

*Sermon preached by Christopher Ingram on July 7, 2024, at Yates Baptist Church*

Special thanks to all the ministers of music who have called forth wonder and praise from us, drawing our attention to how God is at work today in our hearts and in the heart of this church. We turn now to the scriptures, building on the insights from the book we are studying together this summer, *Beyond Loneliness* by Trevor Hudson.

Last week, I talked about how the first four chapters were an inward look, discussing the relationship and friendship promised by Jesus, cultivated in prayer, giving us an inseparable bond, not because of what we have done, but because of what God has done. However, as I reminded you, any relationship that remains inward-focused can become irritating or even toxic. Relationships come alive when friends turn outward together, building on the values cultivated within their friendship.

We began this outward look last week and continue it today, discussing the wonder, miracle, challenge, and call of being a community—a unity, a gathered body of Jesus' friends. Turn in your Bibles to Romans chapter 12. We'll read a couple of verses to get us started, but I'll refer more broadly to the 12th chapter and other scriptures along the way. Hear these words from Romans 12:3-5 (NIV):

*"For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."*

May God bless the reading and the hearing of the word today.

Good morning. I want to explore the beauty and complexity of what the Apostle Paul has laid out for us today—the beauty and complexity of community. We all know that meeting diverse people can be challenging, but making friends who are unlike ourselves can be transformational. The power of community and achieving a new unity cannot be overstated. To illustrate this, I want to tell you a story.

Let's go to Cedar Grove, North Carolina, and learn about the Anathoth Community Garden. Anathoth is Jeremiah's hometown, mentioned in his prophetic writings. It's also referenced in Matthew 27:6-8 when Judas returns the 30 pieces of silver and, in his despair, dies by suicide. The authorities use the blood money to buy a potter's field, a place for burying foreigners, linking back to Jeremiah's purchase of a field in Anathoth.

The Anathoth Community Garden was started after a local storekeeper's murder. About 100 neighbors gathered at Cedar Grove United Methodist Church, prayed, and discussed

ways to bring the community together. Now, 20 years later, the garden cultivates fresh produce, delivering to older adults and offering workshops on organic gardening. It brings together diverse groups—church members, local families, new neighbors, and students from NC State, UNC, and Duke—all connecting with the land, each other, and above all, with God. This garden is a testament to the power of community, healing, hope, and restoration.

Community is central to Christian faith because it reveals a special part of God's own identity. Moreover, community is a miracle because God does not call us together because we are similar. Finally, community is important because we hold the items of utmost importance in common. Reflecting on these points, let's consider the friendships God makes with us in Jesus and how we can expand our vision for a community in Christ, as an antidote to loneliness, division, and isolation in our world today.

Community is central to Christian faith, as we read in Romans 12:4-5 (NIV): "For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." The church functions like a healthy body, each member playing a crucial role. The Apostle Paul emphasized unity because the early churches were diverse, facing external pressures and internal prejudices.

Paul wrote to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28 NIV). Their unity was crucial for their survival and witness to a fragmented world. The Roman church also faced tensions with the return of Jewish Christians expelled by the Emperor Claudius. Paul emphasized love and unity, writing, "Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves" (Romans 12:10 NIV).

Unity is essential to our faith because it reflects God's very nature. God is revealed to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons in one God. This divine community models perfect fellowship, mutual indwelling, and shared will. Our church community reflects this unity and diversity, bearing witness to the nature of God.

Trevor Hudson writes, "Loneliness is a complex reality, but God invites us into a community where we can be known and loved." Our material lives often experience this community through the church, pointing to a greater reality where we are welcomed and loved into the very life of the triune God. The early church exemplified this in Acts 4, where believers held everything in common, reflecting a deep relational bond grounded in Christ.

Community is a miracle because we are diverse, yet we share our lives together despite our differences. C.S. Lewis said, "Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another: 'What! You too? I thought I was the only one.'" Our unity in diversity is a testament to the power of God, not our achievement. The world tries to pull us apart, but our unity

becomes a powerful and countercultural witness. Jesus called together diverse people—tax collectors, fishermen, revolutionaries—united by their calling.

Our unity is not just about holding things in common but sharing the most important things: our faith in Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Romans 12:9-11 calls us to genuine love, devotion, and zeal in serving the Lord. Paul taught the uniqueness and holiness of the church, a community born of God's love for us, even while we were sinners. Jesus' sacrificial death reconciles us to God and breaks down barriers of sin and division, creating a new humanity united in Him.

Forgiveness is a common possession of everyone in the church. Reconciliation and being brought together are the returns on the investment of our community. Jesus taught us to forgive and be forgiven, emphasizing humility and reconciliation. Paul instructed the Colossians, "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13 NIV).

Reflecting on these three big ideas—community is central to our faith, unity reflects God's power, and our relationship with Christ sustains our unity—let's consider how we can more faithfully reflect the body of Christ. What must change for us to do that, and what must never change? Ask yourself, what is one thing you can do this week to reflect the unity within the diversity of the body of Christ, showing the power of God and the triumph of love and grace? Go and do it, but don't go alone. Go and do it, energized by the Holy Spirit, to share God's transforming love with the world.

As we come to our time of reflection and response, we have special music from the Sturgills It's an opportunity for us to open our hearts and minds to God's call.