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Philippians 2:19-30

True Community

In the animated movie *Ice Age*, when saber-tooth tigers attack a tribe of nomads, a mother and her baby attempt to outrun the man-eating beasts but are cornered at a raging waterfall. The little boy is discovered by a woolly mammoth named Manfred, a sloth named Sid, and a saber-tooth tiger named Diego. These three unlikely companions unite on a common mission to return the baby to his father.

As the trio treks through a mountainous terrain of ice and snow carrying the baby, at one point the mammoth, sloth, and tiger realize they're on an erupting volcano. The heat of the lava melts the glacier bridges atop the ice fields, separating Diego from the others. Isolated on a quickly melting island of ice, Diego jumps to reach the others, but falls short. Dangling from the edge of the ice field, his grip falters, and he falls. Manfred, unwilling to let Diego perish, leaps into a chasm after him and tosses the tiger upwards to safety. Diego, realizing the danger involved in the rescue, is moved by Manfred's compassion, courage, and sacrifice.

"Why did you do that?" he asks. "You could have died trying to save me."

Humbly, the mammoth responds, "That's what you do when you're part of a herd. You look after each other." Amazed at the convergence of circumstances that has brought these three together, Sid muses aloud. "I don't know about you guys, but we are one strange herd."

One strange herd! Don't you feel like that's a great description of the church sometimes? A mix of people with different personalities, different backgrounds, different ideas sometimes, who

might never hang out together— except for the one thing that we have in common: we love Jesus. And in one way or another, we have been transformed by His amazing love and mercy. Because of that, we hang out together. But even more than that, as the film illustrates in a cute way, as a “herd” of Christ followers, we look after each other—even if we might look a little strange at times.

When the church is working right, it becomes a place where our old nature and our old instincts begin to die and we start thinking completely different about the people around us. People who we might never have associated with before, or people who we never would have thought we would befriend, suddenly become our brothers and sisters. And we find ourselves wanting to bring in more and more of those who might not belong anywhere else—we find a place for them. And our herd, our community, becomes a place of love and service; a place where people experience the transforming power of Jesus at work in their lives.

If there is one theme that permeates Paul’s letter to the Philippians, it’s this theme of sacrificial love and service.

All this servant and sacrifice talk sets the stage for the section of his letter that we just read where Paul talks about his friends, Timothy and Epaphroditus. These are wonderful verses tucked away inside his letter that remind us that Paul was not writing some kind of theological dissertation. This is a letter; a letter from a friend to a group of friends. From a very real person with real problems, feelings and character, to a real group of people with their own unique character and issues.

We know that when Paul wrote this letter, he was in prison. But we don’t know exactly where—but probably Ceserea. We do know that he is far from his home. Far from his friends. Unable to carry out the calling that he is so passionate about, which is to share the message of Jesus with whoever he can, wherever he can. And in this prison, he feels an incredible sense of distance from his friends in Philippi, people that he cares deeply about.

But he has not been completely alone. Things are not all bad. What makes this section so meaningful is the impression that two of his very good friends, Timothy and Epaphroditus, have been around. And what we see in these verses is how they have served as connecting points between him and the church in Philippi . They have blessed him as friends right there in prison. But they have also been a link between him and his faraway friends.

Listen to how he talks about Timothy in verses 20-23:

I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me.

One of the important pieces of background information that is helpful to know about the letter to the Philippians is that one of the issues that the Philippian church was struggling with was over bad teaching by self-focused teachers. There were people at work in the community who were trying to gain power and authority over everyone and were willing to talk down Paul in order to get what they wanted.

His response to the leadership crisis in Philippi is to send two of his friends to them to address the situation. In these two friends we see the ingredients of true community.

The first is Timothy. What you'll notice about Timothy is that he doesn't get sent to Philippi to help resolve their issues because he has such great credentials in teaching and leadership. It's not that he has more skills. The one qualification that makes Timothy the perfect person to visit them is his character: he has a servant heart. He is completely unselfish. His main goal is not to focus on his own interests, but that of Jesus. Timothy lives his life in complete contrast to the teachers in Philippi .

So the first example of community is Paul's friend Timothy. His second example of community is his friend Epaphroditus. We know a fair bit about Timothy because we can read about him in other places in Scripture. But this is the only place in the Bible where we read about Epaphroditus, so we know nothing of his background.

Timothy and Epaphroditus provide the perfect set of gifts for a hurting church. In Timothy, we see someone who embodies Truth in a beautiful way. Because of his character, he is the perfect person to model what it means to have the mind of Christ, to counteract the craziness that's going on in the church. Timothy doesn't just know the Truth of Jesus, he lives it.

Well, if Timothy embodies truth, then perhaps we could say that Epaphroditus embodies love. Specifically, he represents Paul's love for the Philippians.

Going back to the idea of community, Timothy and Epaphroditus gives us a beautiful example of what it looks like to help foster beautiful community. They embody the two ingredients that help the church function at its best: truth and love.

Epaphroditus seems to have been sent to Paul by the Philippian church. They were so concerned about Paul's condition in prison, that they sent someone to go and care for him on their behalf. If Paul was in Caesarea, then the journey from Philippi took more than a month, most of it by ship. This was no small commitment of time and money. We know that it was a challenging journey because Paul tells us that Epaphroditus became so ill on the way that he almost died.

So the Philippians sent Epaphroditus to Paul to encourage him. Now, after he has been with him for a while, Paul is sending Epaphroditus back to the Philippians, likely carrying this letter with him.

What's so interesting about Epaphroditus is the way that Paul introduces him in verse 25. He calls him, "my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier." These are fascinating words. Bible scholars point out that each word in the original Greek language holds deep meaning, each one deeper than the one before it. These descriptions build on each other, and so it appears that Paul is using them intentionally. And each of these words serves as a great picture of how a community of Christ followers can grow deeper.

The first word that Paul uses to describe Epaphroditus is "brother." It's a favorite word of Paul's. He often describes the people he is connected to as brothers. It was an inclusive word. Today, we would use the term brothers and sisters. With this word, Paul is letting the Philippian Christians know that he has a connection with them that goes beyond the fact that they just happen to share the same faith in Jesus. They have a heart-connection with each other. They know each other.

The second word that Paul uses to describe Epaphroditus is "fellow worker." Here, the connection goes to another level. Now it's not simply about a personal connection on a faith level. This is about serving together. Paul and Epaphroditus didn't just hang out together as friends, they worked together. They have served as partners in the mission that this has been powerful for Paul.

The final word that Paul uses to describe Epaphroditus is an interesting one: "fellow soldier." Here, Paul borrows some war imagery. He takes the fellow worker analogy and presses it even further. Paul thinks about how they went through the trenches together and how Epaphroditus was willing to sacrifice everything to make things happen. Even coming to see Paul was a huge risk, and he almost lost his life in the process.

Epaphroditus' thought was, "Paul needs help, so I'm going to go and help. That's what friends do for each other. I'm going to go, no matter what happens to me. If I don't make it, I don't

make it. But if I do, Paul gets blessed and the gospel gets out there.” As a fellow soldier, he laid down his life for Paul. As mentioned earlier, our friend Mo is back from serving in Iraq. She has many stories to tell about horribly, awful things. But, she also has stories of a great community of fellow soldiers that literally laid down their life for others. That’s an amazing illustration of true community.

This final description of Epaphroditus reminds us that at the center of healthy community is sacrifice. We are fellow soldiers fighting a battle and if we are going to be effective for God, we must be prepared to lay down our lives for one another. It’s one thing to like each other as brothers and sisters and feel a heart connection. It’s another thing to step out and serve together. But when we see ourselves as fellow soldiers, in the trenches together, our concept of community becomes that much deeper.

There are times when we experience that ourselves. Let me give you an example of how I see that working in our own community. Last week, myself and 10 adult advisors took 29 kids to Holland, MI to serve a ministry there called Jubilee Ministries. The whole week, these kids, our kids, worked their tails off hauling scrap metal, doing yard work, demolishing walls, hauling scrap metal and did I say hauling scrap metal? The building they were working on will be turned into small office spaces for low income people to have an opportunity to start small businesses. Our kids served with smiles and complained only very little!

Community. I have never seen a more phenomenal community than the one that we have right here, with us, in our youth groups. As I’ve watched our kids over the last year or so, I’ve been consistently amazed at their ability to see beyond each others differences. When these kids are together, it doesn’t matter what group they might hang out with in school or what they can or can’t do—these kids are one—together as a group that sees beyond differences and sees beyond themselves into something bigger—the kingdom of God. I think we can all learn from these kids---I know I most certainly am.

Even so, the challenge remains. The challenge is for each of us is to walk the journey of Epaphroditus. For some of us, we need to move from being observers of the community to a place where we embrace the people of this community as brothers and sisters. It may be that we need to take a step toward membership. We need to begin speaking of our church as “our church,” not just “your church.” It is a very significant decision to embrace a community of believers as your own, and see yourself as on a journey together.

Others of us have embraced this community as our family, but there is room to grow. For us the challenge may be to take our involvement to another level where we see ourselves as fellow workers. Volunteer to be a youth advisor and be part of the fabulous community they have created, take a trip with Mamie to Colombia in a few months, work with PADS, Invite the stranger sitting next to you to lunch. A great analogy is a dinner table. As someone has said, both dinner guests and family members may enjoy the same meal. The difference is that at the end of the meal, family members also do the dishes.

It's appropriate to be a dinner guest—for a while. But there comes a time when it's appropriate to get up and help with the dishes. Perhaps there are areas that God has laid on your heart where you would love to dive into community and service, but you just haven't dared to yet.

Brothers and sisters. fellow workers. The final challenge is for those who may see themselves as fellow workers but need to press that another step forward. Perhaps God is inviting you to see yourself as a fellow soldier. That raises some significant questions: What does it mean for me to really live sacrificially? What does it mean for me to step out in faith and trust that God will work? Is the Holy Spirit nudging us toward some kind of deeper commitment, to pursue a specific calling?

True community doesn't happen overnight. But when each person in the family begins to wrestle with their own place in the church and takes a step toward deeper relationship, slowly, the community grows. People who would normally never hang out together begin to love each other and even lay down their lives for each other for one simple reason: Jesus laid down His life for us. It is my prayer that our community would become a place filled with people who know each other as brothers and sisters, fellow workers and fellow soldiers. To the world, we might look like one strange herd or have a strange name like FUSH, but when the love of Jesus flows through us, they'll desperately want to join in this amazing journey of faith—together. AMEN.