

life groups discussion guide

i don't care about you • it's not about you



"How can I possibly serve another person in unfeigned humility if I seriously regard his sinfulness as worse than my own?"

-- Dietrich Bonhoeffer

"Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the Gospel of God, but our lives as well."

-- 1 Thessalonians 2:8

Community is something we all want. No matter how you're wired—introvert, extrovert, socially adept or socially awkward—something in your soul longs for meaningful relationships with other humans. We long to know others and be known by them. We treasure friendships that allow us to truly "be ourselves." Though some of us have never found this sort of community and though others have been deeply wounded by relationships, all of us still long for deep, authentic, real community.

How did we get this way? How did this craving, this longing, get hard-wired into us? The Bible answers that by explaining that we are created in the image of God. The doctrine of the Trinity is a demonstration that God **Himself** is in community. More accurately, God is community: one God, three persons. Before any sort of human community existed—there was God, dwelling in perfect, loving harmony in his threefold being.

In the biblical account of creation, this Triune God says: "Let us make man in our image" (Genesis 1:26). Human beings are made to image God, to reflect his likeness. That's why our longing for community seems so deep and primal. God exists in community and we, being made as His image bearers, are created to do so as well.

Q :: Why is it so important to find friendships and community where we can be "truly ourselves"?

Q :: How do we communicate to others that they can be themselves around us – or do communicate the opposite?

Q :: If deep community is something we all want, if it's part of being made in God's image, then what makes it so hard to attain? What keeps us from the type of meaningful human relationships that God wired us for?

Someone I follow on Twitter posted the following question last week: "Does texting, emailing and social media allow us to present the person we wish to be seen as, not our real self?" I posted a reply that said "Only if we're doing it wrong. If we're not going to be authentic, then why bother?" But then, realizing that my approach to social media and electronic communications are most likely representative of most people, I added "That said, many people do as u suggest." Because in a world where the information we get from or about people comes to us in soundbites and 144-character snippets our lives and the lives of our friends can very easily be seen as a highlight reel where only the good stuff gets publicized. Let's face it – that is by FAR the safer way to go!

Q :: How do the trappings of our connected culture enhance our ability to share our lives?

Q :: How does that very same culture of connectivity stand in the way of sharing our lives?

Q :: How do our own likes, dislikes and other personal preferences make sharing our lives more difficult?

Q :: The gospel is "good news" because we are ALL sinful, broken people; rebels against God; mired in lies and self-worship; and looking to things other than God to give us identity and significance – and we are incapable of freeing ourselves. How can remembering exactly what the gospel has done for us help us in community?

Did you ever notice how patient you are—as long as no one is getting on your nerves? Or how loving you are—as long as you’re surrounded by people who are easy to love? Or how humble you are—as long as you’re respected and admired by others? Every one of us is a saint in isolation! It’s in community that our real weaknesses, flaws, and sins are exposed. That’s why community is essential—not optional—for transformation. We can’t become the people God wants us to become outside of community.

Q :: How has being in a community impacted your life in general, or been transformational in your spiritual walk?

We sometimes treat community like the safety net under a tightrope walker: it’s a good thing to have in case something bad happens. But isn’t community the tightrope itself: where we, at great risk, step out on something that we pray will hold us up as we move further from where we’ve been to where we are going? The tightrope is the way forward. And indeed we are called to move forward – but not just forward, but OUTWARD!

And here’s where it gets even tougher. Consider this quote from the book *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

“Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. At the end all his disciples deserted him. On the Cross he was utterly alone, surrounded by evildoers and mockers. For this cause he had come, to bring peace to the enemies of God. So the Christian, too, belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the thick of foes. There is his commission, his work. ‘The kingdom is to be in the midst of your enemies. And he who will not suffer this does not want to be of the Kingdom of Christ; he wants to be among friends, to sit among roses and lilies, not with the bad people but the devout people. O you blasphemers and betrayers of Christ! If Christ had done what you are doing who would ever have been spared’ (Luther).”

I’ll be honest with you, that last part where Bonhoeffer quotes Martin Luther just cuts me to my heart. What if our living rightly in community with other believers was not just a way to make church feel “smaller”; not just so we could have a group of people who we knew better how to pray for; not just so I could get “plugged in” and be “connected”? Don’t get me wrong – those things truly are important. But what if it was critical to learn how to live in community with other believers because doing so would better equip me for community among those who don’t know Jesus. What if my Christian community ITSELF was meant to be an instrument in the hands of God for reaching the lost. It’s not merely about us becoming more like Jesus; it’s about people who don’t know Jesus coming to know him as Savior and Lord.

I was driving down the road this past week and saw a banner out in front of a church that read something along the lines of “The Church For The Rest Of Us”, and featured a photo of a happy young woman covered in tattoos and (if I remember correctly) sporting some unnaturally-colored hair. Shouldn’t this beg the question from believers: “When did church *cease* being for these people?” The banner is an invitation to be included in the community of this church – addressed to people who aren’t what we’d call the “roses and lilies”.

Q :: Are there correlations between the dynamics of how we might approach and participate in a Christian community of other believers and how we might approach deeply connecting with unbelievers?

Authenticity and transparency—or their absence—can make or break our efforts to be in the deep community that we were created for and called to, both for our own growth and for the reaching of the lost. We’ll close with another quote from Bonhoeffer that may contain the key to all of this (feel free to discuss its implications):

“The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we are sinners!”