled.” Now why would he do such a thing? *Father.* Father reminds us that God is love, and that love flows outward, seeking our interest at his expense. The

betrayal and death of his Son to redeem a self-seeking people and make them the church, the place where his glory dwells. Holy, Father. Transcendent power keeping us in familial love.

God Sanctifies Communities

He sends communities of grace and truth, keeps communities for his glory, and sanctifies communities. Jesus prays, “*Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth*” (17). Sanctify can stir up stodgy images of people out of touch with reality. But sanctification is actually getting more in touch with reality, with what it means to become truly human. Remember, Jesus is the quintessential man. The Word become flesh, full of *grace and truth*. To be sanctified, then, is to be more like Jesus. It’s being more honest. The more human you become, the more you recognize limitations, your own and others, and the more prone you are to extend grace. Jesus frequently asks the Father for help, but he also tells the truth. Just this week I unknowingly misrepresented someone in a fairly significant way. A less mature person would have said nothing and chaffed silently. But this person walked right up to me, looked me in the eye and said, I think you may have misunderstood me. We talked it out, and sure enough; I had misunderstood! He showed grace *and* he spoke truth. Both are part of being sanctified, of becoming truly human. Jesus says, sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. How do we know what authentic humanity looks like? We need a guide. The Word of God is that guide, a plumb line to show where we’re off and where we’re on. We may not like it at times, society may disapprove of it, but that doesn’t mean it’s not true. In fact, living in line with the truth actually deepens our **joy**. *The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart* (Ps 19). It’s why Jesus taught the disciples, “*that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves*” (13). Jesus wants us to be happy and he knows the only way to get there is by treasuring the truth. And the more we treasure his truth with one another, the more joy we’ll have. On Wednesday I met a friend for coffee at Radio. The air was unseasonably crisp, the coffee good, and the tacos great. While we were talking, another friend just happened to walk up, and we’d just been talking about him, commenting on what a hard time he’s going through. He sat down with us and began to share how much bigger God is becoming to him through his trial, that difficulty is showing just how sturdy the truth is. Our joy expanded, right there on the spot. Do you know why? We were sharing the same piece of truth. We were being sanctified *in the truth*. What truth? God works all things together for good for those who *love God*. We experience that good when we are loving a great God. Jesus prays his church will be formed by the truth, filled with his grace, overflowing with his joy! Now circling back to one of my very first comments, we said that City Life exists to give not take life from the city. And the way God does that is *through communities*. Sent communities: “*As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world*” (18). We’re sent, not just with the truth about how to be human, but with the true Human himself. Wherever you go, the Spirit of Jesus goes with you. He prompts you to be generous with truth, grace, and joy. To be unified in grace, sanctified in truth, kept for the glory of God *spilling out in city*.