

November 24, 2019

Series: Second Mountain

Message: Community

By Pastor James Lambert

Acts 9:10-19 (ESV)

“Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” but the Lord said to him, “GO, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened.”

What’s happening here in the background of Paul’s baptism story is that **the Christian community is not sure if it wants to accept this man called Saul**. Represented by Ananias, the community is not sure whether they want to let this man become one of them. And for good reason; because just a matter of days before this, he was persecuting them, throwing them in prison, even being party to the execution of the first Christian to die for his faith, Saint Stephen.

Have you **ever seen the Christian community struggle to accept someone**? I have. I remember when my friend John Paul got saved. JP was a punk kid, a rebel; he dressed and acted differently from everybody else, and caused a little bit of trouble. That combined with the additional trouble everyone suspected him of being about to cause led to a reputation of distrust. But then JP went to church camp and accepted the Lord Jesus and came back a completely different person. He was still a nonconformist, but whereas before he didn’t believe in God and thought religion was stuff people made up to control unruly teenagers, suddenly he was all about Jesus, and telling others about Jesus. I remember the reaction, however of our mid-size-town Methodist Church, which was confusion. They didn’t know what to do with him. Some people were happy for him – the more spiritually mature and open minded – but was never fully accepted. I hate to say it but I think it had just been too long since this church saw someone be born again in Christ. The Baptist church across the street on the other hand was happy to take him in and disciple him, so he eventually became a Baptist pastor.

If we want a more public example of the Christian community struggling to accept someone, my friend Steven pointed out to me the other day it would be Kanye West. For those of you who don’t know him, Kanye is a hip-hop artist known for his flamboyant ego, and husband to Kim Kardashian. Kanye has recently declared himself to be “radically saved,” and just released an album called *Jesus is King*. Jesus is King. In an age when many *Christian* musicians avoid wrestling with core theology, and many other musicians slowly drift from Christianity to secularity, such a straightforward message is surely striking.

The struggle to accept Kanye has mostly to do with his reputation: he's known for posing as Jesus with a crown of thorns on the cover of Rolling Stone, and comparing himself to God in song lyrics, not to mention a lot of profanity and vulgarity. Kanye has been a walking illustration of lust and pride. Which makes him, you know, a sinner. Just like all of us. And sinners can be saved. That's who Jesus came for. People like my friend JP, and Kanye West, and Saul of Tarsus, and you and me. Once we know Jesus and are born again then we all need to be held to a high standard and we all need good teaching and we all need to grow in holiness. But first **we all need to be given a chance**.

Today we are finishing up a sermon series based on David Brooks' book *The Second Mountain*. As Pastor Tom drew for us last week, there are four main areas of life in which we can find something that is greater than *success,* something called *significance.* Those areas are Vocation, Marriage, Faith/Philosophy, and Community. Today we are looking at that last area, that last arena of life, called **Community**. And really all four of those areas must blend together in our search for significance. Our core beliefs and faith in Christ certainly affect how we live in our marriages and how we live in our vocation. In the same way our core identity in Christ must govern how we live in Community.

Brooks defines a healthy community as "a thick system of relationships" (266 / 23) A thick system of relationships. So what does that mean? Thick **relationships** are relationships with people who really know you, who know who you are and where you come from. They know what kind of trouble you got into when you were a kid. They know how to get a hold of your parents if you are causing trouble as we speak. And while that might be inconvenient while you are causing trouble, it's a really good thing when you are *in* trouble, because those same people will *help* you. And then a thick **system** means there are a lot of these relationships. A child or youth in a thick community is not dependent on just one or two parents or one mentor but has several mentors and role models who can speak into their life at opportune times and places, in ways they can understand and which will stick with them. [There's a great book called *Sticky Faith* which many of our youth leaders have read, and in that book they call this group of mentors "The Five" – the idea is we would reverse the idea of "five students to one adult" and say we need "five adults to one student," to get the whole Body of Christ investing in our next generation.] And then a vulnerable adult, that is, someone who is frail or sickly or disabled: in a thick community they have several friends and neighbors who know their patterns and habits and where they should be expected on a certain day of the week, people who know their needs and are happy to meet them. **In a "thick" community neighbors help each other.** And I don't mean just helping in an extreme crisis, but habitually, as a matter of course.

Brooks tells a story about "an Israeli couple who had moved to an affluent neighborhood in southern California... the husband was away for work, and called one night to chat with his wife. After they hung up, she went to check in on their four-year-old boy. He wasn't in his bed. She frantically searched the house, unable to find him. She ran to the pool to see if he had fallen in. He hadn't. She bolted out of the house and ran up and down her block screaming his name at the top of her lungs. It was about 10 PM. Lights were on in some of her neighbors' homes, but nobody came out to help. By now she was terrified. She ran back inside for one last search of the house and found her son in the family room. He had built a fort with cushions and was sleeping peacefully underneath it.

The next day, she was out walking, and a few of her neighbors politely asked her why she'd been screaming her son's name in the middle of the night. She looked at David Brooks with incredulity as she

told this story. “What sort of community is it where people don’t help a mother find her son? In Israel,” she said, “the streets would have been flooded with people in their pajamas frantically searching.”

That story struck a nerve with me. I value privacy as much as the next American, but I want to live in the kind of community where my neighbors can come to me for help, and where adults and even kids can randomly go to each other’s houses and knock on the door and walk in – and it not be seen as weird.

Which reminds me of my old next door neighbor, **Bill Thomas**. Bill worked at Altus Air Force Base with my dad. They played tennis together, and our families went to the same church, and we were next door neighbors, so Bill’s family and ours became good friends. Actually, it’s a small world because Bill’s son Jeffrey, who was a few years ahead of me in school, is part of Asbury and helps in the student and kids ministries, and Jeff’s wife Lisa works in our finance department. [Actually, when Christine and I got here to Asbury there were several people here from previous chapters in both of our lives to help welcome us, which was either because of God’s special providence, or because it’s just such a big church that when you come here you’re bound to know **somebody.**] Now 30 years later I have friends, and I have tennis buddies, and I do know my neighbors, but I can’t say that I or my children have anyone in our lives **quite** like Bill Thomas. That’s because Bill used to come over to our house to chat **frequently.** He had his own special doorbell ring. “ding dong, -d-ding – ding- ding-dong.” Which some people might find annoying but worked for us. My sister and I would always get excited when we heard that doorbell ring because it meant Bill was going to come in and start teasing us. Sometimes it would be in the afternoon when everyone got home from work and school and sometimes it would be in the evening as we were doing homework. Other times it might be on Saturday. He would come to chat with my dad about something at work or church or local politics, but when he saw us kids he would give us a hard time about something and we might act shy but we loved it. I remember when I turned 10 years old, Bill said “oh James, so I hear you’ve become a teenager! Yeah, see, you’re **ten,** and that’s a two digit number now, so you’re a **teen*ager!* Alright!” And then when I was getting close to my black belt in karate he would repeatedly ask me, “So have you registered yet?” And when I asked him what he meant he said, “you know, registered your deadly weapons. You’re a karate master now, so your arms and legs, they’re deadly weapons; you can’t just be walking around with those things, you’ve got to register them.” Which is a total myth by the way, and I knew he was full of it, but it did sort of make me feel accomplished. Bill just made life more fun. I know that he and my dad were very good friends, and they must have had some serious conversations. But for me he was my local comedian /slash/ encourager, and he added to my community. Bill passed away way too young and is no longer with us, unfortunately, but I can still hear his jovial voice echoing from many occasions in my youth.

We had some other great neighbors in that neighborhood on the edge of Altus, OK. There was Bill’s wife Sandy, who once bound up my finger when I got a nasty wasp sting. I was home alone one afternoon playing wall-ball, throwing a tennis ball against my house – that was back when it was normal to leave your older-elementary kids home alone – and I threw the ball against a wasp nest without realizing it, and ran up to try to tag the wall before one of my imaginary friends threw me out – which sounds kind of sad now that I think about it, but I promise I did have real friends too. Anyway, this wasp stung me, and it hurt really bad, and my parents weren’t around to help, so I went next door and rang the doorbell and looked pathetic, and Sandy Thomas took me in and put some baking soda and warm water on it and a band-aid and I was good to go. Then there was my neighbor across the street, Rich; I don’t even

remember Rich's last name. He was not near as talkative as Bill but he was a nice guy, and he had a cool pickup truck. And sometimes he would give me a ride to karate class on Saturday mornings. Not regularly but sometimes, when both of my mom and my dad were working, or one was working and the other was out of town. You see we thought it was normal to actually *do* things for your neighbors, and to not feel bad asking your neighbors to do things for you.

As I was reading these chapters on Community in *The Second Mountain* I surprised myself with my reactions. You know, I found myself getting downright emotional. Something hit home with these stories – especially when he said “In these kinds of communities – which were typical in all human history until the last sixty years or so – people extended to their neighbors the sort of devotion that today we extend only to family” (267 / 23) Did you get that? You might think he is exaggerating a bit but I think it's basically true. For most of human history people extended to their neighbors the sort of devotion that today we extend only to family, if to anyone at all. The change can be seen in farm country on the one hand and urban tenements on the other hand, and everything in between. 100 years ago, even 50 years ago, they all used to have thicker systems of relationships than seem to be the norm now. Think as far back as you can to the earliest years of your own life; think about any stories your parents and grandparents told you of neighbors helping one another and knowing one another; think about books you have read [Wendell Berry is one of my favorite authors, by the way, if you want to read some good books about neighbors.] So do you think this is true? If so, what do you think has brought our culture to this point when we forget what a real Community is supposed to be like?

I don't have all the answers to that and neither does David Brooks, but it's a start to identify that there is something we are lacking. Here's another of my favorite quotes from ch. 23: “Community life – care for one another – is built on friction, on sticky and inefficient relationships” (270 / 23) I love that. I mean, “sticky” isn't my favorite word, but I love the word “inefficient.” When we make life too efficient, and boil it down to just the necessities, is when we miss out on meeting and knowing actual *people.* Relationships happen when we are not in a hurry to get from A to B. I mean, I really don't want to judge anyone for ordering your groceries online and using delivery or pickup, cause we do it too sometimes... but as we incorporate these various time-saving technologies into our lives we really need to ask ourselves the question: **What are we saving time for?** Is there still room in our lives for just running into people and chatting so that on down the road we have some friends?

Another excerpt which caught my eye was in reference to the bewildering array of programs aimed at helping *individuals* born into poverty and hardship, which often involve getting those individuals a great college scholarship, which then amounts to a “ticket out” of their community. There's a problem with that which Brooks points out: it doesn't do anything to help the communities themselves, but just “skims the cream.” “With this approach you're not really changing the moral ecologies, or **the structures and systems that shape lives.**” (272 / 23) Now, depending on your politics you might be tempted to get suspicious when you see that phrase, “structures and systems,” and think he is talking about overthrowing capitalism and the free market economy or something crazy like that. But remember, David Brooks is a *conservative* (at least for the New York Times!). So no, that's not what he's talking about at all. The structures and systems Brooks refers to are **relationships**, and the way you bring healing to more people is to bring healing to their communities rather than just individuals. Healthy structures and systems mean relationships where you are known and loved by your neighbors which

allow you to thrive in your life and community. **Healthy structures and systems** mean kids grow up in a stable environment with a neighbor Bill who gives them a hard time, a neighbor Sandy who can patch up their wounds, and yes a neighbor Rich who can give them a ride in his pickup truck [provided he is known and trusted by those kids parents of course; I know what you 21st century people are thinking]. Unhealthy structures and systems mean that the environment around you tends to make you isolated, lonely, and unknown. It's not about capitalism or communism or any other "ism," or an ailment of the political left or the right. It's an ailment all humanity is prone to but which seems worse in our time – **people starving for community**. I'm telling you friends, look around. Look around where you live, where you work, where you shop, and even right here at church. And you will see people starving for community. I think we need to **ask God for eyes to see** these people; then a heart to love; then courage to act, courage to help.

So back to Saul and Ananias... thanks to a vision from the Holy Spirit, Ananias obediently *accepts* Saul into the community, laying gentle hands on this man who had laid violent hands on the community. At that moment "something like scales fell from his eyes," and then he gets baptized. Isn't that something. Saul had seen vision of the Lord Jesus himself on the road to Damascus, back in the beginning of chapter 9, and Jesus had given him a personal revelation at that time: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And Saul had said "Who are you Lord?" And Jesus then said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Do you find it a little odd that Jesus says "you are persecuting ME," while Saul had never even met Jesus? That's because **Jesus identified Himself fully with his sheep, with his saints, his little children, his brothers and sisters, his Community**. What Saul did to them, he did directly to Jesus. But by the grace of God Saul's life was about to change. He would now become a servant of God and build up that very same Community.

And it is very significant that Saul did not walk away from that meeting with Jesus a completely changed and functional man. No, his change was still incomplete. He couldn't SEE. **It was not until his Baptism, when the community opened its arms and accepted him, that Paul became completely whole**. Now he was In Christ. Now he was whole.

And then what happened? In Acts 9 verse 20, Saul immediately started preaching Jesus in the synagogues of Damascus. People were shocked and a little weirded out by it, naturally. This guy had just been "causing havoc" among "the people who invoke the name of Jesus" – which might be a polite way of saying "the Jesus freaks" – and now he was one of them. The apostles at Jerusalem were suspicious too. But then his friend Barnabus shared Saul's conversion story with them, they accepted him as a brother, and they let him continue his ministry. Then the narrator, Luke, summarizes the results of the ministries of Peter, John, Stephen, Philip, and the newly converted Saul: "the Church had peace and was built up in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria." (Acts 9:31 NRS)

We see only a glimpse of the early Church in this particular story, but the whole book of Acts fleshes it out quite a bit more, and you can see some of that if you are reading along in your Sermon Journal. The book of Acts shows us that the Church, for all its many flaws, is about the "thickest" community out there. **The Church, as the Body of Christ, should be a thick web of relationships which brings security to every member, young and old, strong and weak.**

So how is your web of relationships? What are your relationships like in your physical neighborhood? And how about in the Church? Certainly we can all wish that we had more and better supportive relationships. But to find them we need to make certain investments. I want to lift up a few practical ideas for you on how to invest in a strong web of Christian relationships for yourself; and if you are currently raising children, this will bless them as well.

First would be to find yourself a **Discipleship Community**. A lot of what I'm going to be doing here at Asbury is supporting our existing Discipleship Communities and starting new ones. Right now we've got about 30 different Discipleship communities, which meet concurrently at all three of our worship hours on Sunday mornings, as well as one on Wednesday evening. In a large church like Asbury it is sometimes easy to be anonymous. When you're in a community you can't be anonymous, and that's a good thing. This is where we live out our Christian discipleship with people who know us. Our communities learn the Bible together, they care for one another, they serve in God's mission together. There are lots of reasons to **not** join a Community – but I can tell you as a pastor who's been in a few churches and watched a lot of people come and go: if you get connected with a discipleship community you are much **more** likely to stay connected to this local expression of the Body of Christ, and much **less** likely to drift away. Because that's how communities work; they bind people together.

We do understand there are those who can't fit a Community into your schedule, and some of your reasons are good. 😊 Like if you're really involved in music, or hospitality, or volunteering with your youth and kids. And for that reason we try to make those music and service groups at Asbury the kinds of places where you make good friends and form **a thick web of relationships** as well.

There are different levels of community, of course. You can't get to know a group of 2000 people like you can get to know a group of 150 people, and you can't get to know a group of 150 people like you can a group of 40, or a group of 12, or a group of 6. For that reason we have **Small Groups**. Small groups have always been a vital part of Christian discipleship, especially the Methodist movement. Most of Asbury's small groups are actually organized **through** our Discipleship Communities, while others are available through our Young Adult ministry, our Men's Ministry, United Methodist Women, and several other groups here and there. It would be very difficult to catalogue all the small groups at Asbury, since some are unofficial, and many were formed decades ago. That's the nature of a big church, but the important thing is people find each other and stick with each other as the Christian life progresses and the years go on. Finding the right group can certainly be a challenge, but I promise you, it is worth it.

To see me up here talking about Discipleship Communities and Small Groups may look a lot like a church advertisement. If you're comfortable just coming to worship it may sound like I am pushing "extra" activities on you. But **remember Saul at his baptism: he didn't become completely **whole** until he became part of the community**. Remember the woman running around her neighborhood frantic wondering why no one would help her. That's not the way it's supposed to be. It's normal to feel lost and disconnected when we don't enjoy a thick web of relationships. It can be hard and awkward to forge those relationships, but it's worth it. If you've **ever** thought of visiting a Community or looking for a small group, if you have even a **hint** of an idea that the Lord might be prompting you at this time, please let this be the day. I hope to have my inbox flooded this afternoon with people asking for help finding a community or a group (that's jlambert@asburytulsa.org). When you reach out to me, I hope I

don't disappoint you by not always having the perfect answer for every need, but I will do my best to get you in touch with the right people. And then I hope our Communities don't disappoint you by being filled with regular people who might not always say the right things – but they are growing in Christ together, and they could grow more if you were there.

Our time draws to a close. Soon our moment of corporate worship will end, but our Community will go on. We are the Body of Christ: The same Christ that Saul persecuted, the same Christ who then sent him to start new churches throughout the Roman Empire. Jesus, who is both God and man, came to join our fallen and sinful human community as a representative of the Original Community! The Trinity: Father Son and Holy Spirit, together forever. One of the mysteries of our faith is that Jesus Christ came to draw us up into that eternal Community so we could take part in it. As Christians we get to be a shadow and a reflection and preview of that Community here on Earth. Let us not get caught up in time-saving technologies and techniques, but let us remember what we are actually saving time for. **Let us strive to live truly connected to God and to one another, in our church and in our neighborhoods. Let us treat our neighbors as family.** Let us ask God to make it so, and as far as it depends on us, let's live it out. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.