

Made for Community – Andy May
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As we look at this series on community I'll be breaking it into five talks:

Made for community
Broken community
Truth in Community
Love in Community
And lastly Hope for Community.

Today we will begin by looking at Made for Community

Let's pray

Staying apart keeps us together
When the marketing team for the Victorian government came up with that slogan at the start of the pandemic
They must have thought they were on to a good thing
That slogan has appeared as the backdrop of daily press conferences given by our premier
In Melbourne that slogan has felt less and less true after months of lockdown
I've wanted to jump on that press conference stage with a marker
And just change one of those words
"Staying apart keeps us apart"

Staying apart has meant
Grandparents have not seen grandchildren
Businesses have shut down
Churches cannot gather
Sporting clubs are empty
Schools have just this week reopened for some but not all students
Isolation is driving up rates of mental illness and family violence
Families have had to choose who can be with their loved ones as they die
Our sense of community is seemingly in shambles

We're left with a series of unanswered questions.
What will our community look like after the virus?
How will we rebuild our community after so long apart?
Some of us will be questioning the various communities that we're part of
and whether we will remain committed to them

What will it look like to gather as a church?
We know things won't go back to the way they were
But what will the new normal look like?

This series of talks is not intended to give detailed answers to all those questions
But I'm hoping it will begin a conversation
As we plan for the months ahead
Especially if restrictions ease and we can start to meet in smaller groups again
I hope it will begin you thinking about what shapes your ideas of community
And to consider what God thinks makes a good community
And to make that your foundation for rebuilding

If you do a word search for "community" in the Bible you will not find it.
But the bible talks a lot about relationships.
And that's how I will often use the term community
I want to talk about relationships
Relationships are at the heart of community.
The Bible tells us that that God made us for relationships
So if you want to understand community
I think you need to go back to your Creator.

That's where the bible starts.

Here's the point I want to make from the bible this morning

We've been made by God for God and others

At the start of the Bible in Genesis chapter 1

The pinnacle of God's creative work is people

Verse 26

"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness"

Verse 27

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Nothing else in all of God's creation bears God's image

And much can be said about what it means to be made in God's image

For example the role of ruling over His creation that he gives to people

But today I want to draw your attention to just one aspect of being made in God's image

And that is relationship

Relationship with God

And relationship with others

We are made, first and foremost for relationship with God

This is how the apostle Paul says it in Acts 17

When he addresses the Athenians

And he looks back at creation

Verse 24

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man,²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place,²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,²⁸ for "In him we live and move and have our being".

We were made by God for God

Notice verse 27 says

God is not far from each one of us – that includes you

Now for whatever reason you might feel that God is far from you

Or you are far from Him

But in reality He isn't

He made you in His image

You reflect something of God's dignity and wonder

God wants to have relationship with you

He wants you to reach out to Him

Because He has already reached out to you

When He sent His Son Jesus into the world

That is God opening His arms out to you and saying come find me.

Take up His invitation

Call out to God in prayer – ask Him to show you who He is

That is the way to begin a relationship with God

Not only did God create us for relationships

But God is the source of all relationships

Genesis 1 verse 26 says "Let us" make man in our image

Who is the "us"

Well some say that the "us" refers to God and the other beings he made before making people
Being like the angels

But many also say and I agree that the "us" is referring to the Trinity

One God in three persons - Father, Son and Spirit

We see that in the start of Genesis 1

God the Spirit was hovering the formless earth

In John chapter 1 - the eternal Word of God was both with God and was God at the beginning

Before the creation of the world

John goes on to tell us that the Word is none other than God's Son - Jesus Christ

Before creation there was already a community of relationships

God the Father, Son and Spirit - already had loving, other-centred community with each other

You see that raises an important point

Why does God want to be in relationship with us?

God didn't make us because He was lonely

God didn't make us because He was desperate for relationship

He already had a community

God made us to know Him *for our benefit*

Why?

Acts 17 verse 28

In him we live and move and have our being.
Without God, life doesn't work properly
Relationships don't work properly
Without God, in the end - nothing works.
Creatures need their Creator

We were made by God for God because we need God.

The Psalms are a great book in the bible for pandemics
Because these songs are often the experience of people who have been humbled in life
Things have been stripped away from them
Suffering has refined them in such a way that the conclusion they reach is this
I need God

Psalm 42

1 As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?
3 My tears have been my food day and night

There's someone who knows their need for God in their suffering

I've found myself envious of the freedoms of people in other states during lockdown
Our family had planned to go to Queensland
During these last school holidays
Instead we've been stuck within a 5km radius just like many of you
And there have been a number of times this year
When I would rather have lived in another state other than Victoria

The author of Psalm 73 envies the prosperity and carefree lives of others
Even those who couldn't care less about God
But by the end of the Psalm this is where the Psalmist lands

²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.
²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

We need God.

We were made to need God

In his ministry, Jesus often retreated away from the crowds who wanted so much from him
And he did this either by himself or with his disciples
To spend time with God His Father in prayer
Jesus knew His need for His Father

I suspect that dealing with COVID-19 and lockdown has been harder for all of us than we care to admit
Feeling frail and helpless has been hard for us
Dealing with grief and boredom and isolation from others has stripped us bare
How have you been dealing with all of this?

Where have you found your comfort?

Is it food? Have you found comfort in Uber eats or that new recipes
Is it Netflix? Bingeing another new series
Is it more exercise? Those endorphins can give us that temporary high
Is it online shopping? We're shopping online like we have never done before
Is it caffeine?
Is it cleaning?
Is it Fortnite or Minecraft? Tiktok or Facebook?
Is it alcohol or porn?

We try so many ways don't we?

To fill the God-shaped hole in our hearts
And let's be honest - none of those ways truly satisfy like God does
Everything in our culture shouts at us to be consumers
But you were made for a higher calling
You were made to be a lover

A lover of God

Jesus said:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.

Jesus didn't say this to harm us but for our benefit
This is what you were made for – relationship with God

**Let me ask you – have you learned the most important lesson in lockdown
You need God**

Don't miss the great lesson
You are weak and frail
You are a creature who needs your creator
So cry out to Him
Ask for His help
Stop running to all the other options and run to Him
Because when everything else is stripped away
All that we have left is our relationship with God
And He has and always will be more than enough

If you're a follower of Jesus
I wonder if you have used this time to develop a habit of spending time with God in prayer and reading your bible
If not, then don't waste the rest of lockdown
This is the time
Do it before you forget how much you need God

**Not only did God make us for God
We've been made by God for others**

In Genesis Chapter 2 verse 18
God said "It is not good that man should be alone. I will make a helper fit for him"

And what's amazing about that statement
Is that right through chapter one God said everything was good
But here's the first thing that is not good.
Man was not made to be alone
So God created woman for man
A helper, a companion, someone who could be his equal as they ruled creation together under God

As much as we've relied on our pets to get through lockdown
Dog is not man's best friend
As image bearers
God made us for relationship with other image bearers

Marriage is the first community that God created between people
But clearly marriage is not the only community in the Bible
God's people are a community described in different ways
God's people are a family – brothers and sisters with God our Heavenly Father
God's people are a bride – with Christ as our husband
God's people are a body of many parts with Christ as our head
God's people - the church
Is a community made by God to gather together
That is the literal meaning of the word church
Ekklesia – the gathering

That's why you've been finding this lockdown so hard
You were never made for isolation from others
Being an image bearer of God means being connected to others in relationship
And believers in Jesus express that bond between them and other believers
By meeting together regularly

I'm an introvert so I don't mind time on my own
I didn't mind the first lockdown in Melbourne
But even us introverts have been finding this second lockdown hard
Because we were not made to live like this
And I'm thankful for online church
And technologies like Zoom that allow us to meet in some way
It's just is not the same is it?

Don't forget that lesson after this pandemic
None of these technologies
Including all the social media platforms that we use
Are any substitute for face-to-face, embodied relationships
A virtual hug is not a real hug
It's been so hard not to be able to attend weddings and funerals in person
To be able to rejoice and grieve with people in person
All of us have been made by God for others

COVID has not only prevented us from meeting
But I think what COVID has done is it has exposed the cracks in our communities
I suspect that this is a time in which people are evaluating their communities
Marriages will be examined
Families will be evaluated
Churches will be scrutinised
Friendships will be reviewed
Some will work harder at rebuilding these communities
Others will leave in search for new ones
But let me ask you?
How will you rebuild?
And what are you looking for?

If you do a word search in the bible you won't find the word "community"
But you will find the word "koinonia"
It's a Greek word in the New Testament
It appears about 20 times in describing the relationships between believers
and between believers and Jesus himself
The meaning of Koinonia is deeper than friendship
The word "fellowship" is often used to try to capture the meaning of it
Koinonia is deep partnership, a common sharing together of life
The Lord's Supper that we celebrate each month is a meal that expresses this koinonia

The first appearance of koinonia is in Acts chapter 2 describing the early Christians in Jerusalem

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship (koinonia), to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Here is koinonia in action
And I think this is the community we are all looking for
No hoarding toilet paper and pasta
But everyone looking out for one each other
Meeting each other daily
Selling possessions and sharing with others in need
Thankfulness, generosity, praising God,
having favour with those outside their community
It's all very appealing.
But it didn't necessarily last even in Jerusalem
By chapter 8 of the book of Acts
We read that a persecution broke out against the Christians
And we read that all the believers except for the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria

Many since then have tried to capture that sense of community and failed
Dictators, Cult leaders,
Church or family leaders have chased after their own vision of community
Only to destroy their communities
You see you don't find community by searching for it
Because when you put that much hope in other people to meet your needs
You will be disappointed
Just as much as you will disappoint them.

So how do you get this koinonia kind of community
The Bible's answer is Jesus
You look for Jesus

The apostle John writes in 1 John 1 about Jesus

1 John 1

That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship (koinonia) with us; and indeed our fellowship (koinonia) is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

Let me explain the logic of what John is saying
John is saying here that he knew Jesus
And had koinonia with Jesus
In sharing about Jesus with his readers
Then they too can share koinonia with him because they have koinonia with Jesus

You see the key to koinonia in the Bible is Jesus
It is coming into deep union with Jesus that gives us the community with others that we long for
Christ is the head of his body the church
A body without a head is dead and lifeless
And so if you want to be part of a dynamic, life-giving community, that is other centred
you must keep looking to Jesus

Jesus is the ultimate image bearer
He is the very image of the invisible God
The exact representation of God's being – the Bible tells us
If you want to see what humanity is meant to be
You look at Jesus
If you want to know how to live in your community look at Jesus

The second greatest commandment Jesus gave was this
Love your neighbour as yourself

Give yourself to the needs of others and not your own needs
That is how Jesus lived – he gave himself to loving, sacrificial, other-centred love
That is how Jesus loved us
And that is what He commands of his people
And we will see this more when we look at the topic of love in community
Jesus exemplified other-centred love in no greater display than the cross
Not only did he love his neighbours
He loved us his enemies
And the price of bringing us community with God was His blood
You see, the more we rely on others and ourselves to build the community we want
We will be sorely disappointed
But Jesus will never disappoint you.

I don't know about you
But I am feeling lethargic and unmotivated
It's hard to respond to people's calls and messages
Some Sundays have been hard to turn up to online church to be honest
And that's coming from the guy who spends much of my week putting it together
That command to love my neighbour feels as hard as ever
And that's why I need Jesus more than ever.

I was thinking about these verses
Hebrews 10:23-25

²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

I think these verses could easily have been written during a pandemic
And what they remind me of is this
My life is bookended by two certainties
When I look back I know for sure that
Jesus died for me and opened a way for me to God
And when I look forward I know the Day is coming when He will return to take me home
In the meantime, I'm tired
I'm tempted to think it's all too hard
I am tempted to be selfish and to withdraw
I'm tempted to give up
But I'm reminded that the time is short
Jesus is faithful
He will return

And I must make the most of the time remaining
Not to indulge myself but to serve others
Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works

Let me stir you up.
Men – get off your phones and talk to your wives or your housemates
Women – stop comparing yourselves to others and serve them instead
Kids – empty the dishwasher without being asked
Brothers and sisters
Ask not what someone can do for you today?
But what you can do for someone
Drop off a care package
Call someone who you know is lonely
Pray for someone then send them a text message telling them you prayed for them
If restrictions ease this afternoon
Make a time to meet with people you haven't seen for a long time
So that you can encourage them

I know it's hard at the moment
I'm finding it hard
Don't give up
Keep fighting the urge to shrink back and not meet with other believers
Keep fighting the urge to be self-centred
Keep looking to Jesus so you will be other centred.
Jesus said, it is more blessed to give than to receive
This is what you were made for.
If you see me shrinking back then please stir me up.

This pandemic has at times, brought out the worst in our communities
But this need not be the case
Sometimes we can see the very best of loving your neighbour

Bubonic plague came to the town of Eyam in 1665
By the end of that year, 42 people had died in the town
The minister of the village William Mompesson
Along with the previous minister – Thomas Stanley
Persuaded the villagers not to flee to other towns
But to quarantine themselves
Which would lower the risk of spreading the plague to other parts of England
They went to great lengths to do this
When supplies were dropped off from other villages at the edge of town
The residents of Eyam dug wells with vinegar in them to drop their coins into
To disinfect the coins so they wouldn't infect their suppliers
Church services and prayers meetings took place outdoors
To lower the risk of infection
William Mompesson and his wife Catherine,
devoted themselves to caring for the sick and dying
This is what loving community looks like
According to one account, only 83 people survived out of a population of 350 in Eyam
Catherine Mompesson, aged 27 was amongst those who died and went to be with her Lord

This is what William Mompesson wrote to his patron Lord Halifax
*My dearest dear is gone to her eternal rest
And is invested with the crown of righteousness
Having made a most happy end
Had she loved herself as well as me
She would have fled from the pit of destruction and might have prolonged her days
But she was resolved to die a martyr for my interest.
My drooping spirits are much refreshed with her joys which I assure myself
Are unutterable.*

This is love of God
And love of neighbour.
This is what you were made for.

Let me pray