

COMMUNITY CHURCH OF THE MIDLANDS

Unapologetically Christian, Unapologetically Progressive

Pastor's Paragraph

"UNLEARNING COMMUNITY?"

Each time I read through the gospels, I am struck by the reality that Jesus's main focus was on *building community*—community facilitated by experience of genuine, reciprocal love. To follow the Great Commandment to love God and others with the same caring with which we love ourselves is the powerful dynamic that *creates* and then *sustains* community—in families, in churches, and internationally.

When, in gratitude, I reflect upon my childhood years, I recall with amazement a time when no one in our neighborhood locked doors during the day, and automobiles remained unlocked all day and all night! Neighbors constantly were dropping by to "sit a spell" on our porch in the evening—and, especially, on Sunday afternoons. Regularly, someone knocked on our front or back door and surprised us with a freshly made pie, cake, or a delicious vegetable or meat casserole. Moreover, if a mother became ill at home or was in the hospital, people from the neighborhood and, especially, our church would keep the house clean, look after the children, provide food, wash clothes, etc.; and if a father became ill, folks would appear, seemingly out of nowhere, to mow the lawn, trim shrubbery, pull weeds from flower beds, and do whatever else was needed or helpful. There was a palpable sense of meaningful community, underscored, when we went to church, by people greeting and hugging one another with genuine caring and affection.

But the sense of community that people felt in those days seemed not to be limited to our small South Carolina town. Even as a tiny tot, I remember gathering around the radio with my parents to hear F.D.R., our president during World War II, accurately inform and profoundly inspire the entire nation with his regular "fireside chats," thereby creating a feeling of cohesive community. I recall, with understandable nostalgia, how Republicans and Democrats in our neighborhood shared political viewpoints openly, learned from one another, and actually respected one another's well-thought-out differences. Community! Also, members of our state and national Congress met together, persuasively argued their differing positions, then adjourned and went out to get a drink, eat a meal, or engage in some recreational pursuit together. Community!

I hasten to add that life certainly was not *perfect* back then, but there seemed usually to be a delicious, palpable sense of community that I now miss, and I cherish having had the opportunity to observe neighbors and church members helping one another in profoundly meaning ways, actually "living out" the Great Commandment as people loved God *by* loving one another.

Since those early years, it seems to me that our nation has been engaged, albeit unconsciously, in a slow but steady process of *unlearning* community! Look at the White House. Look at our Congress. Listen to the pervasive anger on some of our TV stations. Notice the blatant, relentless bitterness and vicious name-calling on some of our radio stations. Look at the unfiltered hostility that so frequently characterizes politics and even some religion today; and witness the families I've read about that have canceled Thanksgiving and Christmas get-togethers to avoid belligerent, offensive encounters and seriously hurt feelings over political and religious issues. *Are we in the process of*

actually *unlearning* community? The evidence appears to speak for itself, especially when measured by the more fulfilling standard taught by Jesus.

I am reminded of one of the more direct ways in which Jesus sought to create community simply by *talking* with his friends and closest associates. Do you remember one of his salient questions to Peter? “Peter, do you *love* me?” Well, in *our* culture, as *well* as in the 1st century, that certainly is not a question that a man usually asks another man! *Today*, if some fellow were to have another guy put that question to him, the stunned individual probably would say something such as, “Uh, well, uh, umm, I...er...don’t...*think* so, uh...” That embarrassed responder definitely would not be thinking, as Jesus no doubt did, about the biblical teaching to love others as we love ourselves, *or* about the reminder of Paul that, for followers of Christ, gender distinctions do not exist. But, then, that probably would be the case with most of us, too—no matter *how* much we go to church and *assume* that we are following Jesus.

There is something that would be helpful for us to understand. When Jesus spoke to Peter, he was asking him about the *quality and depth* of Peter’s affection—the kind of love that has the *power* to build incredibly meaningful community (which Jesus called the kingdom of God). The Greek word for love in the biblical account of Jesus’s question designated *unconditional* love, the *highest* level of spiritually grounded love. But when Peter *answered* Jesus, he used a very different Greek word for love. Peter affirmed that he did *care* for Jesus, but it was with the love of friendship. So Jesus asked Peter, “Yes, but do you love me with a spiritually grounded *unconditional* love?” When Peter replied again that his caring was on a somewhat lower level qualitatively, Jesus gave up on helping Peter to move to a higher level of love and replied: “Well, are you sure that you love me with *even* the love of *friendship*?” Ironically, Peter, who later would claim that he never knew Jesus, assured Jesus that he definitely did.

So, Jesus seems always and in all ways to encourage us to move beyond just the limited love of casual friendship to a more spiritually grounded love that creates genuine community. I think that the conversation between Jesus and Peter was included in the New Testament to help us see that, in *some* ways, with *some* people, and under *some* circumstances, we *ALL* are *Peter*! We *all* fall short of the goal of *agape*, a quality of loving with no restrictions, a love with no strings attached, a love that God has for us and that Jesus called us to have for one another. Of course we *already* are loving people, but we tend to give and receive love on a more *limited* level, while, deep down inside ourselves, we *yearn* to experience the reality of the love toward which Jesus tried to encourage us—a love that creates the *most* beautiful form of community, which he called the kingdom of God. Jesus taught us that we *can* experience it, at least to some extent, here and now. But how?

In the New Testament, the *Church* is the God-ordained laboratory in which we are called to *re-learn* that which our less-than-perfect society has influenced us to *un-learn*. Of course, a church is a place filled with many wonderful but still imperfect people—many *Peters*! We *all* have some growing to do, but we are able to do it in a mutually supportive, nurturing environment that we aren’t likely to find at a cocktail party, a country club, any other purely social situation—or even always in our own family. So, what makes an *authentic church* different? It is a place in which we imperfect people can relate deeply to other imperfect people by following the call to allow *forgiveness* to reign so that *genuine* community can be *sustained*. And above all, it is a fellowship in which, as is the case at CCM, we do not hesitate to express our caring with a hug for others who are receptive (as did the early Church)—or to say “I love you” as did Jesus and his followers who always greeted one another with what they called “a holy kiss.” Jesus not only demonstrated his love to others by his availability and

support, he also expressed his love *verbally* and encouraged us to do so, as well. “Love one another—as I have loved you!”

When we follow Jesus’s directive, we can *indeed* relearn that which we have *unlearned*: the delightful ability to *combine* the love of friendship *with* a spiritually grounded unconditional love; and, that which we all need but rarely experience—the most fulfilling community possible—is the unforgettably joyful result.

For the high purpose of *re-learning* community in the love laboratory we call CCM, I remain, gratefully,

Your pastor and friend,
John

IT'S HAPPENING AT CCM
May, 2017

Sunday, May 14 (2nd Sunday of the Month)

10:00 a.m. MOTHERS' DAY: AN INFORMAL TIME OF SHARING

We all are aware of the biblical injunction to honor our mothers and fathers, but churches rarely enable us to do that in any meaningful way. Ordinarily, the only opportunity available is to attend a worship gathering and stare at the back of other people's heads while we engage in what we do every other Sunday: listen to a sermon! But is that a truly meaningful way to honor our mothers? After all, it is not substantially different than any other Sunday.

So today, at CCM, we'll have an opportunity to do something that actually *will* enable us to honor our parents! Everyone who wishes to do so will be able to honor his or her mother by sharing with others any important memories that come to mind.

Mothers' Day sermons sometimes tend to be a bit unrealistic, often painting the ideal mother is superhuman—an individual who is expected to be as perfect as God. However, as we all know, no human being is perfect, and no family is perfect. But, thank God, we can have wonderful families and marvelous parents *without* being perfect! Even the best of families has *some* flaws, and even the worst of families has *some* redeeming qualities! So, if we want honestly to *honor* our parents, the ideal way to do so is by being the very best person *we* can be, not by denying our human fallibilities.

Therefore, all of us who wish to do so, including our pastor, will be able to honor his or her mother by sharing lovingly from her example that which we have learned about what *to* do and how *to* be a more mature person as well as what *not* to do and how *not* to be. That lovely tribute to our mother affirms our ability to learn from all that is positive as *well* as that which we may not see as quite so positive for *us*. To be a deeply appreciative child who is also *discerning* is an incredibly wonderful tribute to *any* parent. For anyone who wants to share *only* the positive, that gift will be welcomed, too.

Anyone who does *not* wish to share is welcome simply, caringly to listen. That, also, is a contribution through which we help to build the kind of meaningful, nurturing community about which our pastor wrote in his article for this newsletter.

Can you think of a more meaningful way to honor our mothers? (Out by about 11:30 a.m.)

Sunday, May 25 (4th Sunday of the Month)

10:00 a.m. OUR PASTOR SHARES HIS EXPERIENCES OF "THE BEYOND"

In the Church Year, today is called Ascension Sunday—the commemoration of Jesus’s transition from this life to “a reality beyond.” But is it possible for those of us who are still living to experience the presence of one who has undergone that transition? Our pastor thinks so!

As promised in his most recent Easter sermon, John will be sharing six personally experienced apparitions (sudden appearances) of deceased persons and creatures. He will describe in vivid detail each surprising occurrence and its possible relationship to the reported appearances of Jesus after his death. (Out by about 11:30 a.m.)

On Sunday, June 11th, persons in our fellowship will have an opportunity to share any similar personal experiences that they, their families or friends have had. Such experiences are much more common than most people probably think. Indeed, scientific literature is full of them!

It is possible that our time together today and on June 11th will enable us to experience a sense of awe that can deepen our faith as well as help us to feel a more profound connection with God, with one another, and with the reality of the immense Mystery that surrounds us.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

BIRTHDAY WISHES

To our knowledge, we have only one person in our fellowship who has a birthday during the month of May. Lovely Gloria Stroud will be celebrating her natal day on May 13th. Cheers, Gloria; and happy, happy “new year!”

LOOKING AHEAD

At our worship gathering on Sunday, June 25, it is possible that our pastor will startle us with the title of his sermon for that day. He will be speaking on “LET’S BE HONEST: IS CHURCH REALLY ‘WORTH IT?’” Surprises abound. One never knows what he or she will hear at CCM, but we can be very sure that it will be relevant!

CCM:

BREATHTAKING RELEVANCE
FOR LIVING
IN TODAY'S WORLD

*WHEREVER YOU ARE, THE DIFFERENCE
IS WORTH ANY DISTANCE!*

Our Telephone:

Senior Pastor: (803) 331-9999. Our mobile cell phone is more reliable than our landline phone, because it is on 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If no one answers, it usually means that our pastor is in a meeting, in a counseling session, doing regular spiritual mentoring, or is involved in some other form of ministry; but he will return your call as soon as possible, so please be sure to leave a message.

Our Website:

CommunityChurchMidlands.com (Also .net, .info and .org)

or

CommunityChurchOfTheMidlands.com (Also .net, .info and .org)

Our Mailing Address: P.O. Box 6946, Columbia, S.C. 29260-6946

Our Location: CCM usually gathers on the 2nd and 4th Sunday of each month, and any changes will be noted in our monthly newsletter. Please join us at the gorgeous Seven Oaks Community Center in beautiful Seven Oaks Park, 200 Leisure Lane (between St. Andrews and Piney Grove roads, just off I-26 West). When you enter the spacious parking lot, you'll see the main entrance to our newly renovated building on your right. Once you are inside the Reception Area, our meeting locality is on your left. For updates on our programming, to verify meeting times, to learn about changes in scheduling, or for any pastoral need, please feel free to call 331-9999, night or day.

ALWAYS, WE'RE HERE FOR YOU!