

Lord Change My Attitude

Attitudes: Community [Part 3] “Community Is Worth Fighting For” Acts 2:42-47

February 15, 2009

(Sermon notes are a transcript from the sermon with only minor editing, retaining the conversational style.)

How do we become an Acts Chapter 2 church? A church where people are connected to one another.

Where there's no pretense. People are real and honest with one another. I submit to you it's by developing an Attitude for Community.

You are not here on your own. You are who you are today because there are people who have touched your life - parents, neighbors, friends and teachers. There is a whole community of people you carry around inside of you.

Some touched you for the better, and you are very grateful for that.

Some may have done some damage along the way.

The fact still remains, you're not here by yourself nor do you get here by yourself.

Let me remind you, that there is a whole, little world of people who are going to be touched by you. There are friends and coworkers. Some of them may be embraced and built up by you, and some of them may be hurt by you.

There is another generation of human beings coming along because that is the way this world works. Your life and actions will touch all kinds of human beings.

Which brings me to the point,

You and I were created for community. This is why the topic this morning is so important. You were made to have intimate relationships,

- serve people lavishly,
- share the stuff that you have,
- build into the lives of the people around you,
- have people to whom you entrust the secrets of your heart, to laugh, praise, pray and cry with other human beings.

You are made for community. But as we saw in the drama portrayed a few moments ago,

we want community but at the same time drive away community. It's our tendency to hide from people. We distance ourselves from people and hurt people. Why do we do it? Fear, wounded, and any number of reasons

This is the weird truth about human beings. We long for community, and yet we run from it.

You have to decide whether you will live with an attitude that values and pursues community which is not easy and takes a lot of work **OR** whether you will go down another road where your priority is to look out for number one.

You have a choice today:

You can embrace people, take them by the hand, do life with people and open your heart to them, which is the heart of God. God intended for us to embrace people. That is the heart of God.

The other way is to exclude people, grow cold and distant and shut people out from your life.

Some years ago, a man by the name of Jim Roberts, was visiting the fourth grade class of his son, Daniel. The teacher had organized a game called the “Balloon Stomp.” Some of you may know what this game is.

The way it works is every student has a balloon tied to his or her leg, and the object of the game is to stomp everybody else's balloon while protecting your own. Whoever has the last balloon still intact after everybody else's balloon has been popped is the winner.

It is a ruthless game. This is survival of the fittest and a very Darwinian kind of contest. This is not a community-building kind of event, especially with little 10-year-old kids playing it.

The teacher blew the whistle, and the game began. It was dog-eat-dog.

Some kids approached the game strategically. Trying to protect their balloon while stomping out others.

Some kids were focused on survival and retreated to the corners in order to protect their little balloon so nobody would stomp on it. Others would go charging in aggressively knowing that their balloon will be popped, hey, if they can take down other kids, the more the merrier.

This game goes on and eventually all the balloons are popped except one. The kid who still has his balloon intact is the winner. The rules are real clear. If you win, then I lose. Every time anybody gets a balloon popped, I am a little closer to the top. Every person is out for himself or herself, and that's the way the game works.

Then Roberts said that something disturbing happened. It was something that felt real off. Another class was brought into the room, and they were prepped to play the same game. Balloons were tied to each one of their legs, and they were briefed on the rules. This time it was a class of mentally challenged students.

Roberts said that he started getting a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach because he knew what was going to happen next. He just looked at these kids and their hearts. He thought, "*They shouldn't have to go through this. This is not the way the world ought to work.*" He got sick.

The whistle blew, but the kids didn't have much of a clue about what they were supposed to do.

The only idea that began to trickle through was that balloons were supposed to be popped. They started popping balloons, but they didn't play the game quite the same way as the previous group.

Instead of protecting their own balloons and chasing everybody else's balloons, they began intentionally to go around helping each other get their own balloons stomped on.

One little girl knelt down and held her balloon on the ground like a place-kicker holding down a football. A little boy stomped on it and popped it, and then she congratulated him for popping her balloon.

Then the little boy knelt down and put his balloon on the ground.

She stomped on it, and he congratulated her. All over the room, these kids helped each other until every balloon was popped.

When the last balloon was popped, all the kids applauded and cheered. They got the job done together, and no one was left out. Nobody lost. Everybody won.

The question you have to ask is, Which class got the game right and which class got the game wrong?

The real question that confronts us today is: Which game are you going to play?

How are you going to play this game of life?

You can choose one of the two ways to go through life. You can choose to embrace people and live in community with an open heart or choose to exclude God and people from your life so you can pretty much go through it on your own.

You can try to achieve whatever it is that you want to achieve, climb however high it is that you want to climb and acquire whatever it is that you want to acquire. If you want to, you can do life that way. You can try to be an island. What will you have then when you get to the end of your life?

I have to believe that deep down inside each of us we truly do want to live in community, but sometimes we

just don't know how.

I want to suggest to you four major choices that we can make today to cultivate an attitude of community.

They are:

- to judge or accept,
 - to beat you or build you,
 - to withhold or share myself,
 - and to ignore or attend to you.
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1. ***Judge or Accept.***

I exclude you when I stand in judgment over you. Jesus said, *“Do not judge. Don't judge so you won't be judged.”*

Paul picks up that same theme in Romans when he was writing to a group of people who were having huge problems with a judgmental spirit, Paul said, *“Let us stop judging one another.”*

Paul went on to say a little while later in the same letter,

“Welcome each other.” It could be translated to, “Accept one another just as Christ accepted you. What Jesus did for you, you do that for each other.”

Jesus said, *“Don't judge people.”* When he says this, he doesn't mean that you should applaud everything that people do. People obviously do bad things. You and I do bad things, and we need to discern them.

The kind of judging Jesus warns about is when people close their hearts off to other people and reduce them to **a label**—*“You're not healthy. You're not normal. You're not spiritual.”* The implication is that I am.

What I forget then is that I am just a fallen human being like you. That gets forgotten in the growth of a judgmental spirit. People who judge adopt this pose of superiority, as if they are in a position to pronounce judgment because they are superior. People play this game.

The Hall of Fame coach, **Don Shula**, who coached the Miami Dolphins for many years, tells a wonderful story about himself. Shula is a very well-known and successful guy. He and his wife were on vacation one time and went to a very small town in Maine because he wanted to avoid being recognized.

It was a real rainy night, so they went into a movie theater where there were just a handful of people. When Shula and his wife walked in, people in the movie theater applauded. Shula puffed himself up and said to his wife, *“Well, I guess there is nowhere we can go where people won't recognize me.”*

They sat down and Shula shook hands with the guy next to him. Shula said, “I am surprised that you know who I am.” The guy looked at him and said, “Am I supposed to know who you are? We just were glad that you came in because the manager said he wasn't going to start the movie unless there were at least 10 people here.”

We ought to have something like that happen to us about once a day. It says something real deep about humanity and about human beings.

In the church, there is an old expression for it that some of you may have heard. It goes like this:

“The ground is level at the foot of the cross.”

When you get into the world and away from the cross the ground isn't level at all. People fight with each other, assume they are superior over each other, pronounce judgment on each other and exclude people.

When you come to the cross and to the place where the fallenness of humanity finds its ultimate expression, we realize the truth about us. We are all in the need of grace.

This gets killed when a judgmental spirit takes over. When you judge somebody, you don't look at them and think, "*Wow! This is a person made in the image of God.*" When you judge somebody, you forget that he or she is a fallen and flawed human being just like you are.

When you stand at the foot of the cross, you remember because the ground is real level there. There is no room for that air of superiority or the judgmental thing that goes on. In the attitude of community, you recognize that we stand on level ground. You embrace people, accept them and welcome them. This doesn't mean you accept all the stuff that they do wrong. It means that you say, "*I am a flawed person.*"

Do you have somebody in your life who needs you to come to them and say, "I have failed, too. I want you to know that I love you, and I am so glad that you are my friend. I want to be in community with you."

Some of you have very serious work to do here. I want to speak very seriously for a moment. It is an odd and ironic thing that this business of judging people is especially dangerous for **religious people**—people who take their faith in God seriously.

This is why the Bible has quite a lot to say about it.

In Jesus' day, it was the religious leaders who had the most judgmental spirit. The people who were supposed to be the most spiritually mature were farthest from the heart of God on this one. They excluded lots of folks.

These religious leaders watched Jesus embrace people whom they didn't embrace—people who looked insignificant, little children who didn't have much status, and most amazingly sinners. Corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes would come to Jesus, and he would welcome unholy people with open arms.

Jesus would say, "I'd love to have you be part of my community. I'd like to eat with you, tell you about God and his heart for you and have you turn around and start doing life a different way. I'd like to be your friend."

The religious leaders were shocked and offended by this. They got very vicious about Jesus because he would do that. But Jesus would turn to the religious leaders and in essence say to them, "*How dare you write people off when God hasn't written you off. With a cold sense of superiority, how dare you pronounce judgment on people.*"

I want to ask you to do a heart assessment on this one. What type of attitude do you have in this area?

Are you living with a judgmental spirit?

- Did you criticize anybody yesterday?
- Do you find yourself condemning people sometimes?
- Do you find yourself with this kind of self-righteous spirit?
- Do you enjoy passing judgment on people?

This is the first point where you have to choose. Will you live with a spirit of judgment or will you live with an open heart, welcome people and say, "*I am a flawed person, and you are a flawed person. I would like to do life together with you. I'm not going to pronounce judgment on you. I may need to confront you about some behavior, but I am not going to write you off.*"

The second choice point is a real difficult one. Beat you or to Build you. I exclude you when I view life as a kind of competition, and you are the opposition.

2. I measure who I am by comparing myself to you.

People whose lives are devoted to comparing and competing are hard to be around. It is difficult to argue with a competitive person. When you argue, conflict is not about solving problems and coming up with solutions.

It becomes a field of battle where I must prove that my will is stronger than yours or where I try to inflict pain

on you. While you are speaking, I really am not listening. I am quietly trying to think up more irrefutable stuff to say to you. The other person eventually learns to hide.

Now don't do me a disservice. The right kind of competitiveness can be a great gift in areas of athletics or business. It can push us to higher levels. It pushes us to achieve things that we normally wouldn't achieve on our own.

When it comes to building community and I have to start showing everybody that I'm smarter, stronger, better, prettier, more important than everyone else, it will rip apart the fabrics of what CHURCH is all about.

That's the way the game goes in this world. A lot of you have to face that world everyday. A world of pushing, shoving to see who is going to be number one. But if we are going to build an attitude of community within the context of the Body of Christ when I have that spirit. I have to be very intentional and say to myself,

"I will refuse to try to look bigger by making you look smaller. I won't define my identity by comparing myself to anyone else. I am going to try to build people up."

You really do need to decide. Some people walk through their whole life measuring who they are by how they compare with somebody else. If somebody else succeeds, a little pain gnaws at some people.

You can do life that way or say, "It will take a lot of work and I will have to keep working on it a lot, but I am going to try to build into other people as best I can and **celebrate** when they do well."

Which way are you going to go?

3. The third choice is to either withhold or share myself.

I embrace community when I share what I have—my resources, my stuff and my time. Or I close myself off when I try to withhold.

In our world—a balloon-stomp kind of world—we are taught to be real protective of our stuff.

A **woman in an airport**, bought a little bag of chocolate chip cookies and sat in a waiting area to await her plane's takeoff. A guy was sitting across the table from her whom she didn't know. He apparently was from India since he was wearing a turban and didn't seem to speak English. In between them was a table with the bag of chocolate chip cookies. Much to her surprise and without saying anything, this guy on the other side reached over, opened up the bag, took a cookie and ate it.

She was taken aback by this, so she reached down, took a cookie and started to eat it to assert her ownership.

He just smiled, nodded, reached down, took another cookie and started eating it. She reached down, took two cookies and ate both of them, although she wasn't even hungry at this time. She wanted to send a message.

The guy smiled, took two cookies and ate them. They kept going like this until there was one cookie left. He politely nodded to indicate that she can have the last cookie. She grabbed it. Stuffed it in her mouth and went away livid.

She walked onto the plane, took her seat, looked into her purse and found the bag of chocolate chip cookies that she had bought. It had been his bag. Not only had he not taken her stuff, she had taken his stuff without asking for it.

We learn early on that we have to be real protective of our stuff. If there is any question about it, I better make a preemptive strike. I better guard my stuff.

One of the greatest signs of the power of the Acts Chapter Two Church that they shared everything among themselves. Luke said that they were together and experienced this community and level playing field where people were just together. Walls came down. The Jews and Gentiles, who had been enemies, weren't enemies

anymore. They were like brothers and sisters.

Men and women who had been separated by so many walls found that they could be in community together and be enriched by each other's lives. Those who had power and those without power—slaves and free people—were in community. The power deal was gone, so they could be friends.

Those who were rich and those who were poor could come together and be friends. The pull and beauty of this community was so strong, Luke said, that it obliterated the selfishness that tends to be a part of human beings.

He said that the people in this community didn't even think about their possessions as their own. It wasn't because they were trying to be noble, it was because they had discovered something so much better than just a life of trying to acquire and hoard.

They started to think about their stuff—"How can I build up the community with my stuff? Who is here who is poor and in need that I am able to help. How can I use my stuff to delight God and bring life to the community?"

The building of community was so strong that people started to think that way.

That's different from the way that life tends to be in our world. In our world, people tend to think about their problem as having too much stuff and not being sure where to put it. They get worried if somebody else comes over and sees a lot of stuff around their house. It's not neat enough.

A writer by the name of **Paul Piersall** has advice on this. He puts it like this: "If your problem is too much stuff, go ahead and leave stuff out. There is nothing sacred about always putting stuff away. If you find yourself in a hide-the-stuff panic when there is an unexpected knock at the door, you probably have too much stuff.

Then he goes on to say, "Maybe your visitor could take some of your stuff when he or she leaves. Leave your stuff out as a perpetual estate sale for visitors to shop through and to take some stuff off your hands."

Use your stuff to build community, meet needs and help the poor. How do you handle your stuff? This is a real important part of cultivating a heart for community, and it is very practical.

From the standpoint of what the Bible says about community, what is of enormous worth are human hearts using their stuff to build community, feed the hungry, build the church and make sure that the Word about God and His love for human beings is able to be proclaimed. Where are you honestly at on this one?

4. *The fourth choice point is to ignore or attend.*

I exclude you when I ignore you. I embrace you when I pay attention to you. I have come to believe that the reason why people spend a lot of money on seeing a psychologist or counselor is not always to get advice or wisdom. That is true in many cases.

The thing people look for and value above all when they go to someone for counseling or therapy is to have someone who will actually look at them, listen to them, pay attention to them and treat their lives and hearts as though they mattered.

People are so hungry for that. You don't know how many lives you can touch and heal if you just listen well to people.

One of the writers in the New Testament, James, put it like this for those in the new community: "*Be quick to listen.*" Paying attention to people is part of how they know that they matter and are embraced.

There was a father with his daughter who was three or four years old. They were at a donut shop. She was munching and crumbling donuts, and he was reading the newspaper. She kept trying to get his attention. She would put her head around one side and then the other side, throw some donut crumbs up every once in a while

and knock on the paper.

Since nothing else was working, she finally went underneath the paper and came up. Her dad who had successfully ignored all the other attempts finally looked at her and said, “*I bought you donuts. What else do you want from me?*” Then he started reading again.

What she wanted was for her daddy to put down the paper, look into the eyes of his little girl and let her know in that moment that she mattered to him more than anything else.

There are people who are dying to have another human being put down the newspaper, look them in the eye and say, “*You matter.*”

Maybe there is someone in your life today who is trying to get your attention. Perhaps you need to put down the paper and say, “*You matter to me.*”

Are you going to do it? There are lots of times when we have tasks that have to get done and can’t be interrupted. That’s the way life goes. But as a general rule when a person comes up to you, do you look at them and really see them? Do you listen for what is in their hearts?

You may be in a conversation with a friend whom you have a comfortable relationship with when a third person comes by who feels like an outsider. There is that moment when you decide, are we going to allow this person to be in this conversation or shut him out? What do you do?

When you walk into church there are so many subtle ways—body language, whether you make eye contact, whether you greet and how you greet—that you send a message to people.

One message is, “I embrace you and invite you into my life and my heart even if it is just for this moment. We will walk together.” Or, “I exclude you and send you away from me.” What do you do?

Do you know how much God longs for this to be a community where people are embraced? This is part of why we do what we do on weekends. We are trying to create a setting where anybody in the world—no matter how long they have been away from the church or from God and no matter what they have done—can come in and just feel the embrace of God.

It is so important for us to be this kind of people and build this kind of community, because that is the heart of God. This is why God sent Jesus to live and befriend ordinary, ragged and sinful people.

Jesus ultimately went to the cross, died on the cross and stretched out his arm to show the world how intentionally God longs to embrace the human race as ragged and fallen as it is. He was willing to die for that.

We have to choose. Are you going to exclude people and shut them out of your life.

Or are you going to choose to embrace people and go through life with an open heart? I hope you develop an attitude where you embrace and choose community before it’s too late.

I go back to the beginning. I have to believe that everyone of us truly wants to be involved in intimate relationships with other people. We don’t do it because of fear, we have been damaged, or feelings of insecure. I want to say to you this morning, the primary purpose of Christ Community is to tear down walls and to embrace each other.

We are all God’s workmanship.

Resource Materials:

- John Ortberg: “Living With An Attitude” series
- James MacDonald, Lord, Change My Attitude
- John Maxwell, The Winning Attitude
- Louis H. Valbracht

