

Sermon Prepared by The Rev. Matt Rhodes for  
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Forest, Virginia  
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 11, 2022

(Luke 15:1-10)

This morning I've got two questions, questions I hope continue to percolate in your minds even after the service has ended and you've moved on into the rest of your day and week. First, what *does* community look like? And second, what *can* community look like?

What *does* community look like, and what *can* community look like?

First, let's consider what it *does* look like. In one way or another all of us belong to some sort of community: our families; groups of friends; professional colleagues; clubs or organizations. It's certainly no secret that this congregation – all who gather in this place for worship and fellowship each week – is a form of community.

In today's world in which virtual encounters often replace personal encounters, social media has significantly redefined the idea of community by skewing it. People praise those with whom they agree and mercilessly attack those with whom they disagree. I know this because I see it, and I see it because I spend time on social media ... although I do strive to be as respectful as possible to everyone, especially to those with whom I disagree.

But interpersonal relationships and meaningful conversation are damaged more and more each day when people pick up their devices and try to see how quickly and aggressively they can drown out someone else. All the while, they're able to maintain a level of anonymous separation because it's all done outside of personal contact or relationship. Yes, some may see it as a *type* of community, but I believe it gives a very *false sense* of community.

I've spent time in my life thinking about the many types of communities and the requirements that sometimes must be met before we are brought in as a part of them. What do I mean by requirements? Well, consider this. With families, we see communities into which we are born, married, or adopted ... groups we enter because of a particular set of circumstances. Our communities of professional colleagues grow almost entirely out of having applied for and been hired into a specific job or profession or being brought into a group with those in a similar profession. Many times the clubs or organizations to which we belong require some sort of membership or initiation fee or approval by a committee before being admitted.

It's been my experience over the years that even with our churches and faith communities, people sometimes feel they must dress a certain way, live a certain way,

or believe very particular things – *agree* with very particular things – before they’re welcomed. Simply seeking a place to worship and a place to be with others who believe in God is – regardless of the reasons why – superseded by feeling that that’s not *all* they have to believe. The sign may say that the church welcomes you, but they don’t feel it because of what they see as requirements found *between the lines* printed on the sign.

For all those who feel they’re on the outside looking in, requirements often mean restrictions, and to them restrictions mean they are *not welcome*. To them, communities – in whatever shape they may take – appear as something to which they can *never* belong.

And that is where Jesus enters, and we begin to consider what community *can* look like. In today’s reading from Luke, he uses two short parables as a way of responding to those criticizing him – specifically the Pharisees and scribes – for directly engaging with tax collectors and sinners ... those who existed on the margins of what was considered acceptable community, and who even may have found themselves outside of community altogether. What we find in these two parables, together with the story of the prodigal son that follows soon after, is what is referred to as ‘the heart of the Third Gospel.’<sup>1</sup> It could be considered “the Gospel of the Outcast’ a deliberate attempt to show God’s concern for those human beings whom people tend to despise or condemn.”<sup>2</sup>

One thing I notice about the passage is that the community moves two ways. First, there are those who come *to* the community; “All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> But then the parables flip that completely: the shepherd goes *out* to where the lost sheep can be found, and the widow goes to search those places in her home where the lost coin may be hidden. The margins are being pulled in to Jesus, and Jesus is showing God’s love through a move to the margins. And here we find the key to what community *can* look like.

Some may find the courage to overcome their fear of not belonging and look for an entrance into a community. Those are the ones who come to us. But what about the many others whose fear pushes them even more away from community – *farther away* by physical space and *further away* in a spiritual or emotional separation? They are the ones who have moved away from God, or who feel God has moved away from them.

But like the sheep who has become separated from the flock or the coin that has become lost, Jesus reminds us that God will drop everything to find them. “This is the long, loving reach of God ... [t]he God who will travel into the thicket to pull you

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Fitzmyer. *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, p. 1071.

<sup>2</sup> Fitzmyer, p. 1072.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 15:1 (NRSV).

out [and] the God who crawls into the hole you have dug for yourself and lifts you out.”<sup>4</sup> What a community *is* is based on who is already there; what a community *can be* is based on ensuring that *all* who can be part of it are present. Whether they’re just outside the door or living in isolation and fear down the road, “those on the fringe of the community are integral to what the community in all its fullness should be.”<sup>5</sup>

As Christians, I believe we’re tasked by God to be parable-like followers ... those who will drop *everything* to find the *one* who has been *lost*, or *one* who is *living in fear*, or *one* who sees community as a *challenge* rather than an *opportunity*. We’re tasked by God to be those who show the world that there is only a *single requirement* to being part of a community: *let us love you; let us welcome you.*

We’ll soon enter stewardship season, and some of you may already be thinking about what we as the community of St. Stephen’s can do to live into the two-way nature of today’s passage from Luke. On the one hand, what *can* we do ... what *should* be do ... to welcome all those coming near to listen to us? On the other hand, what *can* we do ... what *should* we do ... to reach out to our neighbors, to show the face of Christ and to continue building a broader, deeper and stronger community?

I invite you to pray about all these opportunities. I invite you to pray about how you feel called to contribute. I invite you to pray about what we can do to be like Jesus, welcoming those who draw near and going to those who have wandered far.

And may we all pray for the day when in the words of Penny Nixon it becomes second-nature ... to us and to the world ... “that we cannot see a community as whole until all are included and none are ‘lost.’”<sup>6</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> G. Penny Nixon, “Luke 15:1-10: Homiletical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 4*, p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> Helen Montgomery Debevoise, “Luke 15:1-10: Pastoral Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 4*, p. 72.

<sup>6</sup> Nixon, p. 73.