

Let me tell you a story. It's a story about two Mennonites, but really it's a story about an entire Mennonite community – even about what it means to be *in* community to begin with. But to understand this story, you have to know something about Mennonites. They're close relatives with the Amish. You'll often find the Amish and the Mennonites in the same counties in Pennsylvania, Indiana, and even here in Ohio. Talk to Bob about Holmes County, Ohio, and he'll tell you all about the Amish and their Mennonite cousins. One Mennonite theologian described his fellow Mennonites like this: "Jesus is the center of our faith, community is the center of our lives, reconciliation is the center of our world." You've probably heard of a Mennonite or Amish barn-raising. If someone's barn burns down, the local church community gets together everything needed to rebuild the barn, and then they do it. Families bring food and their kids and everyone pitches in to rebuild that one church member's barn. It takes a day, maybe two. If we ever wanted to find an example that really fits the phrase, "We're all in this together," *then this is it*. The Mennonites live by the principle "we're all in this together," and they're serious about it.

But I think the story of these two Mennonites is actually an even better example of just how serious they take the idea that Jesus is the center of their faith, community the center of their lives, and reconciliation the center of their world. You see, there was this guy who bought a house from a fellow Mennonite who lived down the road – a guy he trusted. The guy selling the house told the other guy that everything was in good shape.

There were no hidden problems. Nothing was going to break in two weeks. Etc. Done deal. Everyone was happy. Except that something did break. The septic system turned out to be trash, and the new owner had to replace it to the tune of twelve thousand dollars – twelve thousand he never expected to spend, at least not anytime soon.

So, he goes and sits down with two Mennonite elders in the local Mennonite community – and he tells them his story. “So, he told you that the septic system was in good shape,” one of them asked. “Yes, that’s what he said.” “And you had to replace it?” “Yeah, twelve thousand dollars.” “Well, this man goes to our church,” the elder said, “so here’s four thousand dollars.” Four thousand dollars of his own personal money. And then the other elder offered to cover the rest, eight thousand dollars. “He goes to our church, and that isn’t right. What he did isn’t right.”

To me, *that’s* what community means. *That’s* what we mean when we say with the Apostle’s Creed that we believe in the “communion of saints.” “He goes to our church, and that isn’t right. So let me make it up to you.” *We’re all in this together.*

I didn’t think I was going to talk about the “communion of saints” today, but then I read these two passages from the Gospel of John and First John and realized that’s exactly what the author is talking about. He’s talking about what it means to be all in this together. He’s talking about what it really means to love God and to love each other. And he’s saying that it looks like the communion of saints.

First John is something like a commentary on the Gospel and especially on what Jesus says. And here in 1 John 3, the focus is on what

Jesus means when he talks about laying our lives down. “I am the good shepherd,” he says, “and the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. But, the hired hand doesn’t. He sees the wolf coming and runs away because he doesn’t really care about the sheep. He’s only in it for the money, for what he can get out of it, and he doesn’t want to mess with all the pain and the trouble of fighting off a wolf. But, I am the good shepherd,” Jesus says. “I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.”

“Why?” First John asks. Because the good shepherd loves the sheep. Because the good shepherd knows the sheep and the sheep know the shepherd, and there’s love in that knowledge. There’s real community there. There’s love. “We know that we have passed from death to life,” First John says, “because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death.” And then the author takes it up a notch: “Everyone who hates someone else is a murderer, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. But *we know* love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” The difference between life and death – the difference between love and hate – is the difference between sacrifice and murder. It’s the difference between really attending to the life and needs of someone else and only paying attention to your own fears and desires and concerns. It’s the difference between being a shepherd and being the hired hand.

That murderer connection is important for First John. The author uses the example of Cain and Abel. Cain and Abel both offer sacrifices to

God, but God only accepts Abel's. He doesn't accept Cain's, and we're never told explicitly why – except for this: we're told that Cain gets mad and decides to murder his brother. And then God shows up and wonders where Abel has gone, and so he asks Cain, and Cain gets uncomfortable because he's been found out and he yells at God: "What? Am I my brother's keeper? Am I his shepherd? Is it my job to keep him like some sheep?" "YES!" God says. "That's the whole point! Don't you get it? *That's* what it means to be brothers! *That's* what it means to be in communion. *That's* the difference between being in it because you love someone and being in it just because you want something, because you like how it feels or you like what it does for you. But, real love? Real community? They're like good shepherds – they *keep* the sheep."

And that's the thing about First John. First John takes Jesus' story about the good shepherd laying down his life for the sheep, and he realizes that the story in the end breaks down. Jesus is the Good Shepherd *par excellence*, but what he does by sacrificing his life for us is put us on a path of becoming good shepherds ourselves. For First John, the Good Shepherd isn't really a shepherd of sheep; he's a shepherd of shepherds. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." Isn't that a picture: Here's a bunch of shepherds shepherding each other, and when they see a wolf come, they all jump in front. They all are laying down their lives for each other. *That's* what it means to love.

This week I came across a definition of love that I thought was spot on. It's by a guy named Paul Tripp who's a pastor and author in

Pennsylvania. He's got this fantastic mustache that Sam Elliot would be proud of. Well, Paul defines an act of love as this: as any "willing self-sacrifice for the good of another that does not require reciprocation or that the person being loved is deserving" of that love. He then goes on and explains that what this love really looks like on the ground is this:

- Love is being willing to have your life complicated by the needs and struggles of others without impatience or anger.
- Love is being more committed to unity and understanding than you are to winning, accusing, or being right.
- Love is being willing, when confronted by another, to examine your heart rather than rising to your defense or shifting the focus.
- Love is being unwilling to do what is wrong when you have been wronged, but looking for concrete and specific ways to overcome evil with good.
- Love is being willing to invest the time necessary to discuss, examine, and understand the relational problems you face, staying on task until the problem is removed or you have agreed upon a strategy of response.
- Love is refusing to be self-focused or demanding, but instead looking for specific ways to serve, support, and encourage, even when you are busy or tired.
- Love is a commitment to say no to selfish instincts and to do everything that is within your ability to promote real unity, functional understanding, and active love in your relationships.

To me, that's a definition of love written all over First John, and it's all about relationships. It's all about attending way more to the people beside you than it is to yourself. It's all, in other words, about community – about the communion of saints. But, if you pay attention to what First John is saying about love and community and holiness, then what you find is that the holiness of all of us who make up the “communion of saints” isn't due to our individual saintliness or anything, but to how we actually treat each other. It's due to the holiness we show while we're actually *in* community. In other words, our saintliness is all about how we actually get along, about how we talk and act and eat and sing and work and play around each other – which means that it's the saintliness of our community as a whole that makes it a community of saints; it's the fact that we're a real, committed, suffering, stick-it-out group of people who love each other. *We're all in this together* – that's what makes the church a community of saints. It's also what makes the church the place where we *should* be experiencing most obviously the “forgiveness of sins,” your sins, my sins. Think about what we say in the Lord's Prayer: “Forgive us our debts, *as we have forgiven* our debtors.” This is what we're saying, “God, we want you to forgive us just like we've forgiven all those around us, just like we've already forgiven anyone who's wronged us or who owes us. And, Goodness knows, just like we hope and pray they've forgiven us, too.”

So, the “communion of saints” – the Church – it's not some kind of generic grouping of individual holy people, as if you could just walk down the street and pick out two random Christians who know nothing of each

other and have no relationship with one another and say, “Look! The communion of saints!” Only in a really extended sense would that make any sense. No, what we call the communion of saints is when we see people loving each other and forgiving each other and reconciling with each other and not just existing in the same space as each other. We’ve all had those times in our marriages or in our families when it’d be a lie to call ourselves a real “community.” We’re just two people who happen to live in the same general vicinity of each other and who eat out of the same fridge. Sleeping in the same bed doesn’t make anyone a community. What makes a community is love – real, hard, demanding, dedicated love. And, it’s loving like that – it’s sacrificially loving somebody who doesn’t deserve it and somebody that you’ve got no clue if they’re going to reciprocate your love or not – *that’s* what makes a community a real communion of *saints*.

This love is never easy. Never. How could it be? If John was going to give us a definition of love, it would begin with the word: *hard*. The communion of saints *is hard*. It’s hard to be in real, dedicated communion with somebody. It’s hard to be a saint. It’s hard to love. And it always will be.

But what *really* makes love and community and saintliness hard today is the all too practical fact that *we just don’t need to love* if we want to do church. I mean, do we really believe in “one holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins...” No, I don’t think so. Instead, we believe in options. We shop. We don’t *have* to be here; we could stay home or go down the street. We don’t *have* to be in this church, with these folks, making peace with people who make us mad, sacrificing our

lives and our pride and our time and our immediate happiness for someone who doesn't really deserve it and who certainly wouldn't give any of it back. We don't need any of this!

In a culture that sees faith as something to be *consumed* – as just one more thing that can make us happy; and in a culture that sees church membership as strictly voluntary, as something that looks more parasitical than relational; in *this* culture of ours, we don't have a communion of saints. We have a collection of individuals. We have a commodity. Instead of a community to be loved and served, the church has become a commodity to be consumed and then thrown away when the wolves start crawling over the walls and our fellow shepherds start looking more like hired hands.

And that commodification of faith changes how we see the communion of saints. It changes how we see church. It even changes how we see holiness and how we understand what it means to be Christian in the first place. But, at root, it changes love into lust. Our attention to Christ and others starts to look awfully like attention to ourselves. Dedication starts to look like desire. Commitment starts to look like comfort. The seeking of unity starts to look like the winning of an argument. And the narrow path of mutual understanding starts to look like the wide highway of stubborn indifference.

Here's the thing: Jesus never promised us the easy life of the sheep. Instead, he promised to make us shepherds. But shepherds guard. Shepherds lay down their lives. And that doesn't mean just *out there*. It means *in here*, too – right here in the church, right here in the midst of the

communion of saints, *because that's what makes for real, true community in the first place*. After all, we're all in this together.

It's hard to imagine a more loving, sacrificial act than what those two Mennonite elders did to start the process of reconciliation between the new owner of that house and the guy who cheated him. Reconciliation in this case meant way more than just apologizing and forgiving. It meant righting the wrong. How many of us would do that? I think most of us would have listened, and maybe we would even have confronted that lying church member. But, I honestly can't imagine us paying his debt, especially out of our own pockets. That's embarrassing. That's the stuff of close-knit families who take responsibility for each other. This Mennonite church didn't just see this guy as a member. They saw his actions as their actions, his life as their life, his lies as their lies. They *took ownership* of his sin; they took it as their own because *he* was one of their own. Because he was one of their sheep, and they were his shepherds.

If that is what it means to make Jesus the center of our faith; if this is what it means to make community the center of our lives; if this is what it means to make reconciliation the center of our world, then I'm not sure Jesus is the center of our faith. I'm not sure community is the center of our lives. I'm not sure reconciliation is the center of our world. I'm not even sure this is the kind of thing we want. But, I do think – and with all my being do I think it – that this is the kind of thing we *need*.

So, let me ask you: Why are you here? Are you here because this is what you want? Or, are you here because this is what you need?

Offering

As the ushers come forward for today's offering and Eunice begins playing, I want to remind you that God calls us to give more than just our money. He calls us to give our lives, to lay them down. He calls us to be shepherds – of our neighbors, of each other – even when we screw up. Let's pray: Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Good Shepherd and you call us to be shepherds just like you, laying down our lives for each other just like you laid down your life for us. Show us how to love each other in a way that we might actually come to understand them in their wrong; help us to empathize with them; help us to bear with them with real, honest compassion, so that we might help save them and us. Make us determined to love, even when it costs us our pride, even when it hurts. Amen.