

“Sunflower Support System”

By Allison Goertz, guest speaker

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Scripture

Acts 2:42-47, 1 Corinthians 13: 1-3, 8-13

Sermon

Isaiah’s whole family is from Kansas where the state flower is the sunflower. I’ve heard stories of his parents going on walks when they were just dating or newlyweds where Henry, Isaiah’s dad, would gallantly pick and give sunflowers to Alice so she would feel like the princess he thought she was. Sunflowers are bright and cheery and some varieties can grow to be over 10 feet tall! One of the biggest threats to a sunflower is the wind as all it has to keep itself from being bent and broken is a tall, thin stalk - which is in charge of holding a sometimes very large flower head. When people try to grow sunflowers in their own gardens they often have to prop them up on stakes or plant them near a fence or structure that can give them the support they need to grow and thrive.

In the wild, this isn’t the case. Driving through Kansas to visit Isaiah’s home town of Dodge City for the first time, I saw fields and fields of sunflowers. Just out there in the middle of vast countryside. It was stunning. Nature has a way of being pretty impressive and this case was no exception. The sunflowers were grouped together in a field to give protection to each other. If one lone sunflower was out on the prairie all by itself, those strong Kansas winds would surely have it bent and broken in an instant. But as a whole, the field of sunflowers stood tall and strong. The ones along the outside took the blow of the wind, leaning on their inner neighbors and leaving the group largely unharmed. In that protected environment, those sunflowers could grow tall and strong and fully mature.

I feel a lot like those sunflowers. I grew up in a small Mennonite community in the countryside of Iowa and although all around my house I could see fields of corn instead of sunflowers, I grew up with the sense of that protection. And with my strong community surrounding me I was provided a safe and nourishing environment during my upbringing.

And I love the feeling of being safe and sheltered deep within a community. I love all things familiar and comfortable and known. I carried around the same yellow and green blankets from as far back as I can remember and still slept with them in my bed until my mom snuck them away from me in about the third grade. She thought I was old enough to try living on my own.

She was right, possibly because of the other support systems my community had in place for me.

I blossomed inside my safe and familiar community. To the outside world I was painfully shy and quiet. My teachers had trouble assessing my knowledge because I would rarely speak, even 1-on-1 with the teacher. But when I was at home, I would burst out of that shell and bask in the attention of my family--putting on plays, reading books out loud, making up songs and dances...

I thrived inside my community, like so many of us do when we find that group where we feel we belong. Where we can be ourselves. And like Steve said last week, where we can be vulnerable and true to the core, which in turn encourages those around us to feel unafraid to be true to their core. I think God loves when we build relationships like this inside our community. Because the God I know is a relational God. A God who wants us to be in relationship not only with our creator but also to be in relationship with other people. I believe that the way we see God and get to know God is often through other people. That God is enfleshed in the everyday people around us. It's a clever little way that the character of God is revealed to us.

Community plays an important role. It is good!

The way I knew community was in this close-knit fashion. It happened that my version of a community typically involved those who thought a lot like me. Birds of like feathers, right? It just happens that people are brought together with common beliefs and interests and a common understanding. This can be wonderful. Here at this fellowship we love God and we love peace and we love working for social justice. It's great to have these common interests. I think it helps drive us to take action. I feel more motivated when working alongside other people like you all. I feel encouraged to actually get off the couch and do something - like volunteer with FFH - when my church family, my community is doing the same thing.

But author Anne Lamott said, "You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."

Where do the lines between mutual interest and great supportive community become blurred with exclusivity? A line from bonding with those you love, to developing a mentality of us v. them. Of in v. out. Of right v. wrong. One of my sweet mother-in-law's phrases fits perfectly here, "there's a balance." Indeed there is. A balance between clinging to that community that builds you up and makes you feel powerful and branching outside of the bubble that is our comfort zone.

In the broader Mennonite church today, one hot topic that seems to create the us v. them mentality is homosexuality. Glennon Melton addresses it best on her blog at Momastery.com. She writes about hearing a sermon on the sins of homosexuality and feeling very uncomfortable with the whole idea of excluding these people. She took to her Bible and read everything she could. She studied and talked to anyone and everyone, trying to make sense of it all. Trying to fit what the church was saying into her vision of who God was. I quote from her now,

"Because listen – here's the thing. After my wrestling match with God, I wasn't really exhausted enough. I still came up swinging. For a little while, I felt angry. Angry at anyone who had a different understanding of scripture than I did. Angry at people who taught that God disapproved of homosexuality. Proudful about my position, really. And then one day God sat me down with the Bible again.

And God said something to me like, "Wait a minute, Lovie. Yes, I love those gays, but I love the ones picketing against them *every bit as much*. That's the point."

And *there's* the rub. There's Christianity. It's not deciding that one group shouldn't be judged and then turning around and judging the other group. That is not being a peacemaker. Peacemakers resist categorizing people. They find the light, the good, in each and every person. They don't try to change people, except by example. They know everyone has something important to teach. They are humble about their ideas and their opinions. They try to find common ground, always."

I think this is what God's version of community must look like. My version of community as a tight group of like-minded people is blown out of the water with this. My version becomes limited, incomplete. There's a very real need for the community I know, but it's not the final destination. It's not the main point, not where the story ends. In another post, Glennon talks about what it means to be reborn. Again I quote from her,

"The first time you're born, you identify the people in the room as your family. The second time you're born, you identify the whole world as your family. Christianity is not about joining a particular club, it's about waking up to the fact that we are all in the same club. Every last one of us. So avoid discussions about who's in and who's out at all costs. Everybody's in. That's what makes it beautiful. And hard. If working out your faith is not beautiful and hard, find a new one to work out."

The idea of the whole world as my family, as my community is quite stunning. It's also quite uncomfortable. It's asking me to show love to seriously everyone. It's asking me to appreciate

the loving and protective community of sunflowers I grew up in, but to understand God more deeply, it's asking me to branch out and rub elbows with people whose stories sound nothing like my own. In God's version of community I see myself sitting at a table with people who disagree with me on every topic I'm currently passionately opinionated about - and us all showing love and respect to each other and passing around the mashed potatoes with a please and a thank you and no bitterness in my heart. Like the verse from Corinthians says, "and the greatest of these is love." It really is as simple and as difficult as that.

I don't know exactly how to move in the direction of living into God's community. Especially when I'm so comfortable and content right where I am. I don't know how to keep alive the fire for justice and peace, and taking action for good, without denying God's love to those I see as oppressors, wrongdoers, bullies. But I believe the magic in life happens when we dare to push forward anyway, in the direction of God's light and do our best to reflect that all-encompassing love demonstrated to us by God onto all those we meet, no matter the circumstance. No matter their opinions. No matter their background.

I took a big step out of my comfort zone when I moved with Isaiah to a small dusty town in the south of Paraguay to do voluntary service for two years. I missed our community and I sure missed the 4-part harmonies of the church we left behind, but I was stretched and challenged in all the right ways. I saw things through new eyes and slowly watched the lines of what I called my community expand to include more and exclude less.

I think this is what God wants for us as we live in community with others. That our version of community would be a great launching pad for us, a place for us to build the confidence and stamina to then jump out into the world and do our little part at reflecting God's love upon others. And when we need a recharge, our tight-knit community is there for us, ready with support and encouragement, tears and prayers. Like Steve said in his sermon last week, "In and through community, is the salvation of the world. Nothing is more important."

Isaiah and I are so pleased to now be a part of this field of sunflowers. You all have welcomed us in with open arms. The feeling of belonging that comes with that is a great reflection of God's love. Like a field of sunflowers we as community protect each other from the harsh winds of life, so that each of us can grow tall toward the light of God, and continue to burst forth from the lines that we humans just can't help but draw around groups of people. So that we may break through the barriers of who's in and who's out because in the kingdom of God, God's amazing version of community, where God loves no one - no one - any more or any less than God loves me, the main point is: everyone is in. All means all. Everyone is our community.