

WWW.COM

WHAT KIND OF COMMUNITY?

I have a question for you: what kind of community would you like the community of the church, of CBC, to be?

Here's what I think.

I would like to be part of a church that seeks, above all, to honour God's name.

I would like to be part of a church where leaders are gifted in leadership and where they seek to lead diligently.

I would like to be part of a church where the structures facilitate the effective ministries of the church.

I would like to be part of a church where people can build significant relationships in Life Groups in which people desire to meet together and grow together.

I would like to be part of a church where worship is real, honest, genuine, inspiring and relevant.

I would like to be part of a church that has a deep desire to seek and save those who are lost – those who don't know about Jesus.

I would like to be part of a church where being a fully devoted follower of Christ shapes what we do in church and out of church.

I would like to be part of a church dedicated to being good stewards of our time, talents and possessions.

I would like to be part of a church that is committed to serving the community and the poor.

I would like to be part of a church that desires to equip families to become strong places of growth.

I would like to be part of a church in which everyone is fulfilled in service as they exercised their gifts.

I would like to be part of a church who loves those whom God loves.

I would like to be part of a church that loves without limit.

I would like to be part of a church like that, because a church like that would bring honour to God's name.

How are we doing friends?

We have a Vision Statement which tells us the kind of church we want to become: CBC will love without limit!

So, how are we doing, friends?

How much are we, CBC, moving towards that vision? How much are we moving towards being those who love without limit? How are we doing? How are you doing?

Today we begin a new series titled 'www.com.' It's a series about community – the kind of community we are at CBC. In this series, we'll think about 'Why bother with Mission?' - being a church that wants to seek and save those who, as yet, don't know the truth about God's great story of love. We'll hear from the Lighthouse Project and CAP to help us in this.

In this series we'll think about being 'Wise with Possessions' - the challenge of being good stewards of what God has generously given to us. We all know times are challenging, so how do we honour God with what he's given us in a world that is struggling?

In this series we'll think about "Wholeheartedly Together." Maybe it's just me, but it seems a lot has changed because of the pandemic, including how we do community. So, we'll think about what it means to be together as God's people. And we do all this so we can walk towards our vision, that: we will love without limit.

Are you ready?

Perhaps another way to say that we will love without limit is to say we will love the people whom God loves. It strikes me as a challenging thought: what kind of community would we be if we did that – if we loved the people whom God loves?

You may know that Lisa and I recently went on a trip to Belgium and Holland to go on rollercoasters! We went with Zac, who had originally planned the trip with friends, but when his friends pulled out he asked if we would go instead. Zac and I rode 34 rollercoasters in three days, Lisa 32. We went on everything

Zac did, and some of the rides more than once. If you want to know more about the trip you could read my blogs titled 'Rollercoasters' and 'Air time.'

If you've ever been to a park and ridden rollercoasters, you will know that for much of your day you stand in queues! Queues at rollercoaster parks can be very long! On our trip the queues weren't too bad – and Zac had an app on his phone which told him exactly how long each queue was at each ride. It meant we could pick the rides with the shorter queues and plan our day accordingly.

Standing in the queue is part of the fun for most people. For us, it meant we had lots of time to chat with Zac and observe the rides while he told us everything we needed to know about the ride we were queueing for.

There is another group of people who queue for rides, who don't wait in the queues like we did. This group of people are the group that buys a Fast Pass. People in this group, the Fast Pass group, go straight to the front of the queue.

Fast Pass people don't want to queue, so they pay to have their own, much shorter queue. They even have their own queuing system so they don't have to stand with people like us in the long queues. It can be frustrating when you've queued for ages, get to the front of the queue and then someone from the other group, the Fast Pass group, gets to go on the ride before you! It can become and little 'us' and 'them.'

Actually we do this in all sorts of ways – divide people into us and them. It's part of a tendency we have as fallen human beings, to exclude rather than to embrace others. This tendency to see 'us' and 'them' can lead us to reject others and to withdraw from them. In extreme forms it can lead to things like ethnic cleansing. Perhaps, the truth is, in our fallen humanness, we all struggle with the choice to embrace or exclude.

Mathew told a story where Jesus confronted exactly this issue:

²¹ Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

²³ Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

²⁵ The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.

²⁶ He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

²⁷ “Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

²⁸ Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment. (Mathew 15 v 21-28)

At first glance, it may appear that Jesus is being a little mean, not wanting to help this woman. But, Jesus is teasing out with his disciples, who God loves and welcomes and who is left out. It’s about us and them. The disciples think they know the answer: they know who God loves. And they know this woman is in the other group: “us” and “them”.

The story takes place in Tyre and Sidon, and the Jewish people despised the people who lived there – including this woman, just because!

The woman speaks using the traditional cry of a beggar: “have mercy on me”. But she adds the words, Lord and Son of David, and by doing so she is being deeply respectful. She is desperate, so she takes the risk of crossing into the other group – she crosses a boundary not many would cross in her day. Jesus says nothing – he appears to completely ignore her! And Mathew doesn’t hide this from us! The woman has to decide what she will do: walk away or try again. Maybe she has to ask herself: how much will I trust this man, this Jesus?

The disciples are not surprised Jesus doesn’t respond to the woman – why would he – she’s one of them! But actually, what’s going on, although they don’t know it, is Jesus is watching his disciples to see how they respond. They tell Jesus to send her away because she’s bothering them! The disciples choose the way of excluding this woman. Jesus then, perhaps surprisingly to us, appears to agree with the disciples, saying he was only sent to Israel: “Of course I’ll send her away, I’ll get rid of her. I’m sent to Israel who we all know are God’s favourites! We have no time for gentile, female, second rate riff-raff. Good call guys! I’ll send her away!”

But, Jesus doesn’t send her away, he waits to see how the disciples respond – will they disagree with him? They don’t – they want him to send her away. The woman hears what Jesus says, which in effect is: “You’re an outsider, in

the 'them' group. I am the Son of David. You are not my mission. Why should I serve you?"

The woman, desperate and worried about her daughter, has, in truth nowhere else to go, and she knows it. Will she throw herself on this man Jesus, even though he seems unwilling to help her? She comes with great courage and kneels, a posture of reverence and humility, and simply says: "Lord, help me!"

The theology of the disciples still says this woman should be shunned, ignored, sent away. But is it possible that God is better than their theology?

The question for discussion is this: who is it that God really loves?

Jesus, still looking at his disciples, speaks again: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." It seems clear: Israel are the children, gentiles (including the woman) are the dogs. At this time dogs were almost as unclean as pigs. Jesus is issuing a challenge to his disciples. It's like he is saying to them: "Ok, I'll do what you want – limit myself to Israel. But take a moment to listen to and watch this woman in her pain."

The disciples do not want to help this woman, they know their theology.

The woman's response is remarkable – its as if she says: "I know your heart. By all means feed the children, but I think you have a crumb for me. I bet you do". She, it seems, understands what Jesus is really doing and saying, when the disciples don't. And she won't give up.

Now Jesus reveals the truth about who's in and who's out, about us and them. He commends the woman for her great faith. He uses a form of great that means mega – she had mega faith. And she, an enemy of Israel, is, in truth, not excluded from God's great love. In fact, she has discovered that the kingdom of the heavens is the least exclusive society in the universe. She has discovered that the kingdom of the heavens is, in fact, shamelessly and ceaselessly inclusive.

The disciples are shocked, their mouths open in stunned surprise and disbelief. They thought Jesus was agreeing with them, when in fact, he was showing them something that would shake their world and their theology. They, it turns out, were still learning. Jesus would challenge them at times, for their little faith.

The kingdom of the heavens breaks down the wall that divides 'us' and 'them.' The kingdom of the heavens is radically and openly inclusive. The truth of this story told by Mathew shows us whom it is that God loves. The invitation to be part of the story of God's great love is open to all, whoever they are, even our enemies.

The disciples had some thinking to do. And friends, maybe we do too.

A final thought. One commentator says of this story, that in it Jesus names as sin what we often, in churches, think of as virtue. It is the sin of exclusion, the belief that spiritual maturity lies in excluding people. I am wrestling with that thought and the challenge it brings if we are to become a community that loves without limit. Perhaps we must embrace rather than exclude. Perhaps we must become radically inclusive because, it seems, that is how it is in the kingdom of the heavens.

So, perhaps the question we must face here and now is: What kind of community do we want CBC to become?

Preached and Live Streamed from Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday
4th September 2022, by Rev. Ian Phillips.