



CONTAGIOUS

The Surprising Things That Make Community Transformational

BY JAN JOHNSON

MANY YEARS AGO, I was speaking at a church about the importance of believing at “gut level” that God loves us when a man asked me, “How did you get to the place that you *really* believed that?”

I’d just led them through a meditative exercise that had helped me immensely—what else could I offer? But in that moment of face-to-face interaction with him, another answer came to me.

Several years earlier I’d gotten involved in a twelve-step group. With head down and hands over my face, I had struggled to confess my mistakes. I’d expected to look up and see disapproving, shocked faces because some of these people knew I was married to the pastor at the church down the road. Instead, I looked up and saw nodding heads, warm smiles, and sympathetic eyes. Those receptive, understanding faces became the face of God for me. They communicated grace in accepting me amiably (passive grace as unmerited favor), and their encouragement somehow equipped me to change (active grace as empowerment). This set me up to start seeing God continually inviting me into a life of fullness and freedom. As I described this to my questioner, I began to grasp that we really need other people on our transformation journey.

Before my twelve-step experience, I’d sought transformation through reading books. Because I’m an introvert, that was my *modus operandi*. Only after repeated failure did I stubbornly traipse off to a group of flawed people who didn’t know Scripture as well as I did. Yet I saw the ideas of Scripture in action in their lives. Through them, I experienced God.

I’ve become convinced we learn about God best through relationship with each other. There are certain

things about God we don’t grasp until we see those things in another person. I’ve always known that God is selfless, but only in knowing selfless persons have I marveled: *So this is what you are like, God, times ten!*

I’ve become further convinced that community enables transformation because spiritual disciplines are as much caught as taught. Breakthroughs in my behavior have come from “catching” disciplines from those I admire. In watching Dallas Willard lead the Fuller Seminary class for eleven years, I caught his practice of not having the last word. When students continually tried to “top” his words with long explanations, he only nodded his head. He did not return zingers, or appear to want to. As I imitated this practice, I felt freedom from impression management and became willing to let the Spirit work rather than trying to dazzle people with my cleverness.

Over and over I’ve caught disciplines from others. My spiritual director of many years had no television. When I was processing my mother’s death, I stopped watching television and no longer wanted to. Someone whose

The contagious nature of spiritual disciplines is an organic form of following Christ.

peacefulness I admired didn’t eat sugar, and after a while I didn’t either. The contagious nature of spiritual disciplines is an organic form of following Christ. It was as if others’ courage or humility or healing leaked onto me because I knew them and admired them.

Community is redemptive as it acts as a space where God can work to pull us back from our slide into sin and despair. In that healing space of community, we can more easily be formed into Christlikeness by the Holy Spirit. However, when I’ve been asked to teach about community among Christians, I find that my event planner’s goal is for people to feel warm and cozy toward



others. This has made me think about what might be an adequate basis for community, which I believe would be love. (For clarity's sake I'm defining love as "engaging will for good of the other.") Exploring then how community works when based on love has led me to many countercultural, surprising conclusions.

WELCOMING, NOT SELECTIVE

Without thinking a lot about it, most of us choose carefully those we associate with. We like to be with people who are like us, having similar education or socioeconomic status. We may even feel uncomfortable around people of different ethnicity or worldview. In our culture, there's a strong emphasis on fitting in and, therefore, belonging. Even Christians notice if other Christians are not from the same corner of the kingdom, if they don't read the same books. Women tend to flock with women who have children their own children's age. Men group with others who like sports or play golf. Parents segregate based on whether kids are home-schooled, go to Christian school, or go to public school. Yet the early church—which included slaves but also rich people, extortionists, and former prostitutes, as well as priests—was somehow "of one heart and soul."² For those who follow God, community can exist between people who are enemies. Consider how opposite Elijah and the widow of Zarephath were: male and female; Hebrew and Palestinian. These gaps were as wide or wider than now. But they needed each other and worked together. I like to say that he had the *power* and she had the *flour* (and oil). Neither *fit in* with the other's crowd, yet they worked together and helped each other. If I follow their example, I will be open to the community that God puts in front of me rather than choosing those with whom I have something in common.

Community among those with cultural or social differences invites us to reach out to others, to go the extra mile, to welcome the "stranger" (Matthew 25:38). So when my husband and I invite to a holiday meal a client at the drop-in center for the homeless where I volunteer, we have to go out of our way to make them feel comfortable. But that's good, because it teaches us to be welcoming and to "look not to our own interests, but to the interests of others."³ In such community we are stretched and grow.

FOLLOWING THE SPIRIT, NOT FEELINGS OF CLOSENESS

You might wonder, "Doesn't community involve feelings of closeness?" Sometimes it may, but I've decided those feelings aren't a requirement. Love (again, engaging will for good of the other), which is the basis of community, is not a feeling but an intention to walk alongside others, some of whom may drive us crazy. We may even complain in our thoughts, "I *really* don't need this person!"—as Paul said the eye might have said to the hand, "I don't need you!"⁴ My husband and I experienced this a few years ago when he was leading a worship team. One of the vocalists was a woman who talked a lot. We both found her irritating. So I was surprised when my husband came home from worship practice to say that the person who had calmed everyone through an upset was this woman. "She talked quietly and just kept soothing the other person until he was calm," he said. "Then we were able to talk about what happened and what we needed to do." I thought about this woman I had dismissed: *Yes, I do need you!*

Making feelings of closeness a standard for community may even be detrimental to community. Some people are not capable of being transparent or open. Perhaps their past experiences have made a sense of closeness very difficult. Should they be excluded from community?

I knew a woman who seemed to ooze authenticity, and we met regularly for a long time. Yet as time passed, I saw that while she could be transparent in a staged way, she withheld a great deal. And she was less empathetic and more judging than I thought. I felt betrayed; why wasn't she the authentic person she seemed to be? So I asked God to release me from regularly meeting with her, but I didn't get a sense of release. The more I interacted with God about it, the more I saw that my motives were mixed. Yes, I was giving to someone by going out of my way to meet with her, but I was *giving to get*. I expected acceptance and empathy, intimacy and transparency. Would I give only if I received something in return? She was being as authentic as she was able.

Are closeness and intimacy, which Americans value so highly, biblical virtues? In talking about community, Paul urged us to "pursue love,"⁵ which is not the same as pursuing closeness or intimacy. Pursuing intimacy can, in fact, make it more difficult. A small group's pastor friend laughs that she no longer has their small groups of married couples read and discuss marriage books because they lead to arguments between spouses! One of the spouses usually feels cornered into an intimacy they're not ready for. Yet that spouse may love the other deeply.

Those receptive, understanding faces became the face of God for me. They communicated grace in accepting me amiably, and their encouragement somehow equipped me to change. This set me up to start seeing God continually inviting me into a life of fullness and freedom.

Even those capable of closeness may have times in their lives when they are not able to be so. Because of grief or calamity, people we love may find they have to distance themselves from others. Can I walk with them through this time and love them when they don't seem to be authentic or relational?

Such situations make us question notions that community is a nurturing place for people to receive what they need. Although that may happen, it works better to view it as a place in which my love will become more well-formed (and by this I mean *teleios* [full-grown, mature]— the "perfect love" of 1 John 4:18). I now see community as a school for love. Community is where I will learn to love.

SHARED LOVE FOR CHRIST

Our basis for community with Christians then is shared love for Christ. We are "one in Christ."⁶ C. S. Lewis makes this clear in his contrast of *phileo* love with *eros* love. *Eros*, he says, is represented by two people looking at each other. At first, it's novel to meet people we don't know and we notice things we like about each other.⁷ After a while, we notice things we don't like or may even become bored. But *phileo* is represented by two people sitting side by side, looking forward together at the same thing. Our focus is not so much on each other, but at the thing we look at together, in this case, Christ. As you and I focus on Christ together, you may notice things I don't notice and point them out to me. I'm glad because I needed to hear what you see. I appreciate you so much! As Christians, we are looking together at the story of God, the love of Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit here on Earth.

When organic unity is based on oneness in Christ rather than our favorable opinion of another, then community can exist even when others are not clear on certain spiritual things. Their personality may conflict with ours. Their worship style

may be distasteful to us. They may be immature. They may be painfully eccentric. Their understanding of the Bible may be poverty stricken. Yet the fact that Christ dwells in them obligates us to receive them as family members. Not only "in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18).⁸

This leads to the conclusion that community cannot be based on *agreement about things*. If so, it will fall apart because we will always disagree with someone at some point. Then we're challenged to "bear with"⁹ each other. I ask myself, *Am I willing to listen to you when I disagree with you? To consider that your view has merit? To consider that I may not change your mind?* Instead, I might meet you halfway or wait for agreement or give in.

Shared life in Christ is central because community reflects the Trinity's love to the world. Within the circle of the Trinity, each divine person's love is focused on *the other, not on self*. This circle of loving persons turns outward and invites all of us in. The church, as God's beloved community on earth, behaves like the Trinity with selfless love for each other, inviting others in.

A good example of this is the Epiphany community that is an outgrowth of Walk to Emmaus retreats. Members of the Epiphany team go into youth prisons and give three-day retreats. Preparation begins weeks before with team meetings in which thirty people practice talks and skits and give feedback. They work together on gifts for the kids and hear each other's stories. As a team member, I was always inspired by other members' selfless service. Some members were in their eighties, but they had the stamina to love kids in the correctional facility twelve hours a day and still be alert for team meetings afterward. We needed each other to show God's love to the teens. Three team members sat at a round table with five kids. When one of us got frustrated, another could say just the right thing.

1 Dallas Willard, *Renovaré* Institute notes, "The Fruit of the Spirit as Foundation and Framework of Eternal Living: Five Major Elements," March 18, 2010.

2 Acts 4:32 NRSV.

3 Philippians 2:4 NRSV.

4 1 Corinthians 12:21 NIV.

5 1 Corinthians 14:1 NRSV.

6 Galatians 3:28.

7 C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960), 61.

8 Frank Viola, *Rethinking the Wineskin* (Brandon, FL: Present Testimony Ministry, 2001), 131.

9 Colossians 3:13 NRSV; "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other."



In the years we served with Epiphany, I found I had very little in common with other team members except shared love for Christ, and out of that, our shared love for each other and the incarcerated youths. Our circle of love of thirty opened up and drew in thirty teen prisoners, most of whose parents were in prison.

HOLY SPACE

Because Christians are all together as “a holy temple in the Lord... a dwelling place for God,”¹⁰ we deal with each other only through Christ. It’s as if there is holy space¹¹ of Christ between you and me. Christ then is the mediator in all relationships. Everything from you comes through God to me. I filter your words and actions toward me through Christ. When you behave oddly or even insult me, I run it through that holy space “in Christ” and ask God, *What do I need to know? Is this other person already troubled, or did I somehow evoke this action from him?*

This active waiting on God acts as an incoming filter so God can help us hear what we need to hear and dismiss the rest. It gives us time to weigh responses carefully. We don’t *react* but let Christ be our outgoing filter of our words and actions.

For example, when I receive a disturbing email, I don’t respond right away. I pause and come back to it. Then I respond, but usually put it in the Drafts folder. If I’m really concerned that I’m not responding with Christ as mediator, I ask my husband to read it. (He says I’m getting better!)

Observing a holy space between ourselves and others also plays out in respect. I don’t always give advice. Instead I ask questions and refuse to play Holy Spirit in someone else’s life. For example, Paul could have told Philemon what to do: accept Onesimus back with no penalty. Instead Paul informed Philemon of Onesimus’s situation and let Philemon make the decision. Paul gave Philemon an opportunity to interact with God, which is what we need to do. While many of us would not tell someone what we think God is saying to them, we might think it nonetheless. Observing the holy space means not even thinking it.

HOW DOES COMMUNITY HAPPEN?

Making community a goal doesn’t work. The Bruderhof, an intentional Christian community that has shared all things in common since the 1920s, understands how community works.

¹⁰ Ephesians 2:21–22 NRSV.

¹¹ This idea (but not this wording) is in: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of the Saints* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 37.

“Our goal is not community,’ says Klaus, 72, who was born into the original Bruderhof group in Germany. ‘If community becomes our goal, then things fall apart quickly. Our goal is to give glory to Christ.’”¹² Bonhoeffer is more adamant: “He who loves his dream of community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.”¹³ It’s important to love flawed people themselves, not just the ideal of community.

That’s why we aim higher than creating community. We aim to live and act in shared love for Christ.

Community, in itself, is not a spiritual discipline but is a result of other spiritual disciplines that help us honor Christ and love each other. Community is then a result, even a gift from God.

FELLOWSHIP WITH INTENTIONALITY

The welcoming, Christ-based love described above nudges us to reach out to others instead of focusing on what makes me feel comfortable. When we enter a room, we ask God whom we might love, enjoy, or perhaps serve. This will often result not in mindless, surface chit-chat (although God uses small talk), but being present to God in others as they speak.

Jesus thought such fellowship must be intentional. Even though he had an important mission to accomplish, he took time for such fellowship. He gave Peter a nickname the first time he met him; he invited himself to Zaccheus’s house for lunch; he directed the disciples to slip away to deserted areas together.¹⁴

SUBMISSION

Community *reverses* society’s tendency to push forward and get our way. Instead we deny self, serve others, and choose to be powerless. In short, we stop insisting on having our own way. We are “subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,”¹⁵ not because others *deserve* it, but because we respect Christ. In truth, we all need much more love than we deserve.

Submission involves surrendering people to God. Instead of trying to control them, we leave them with all their freedom intact. Instead of wishing people did what we wanted them to do, we ask God, *How can I be part of what you are doing in this person? How might I be restorative instead of accusative?*

Perhaps the greatest form of submission is listening deeply to them. Being totally present to others and

¹² Peter Larson, “Inside the Bruderhof,” *Prism* (November–December 2003), 25.

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 27.

¹⁴ John 1:35–42; Luke 8:22.

¹⁵ Ephesians 5:21 NRSV.

“Our goal is not community. If community becomes our goal, then things fall apart quickly. Our goal is to give glory to Christ.”

quieting our mind is hard work. It involves not interrupting, not finishing sentences, not inserting little jokes when people talk, and not thinking about other things while they talk. Listening is *minute-by-minute* submission. Dietrich Bonhoeffer described the “half-listening” phenomenon:

There is a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say. It is an impatient, inattentive listening, that despises the brother and is only waiting for a chance to speak and thus get rid of the other person.¹⁶

Perhaps it seems too harsh to say that to listen inattentively is to despise a person. But despising someone is the opposite of respecting them, and respect is a core expression of love. To listen to one another is one of the greatest services we can give another person.

CONFESSION

Sometimes after we confess our sins to God, God prods us to confess to another person. Often we need safe people to whom we can confess rage, self-pity, envy—all those things we hide. Otherwise we are as sick as our secrets. But when confession can be done in safety and compassion, we are healed.¹⁷ Even if we confess to someone we don’t know well or won’t see again, we have come clean and found restoration through a member of the community. We know others have secrets, and we accept those secrets when they are revealed.

GUIDANCE

Part of how the word of Christ dwells in us richly is when we “teach and admonish one another in all wisdom.”¹⁸ We all need to be investing in someone who looks up to us, and to be honoring a relationship with someone whom we look up to. Sometimes this means we find ourselves hanging out with people from an older or younger generation, but the stretch of being and having spiritual children and parents is exactly what Paul did.¹⁹

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 98.

¹⁷ James 5:16.

¹⁸ Colossians 3:16 NRSV.

¹⁹ 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philemon 10.

SERVICE

Service is too often about getting things done. Time is needed for those serving together to reflect with each other and encourage each other. Staff for any program is not just for the purpose of running the program but also for pouring ourselves into each other’s lives. Reflecting together creates an atmosphere of seeing Christ in each other and helping each other. Think of the bonding that often develops on mission trips. Lewis’s illustration applies. People have linked arms and are all looking at the same purpose together. Because of their outward focus, they easily come alongside their coworker. Paul, who might be considered one of the most productive people mentioned in Scripture, modeled service as community with his traveling gang. He said of so many what he said of Titus, “he is my partner and co-worker in your service.”²⁰

Many other spiritual disciplines build community as well, especially celebrating together, worshipping together, and studying together. As we do these, we create a pattern in our lives as we see each person as someone we might come alongside for this adventurous moment. In each person, we see a bit more of God we desperately need today.

Scripture quotations marked (NRSV) are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. Used by permission. NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® and NIV® are registered trademarks of Zondervan. Use of either trademark for the offering of goods or services requires the prior written consent of Zondervan.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jan Johnson is a spiritual director, author of twenty books, and presenter in the DVD series *Spiritual Formation as Abiding*. This article is taken from the third DVD, “Redemptive Community and Its Disciplines.” She and her husband, Greg, hang out with God in Simi Valley, California. Follow her online at www.JanJohnson.org.

²⁰ 2 Corinthians 8:23.