

Building Community in the Church

A sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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Our topic today could just as easily have been “Building a Church in the Community,” but the particular theme we are addressing is just the opposite: “Building Community in the Church.” So what do we mean by community? Of course it refers to a grouping of people, but it’s not just a physical grouping, it can be any sort of fellowship based on things we have in common with one another. It could be art (as in “the artistic community”), science (“the scientific community”), military intelligence, the theater, economics, sports, philanthropy, the environment, or of course religion, just to name a few possibilities. Whatever it is, the groupings exist for people to support one another in their common interests and in their lives as they pursue these interests.

This, essentially, is the purpose of the church. At one time – even here – it was thought that the best way to build community was to do it with bricks and mortar, roads and parks in a distinctive neighborhood *separated from others physically as well as spiritually*. But with the development of technology the boundaries of these kinds of communities are increasingly blurred as we are subject to every imaginable influence through the electronic media. Now, therefore, it is more important than ever to focus on the *spiritual* community that can bind us together in our common love for the Lord and in the practice of charity as explained in the heavenly doctrines.

In this connection it’s useful to recall the teaching that all of heaven is organized in the form of one very large MAN, or what one translator of the doctrines calls “the universal human” form. This isn’t an entirely new idea, as we often talk about a “body” of people with a head, a heart, arms, and so on. The apostle, Paul, wrote specifically about members of the church being “in the body of Christ” – everyone uniquely represented by different organs with the parts all interconnected and working together for the good of the whole. In fact Paul makes a special point about the value of every part, commenting wryly,

“If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,’ is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,’ is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be?

“But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you;’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor...” (1Cor 12:14-23).

This is good stuff, important to remember. Little did Paul know, however, that the whole of heaven is also organized in the same way, and that the reason the church is like this is because the church – in its best sense – is the Lord’s heaven on earth. Now *there’s* a compelling statement! How often do YOU think of this church as heaven on earth? And yet that is the goal. That is what we must be striving for if we have any kind of heart for what the Lord has taught us throughout the Word. And by the way, we’ll never get there if we persist in thinking that the real problem is all those *other people* who mess things up.

Each one of us has an important role to play and, you know, one of the blessings of the church is that we get plenty of opportunities to *practice* what we preach, given that we often see how the atmosphere could be improved. Do you feel judged or criticized when you come to church? What are the chances that you also might be judging or criticizing? – just different things, right? Do you feel left out by others who seem to know the teachings better than you do, or how things are done in the church while you are left wondering? Welcome to the club! Just about everybody feels this way about some things. But that just illustrates the point that we all have unique, individual uses to perform, and we do them best when we remember that we are all important parts of a larger body, and when we have a sense of *belonging* to that body.

So again, what do we mean by a sense of community in the church? We noted the general support in community for one another in our common interests and in our lives as we pursue these interests. Now let's focus in. The church essentially is about two things – or three if you include the transformation process that is required to participate. First it is about loving the Lord. But isn't that awfully personal? How can we do this in community?

Well, one way is just to show up: show that you love the Lord by being willing to subordinate your own particular preferences about worship to the greater good of supporting others in *their* worship. In case you hadn't noticed in the New Testament, the Lord loves a good crowd. Why? – because He can teach and inspire us with a common message that is reinforced by the shared experience and mutual support afterward.

Another way is to speak openly about our love for the Lord, even about how we want to or try to love Him but find it difficult. An awful lot of people apparently feel it would be presumptuous to speak openly about loving the Lord, as if somehow we might be seen as feeling superior. But think about it. If you love a certain restaurant, or book, or movie; if you love the car you drive or the comfortable chair you just bought, would you hesitate for a second to tell someone about it? If you went to a concert or seminar and just loved what you heard there wouldn't you be delighted to tell others about it? There's no pretentiousness in saying you love the Lord; the only question is, *what* do you love about Him, and how can you say you love him when you still regularly mess up? This is all part of the conversation, and one of the ways the Lord can help us help each other grow in that love. Imagine the common bond – the sense of community – you could have with others who were willing to let down their defenses just a little and talk in personal terms about the first and most important commandment of our faith?

The second essential of the church is that we love our neighbors – meaning all other people according to the quality of their lives, as far as we can tell. One way to build a sense of community around that is simply to practice doing it. The doctrines are clear: we don't get to decide who we will love in a Christian way, since it's all about supporting the good in the person; the only question is what words and actions will best support that good in each individual case. Sometimes love implies rewards, sometimes it requires punishments. In any case the key is just, fair and appropriate judgment, which generally requires a much broader perspective than we can develop on our own. So again we need to talk with one another, and we need to learn how to listen intently so that we understand what is really going on. We can't do this in isolation.

It has been said that every statement is a question in disguise, and every question is a statement in disguise. This may not be exactly true, but it should remind us not to judge superficially. Doctors often refer to “the presenting problem,” understanding that behind that *symptom* is a

likelihood of something much different – maybe way worse, maybe incredibly simple. The point is that when we consider how to act with love toward any particular person we need to understand what that person really needs, and not just give, or try to give, whatever suits ourselves.

For example, we might be inclined to think we *can't* love someone who behaves outrageously, or believes things we can't possibly accept. But by thinking further, and listening carefully, we might discover something *behind* that behavior or belief that is literally crying out in grief or frustration. Then what? Of course we may not have the power to fix this, but the realization alone that there are background issues can open our hearts to a better approach. To be specific what if you had to work with someone who was a poor communicator, had a bunch of annoying habits, and came across as a know-it-all, challenging everything? Then again, what if you knew she had Aspergers' syndrome and that these traits were not her fault but, contrary to the appearance, this person really has a soft heart and a longing for connection? Could you then perhaps overlook some of the problems?

Yes, of course there are boundary issues, and there are times when staying away from someone may be the best medicine for all concerned. But even then, without getting into gossip and rumors, wouldn't it be useful to consult other caring friends to see how they might handle the situation for the maximum good of all? In that case a truly Christian approach would be based on a mutual consideration of *teachings from the Word that might apply*.

That said, one of the simplest ways to build community around a shared love for the neighbor is to join a reading and discussion group where we hold one another accountable for really learning what the Lord teaches us about this. Of course some people have wonderful habits of reading the Word and the Heavenly Doctrines every day on their own. Many, however, have a tough time making this a regular habit, in which case the support group really helps. Even so, have you ever noticed that two people can get two entirely different things out of the same passage of reading? This illustrates the value of reading and discussing it together. Furthermore, when we do that we learn to appreciate one another more and more, and we become friends. We build community.

The third essential of the church is to shun evils as sins against the Lord – and also against the neighbor. This is hard. It may not *seem* hard at first, since we are generally not disposed to commit outward evils against the Lord or the neighbor, but again we need to look more deeply. Anger and resentment, for example, can be signs of evils simmering just below the surface of our outward lives. But again, how can we build community around this unpleasant task?

One way is to be in relationships with other people we trust who can help to hold us accountable for our choices. To illustrate, one reason people sign up for Weight Watchers or any 12-step group is that they know they are going to be asked how it's going; they're going to be asked to check in and share their experience of that week. Then again, if an alcoholic shows up to an AA meeting drunk, do the members throw him out? No. He's there because he knows he's out of control and he's going in order to get help. He may not SAY he wants help, but that's why he's there. And as others share their experiences with this cunning and baffling affliction, he learns to *identify* with those who are in recovery and little by little a light of hope begins to shine.

Another way we can build community with others who are shunning – or trying to shun – evils as sins against the Lord is to be lights for one another: share tips, tactics, turning points and any tangible resources that we have found helpful to stay out of trouble. Guys, for example, often

have trouble with lust; girls often have trouble with gossip – not that it can't be the other way around, but these are common problems. Now of course we don't want to make it worse by making it the main focus of our lives, but in some ways there's nothing worse than trying to fight a battle all by yourself – especially when you know it is against the whole bloodthirsty force of the hells. What if you had a confidential small group, a group, for example, like just one organ of the larger body – a kidney or liver or spleen – that can help you rid *your* individual body of the toxins that are trying to invade every day? What if you knew you could go to that group and get real insights about how to manage the particular challenges that you face? Sometimes just a simple story of someone else's experience in overcoming some harmful tendency can be such an inspiration that it actually brings the sphere of heaven into an otherwise bleak frame of mind, thus making the church itself in some small way more like heaven.

Still another way to build community around the task of shunning evils is to get together and do positive things, either within the group or for others. Now it's true that it won't do much good to simply mask an evil by doing good. The doctrines are clear that doing good without first shunning evil is a false dichotomy. The evil that still lurks within pollutes the good and contributes to the self-deception that everything's alright. But it doesn't last, and when the evil breaks out into our consciousness again it can be overwhelming. Still, doing something positive can establish good habits and deflect the influence of the hells at least for a while. After all, how depressing would it be to focus every day on the miserable state of your proprium, when instead you could be reaching out to someone else with care and determination to make *his or her* life *better*?

This is why so many churches get into service work – bringing the church into the community. But remember, we're talking today about *building community in the church*. In this context the important thing is *not* that we are having a big impact on the world, or building a good reputation for the church, but simply that we are working together to do something positive, to reinforce our good intentions and provide a little less “space” for the hells to work in us. Here at this church a lot of that work is focused on children: helping parents raise their children in the sphere of innocence and truth. But there are many other useful things we could do, and anyone with the will and a good idea should feel welcome to contribute something new to the mix. We all have unique skills and passions, and who knows how one person's inspiration might help another with a similar disposition to feel the Lord's power in overcoming the darkness.

Remember, every one of us has two wills: the old will and the new will, the selfish will and the will to be led by the Lord. It's not hypocritical to do good from a good conscience, even if the selfishness is still there. It's just part of the struggle we all face every day. The important thing is that we ask the Lord to do *for us* what we *can't* do, and that is control the hells within us.

So we come back to the first principle, and the first responsibility of church membership – to love the Lord, not only as individuals in our private lives but as a whole body, each one contributing his or her unique approach to that love, learning and growing *together* in it, *supporting one another*, in effect *building the kingdom of heaven on earth*.

Amen.

Lessons: *Exodus* 31:1-11
 Children's talk on our unique talents in building the church
 Matthew 10:1-16 and *Heaven and Hell* #57 (a bit), #217 & #268