

“Kindness, Mercy, Community”

Romans 12:9-18; Mark 2:1-12 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might truly open our hearts to your love and learn how to open them to others. In Jesus’ name, we pray, Amen.

You have heard me say that we are a Micah 6:8 church. One thing that might mean is that many of you can recite this verse with me: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Over the past few years, we’ve woven this verse deeper into the practice of our faith, singing one version sometimes as the Offering Dedication, or – as today – singing another version as our Benediction.

But did you know that this verse is formative for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as a whole? It has been for over 20 years, since we declared in the year 2000 that our Vision is “to be a faithful, growing church that demonstrates true community, deep Christian spirituality, and a passion for justice.” The order is re-arranged, but all three parts are there: passion for justice, true community, and deep Christian spirituality. Today, I want us to focus on one part of that in particular, true community. Or as Micah puts it, living into what it means to “love kindness.” Or if you’ve been paying attention as we sing at the end of worship lately, you’ll have guessed that many translations use the word “mercy” instead of “kindness.” Kindness, mercy, community. What is it that we’re doing here? How do we live all of that?

What I love about our scripture readings today is how they offer us two contrasting ways of thinking about these questions. The verses from Romans 12 are full of good advice, general guidelines for how to live together as Christian community. “Love one another with mutual affection.” “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” “Live peaceably with all.” It even speaks to the Christian obligation to share the blessings of community beyond those who are already here when it tells us to “extend hospitality to strangers.” This all sounds very lovely, doesn’t it? But it is a little generic. It’s a bunch of good ideas, but it’s a bit abstract.

That’s why it’s so helpful to pair it with this story from Mark 2, where we see community happening. Warm and fuzzy as Romans 12 might make us feel, the idea that you could belong to a community that would remove a roof for you – climb up and dig through thatch or whatever to make sure they’d done everything they could to get you the healing you needed – well, that lands a little more deeply, doesn’t it? That is the kind of friendship we’re talking about when we say this church wants to be a “true community.”

Yet, so often, when we talk about “community” we just let it be a vague, catch-all phrase for the various levels of interaction we have as part of a congregation. What if we all had a story to tell that was as specific as this guy who came in through the roof and walked out on his own two feet? There are people who don’t even know that there’s something out there – this thing called “community” – that can help them feel less isolated, that can connect them into something bigger than themselves, that can

bring them a deep sense of belonging and belovedness that they may not have even realized they were missing. They're probably not very likely to run into this story about this guy being lowered through the ceiling in the course of their everyday lives. But they might be in a situation where they could hear your story about how your congregation brought you closer to Jesus' mercy and kindness.

There are some important things to notice about this story. First of all, the way the dramatic tension is set up, it seems like Jesus was more focused on forgiving this man of his sins. That's what the scribes are set up to react to. But do you have any doubt that Jesus was always planning to also heal the man of his paralysis all along? Of course he was! There's a reason Micah 6:8 can talk about either mercy or kindness; they are two sides of the same coin. Our lives are both spiritual and physical, and Jesus knows that. He is, in fact, the very embodiment of that!

But here's the other interesting thing: Mark writes, "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'" It was the faith of that man's friends that moved Jesus to mercy. We don't know how the man himself felt about this hare-brained idea. He may have thought it was a fool's errand. He may have just been going along with it because he didn't want to disappoint his friends. But it didn't matter. His friends had faith, and that was enough to evoke the mercy of God. The story is showing us that faith is something that we do together, in community. It's the living out of that faith, together, for the sake of one another, that leads us to healing and restoration. We help one another "hold fast to what is good," as Romans puts it.

So what about you? What is your story of faith in community? There is a section on our website that talks about what kind of community we strive to create here. I wonder if you might read through this with me. Let's read that part at the top before each of the squares underneath. At VLM, you'll find a community that shares in informal, inclusive worship. At VLM, you'll find a community that opens Christ's Table to all. At VLM, you'll find a community that offers progressive, biblical preaching. At VLM, you'll find a community that encourages thoughtful questions about faith. At VLM, you'll find a community that serves our neighbors with love. At VLM, you'll find a community that promotes social justice. At VLM, you'll find a community that extends sincere care & hospitality. At VLM, you'll find a community that spans the generations. At VLM, you'll find a community that welcomes you just as you are!

I'd like you to take a moment and consider which of those statements reminds you of a story about how this community is important to you. It doesn't have to be as dramatic as being lowered through a roof; you're just thinking about some of the ways this community has impacted your life. [...] When did you receive sincere care? Was there a time when your questions were encouraged? How was your faith deepened by serving our neighbors? How does being included in worship leadership help you feel connected to God? [...] Is there anyone who would like to share which one of these boxes brings up a story for you? [...]

There are a thousand stories that connect us to the mercy and kindness of Christ. Some of them are in the scriptures. Some of them are in our lives. Some of them are in

the lives of those around us. Some of them haven't happened yet. What are the roofs we need to remove in order to bring our friends closer to Jesus? Who are the people who need healing, the kind of healing that can only happen in community? Who needs to hear your story? Who needs to know that loving one another with mutual affection is not just something we talk about in the abstract? Who needs us to weep with them? Who needs us to rejoice with them? Who needs our help to keep holding fast to what is good? What stranger needs our hospitality? Who needs to share in our faith in order to find the mercy and kindness of Christ?

People may not know that they need community. But they will listen if you have a story about how your faith community has changed your life. They may not realize how thirsty they are for the mercy of God, until they can see that it's real because of the impact it had on you. Your kindness may be the first thing that invites them to believe that a community of compassion can really exist. Kindness, mercy, community. Let's be the church God is calling us to be. Hallelujah and Amen.