

Mark 3:13-21 | Revealed in His Company

Welcome: Good evening and welcome. We are so glad that you have chosen to be here with us to sing, to celebrate a baptism, to listen to God's word, to pray and to be fed at the Lord's Table.

Sermon Series: When Jesus began His ministry, people had expectations for who he would be and what he would do for them. Some of those expectations were accurate, but many were not. Often the words and deeds of Jesus caught people off guard and forced them to let go of their preconceived notions. Today Jesus continues to surprise people. He continues to meet us in unexpected ways that force us to change - to let go of what we expect from Him and to embrace Him on His own terms.

The church around the world is currently in the season of Epiphany - it is a time of the year dedicated to celebrating the revelation of the Son of God - and so, we are spending these weeks exploring the Gospel of Mark to see how Jesus chose to reveal Himself.

Last week we read the story of Jesus healing the paralyzed man and we talked about how Jesus revealed Himself in His *forgiveness*.

Today: This evening we'll see how Jesus revealed Himself in His *community*. We're going to take a closer look at what it meant for Jesus to invite twelve men to be His followers and we'll ask what it means for us, both men and women, who wish to follow Jesus as well.

Community: The word community is an important one and not just for the church. We are all born into the original community - a family. We grow up in neighborhood communities, are educated in school communities, play in sport communities, laugh and rest and explore and date in friend communities - if we marry we marry into a strange, new community called in-laws. Third spaces like gyms and coffee shops and restaurants take on a

community life of their own. We look for communities in which we can belong, and we know that our communities shape us. Ask someone to share their story and they will, most likely, begin talking about the communities that have had helped make them who they are.

As we grow up, fewer communities are ready-made for us - we find that we have to go looking for community. So we join book clubs or adult kickball teams. Happy hour after work becomes essential if you want to have sense of community in the office. Certain neighborhoods here in Richmond are seeing a tremendous spike in prices because word has gotten around that it is a good community.

In the midst of all this community talk comes the idea of Christian community. Many of us who walk through the doors of a church are searching for a community in which we can know other people and be known by others. A community that will care about us, value us and miss us if we're absent.

Since community is so important to us, it's worth asking, "Is Christian community the same sort of thing as other communities - only with a little religion sprinkled in?" Example: If you like golf and over-priced smoothies, then country club is the community for you and if you like God and Christian stuff then the church is the community is for you. Is Christian community simply one of many options on the menu?

It can certainly feel that way at times, but we at Redeemer are convinced that Christian community is actually a different sort of thing entirely. It is not of the same species as the other communities in our city. It works in a totally different sort of way. Here's the idea:

Big Idea: Christian community is *only* found through and in Jesus.

Bonhoeffer: Let's begin exploring this idea with a story. In 1935, a young pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer moved to the small German town of

Finkenwalde in order to lead a secret and illegal training school for other young pastors. These were men from all over Germany and Poland whose Christian faith had led them to resist the Nazis. They lived in cheap, quickly-thrown-together houses and spent their days studying, playing soccer, cooking for one another, singing and talking and listening to each other. Though this little community did not last very long, it made a profound impact on Bonhoeffer - especially regarding what it meant to be a part of a Christian community. His reflection on his time with those twenty-five men led him to write a little book called *Life Together*.

I'd like to read you just a few sentences from it. "*Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to each other only through and in Jesus Christ.*"¹

Text: Keep this in mind as we turn our attention back to the Gospel of Mark. In this story, Jesus has reached the point in His life and ministry where he already has a large crowd of people following him. And he could have continued to let that be the case. He could have allowed Himself to be a one-man operation, doing everything Himself. He also could have allowed the crowd to stay a crowd - all the individuals being a part of an exciting religious movement, but without any intimate relationships - no community. Many churches and ministries have this sort of dynamic. A singular leader surrounded by an excited throng of people who don't really know each other and don't really know the leader. Much excitement, very little relationship. Much enthusiasm and passion, very little community.

But Jesus, in His wisdom and love, resists the natural way of things and instead invites twelve men into a very special kind of friendship. He invites each as individuals, but once everyone has gathered - it is clear that a new group, a new family has been formed. Verse 14 lets us in on the two

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Life Together*. 21.

reasons that Jesus did this. First, that they simply might be with Him. Second, that he might send them out to do things. The second reason - the *sending* usually gets a bit more attention because it seems to involve more action. But let's save that part of the conversation for another day. This evening, let's focus on what it means that Jesus desired to invite people into special friendship with Him for the purpose of simply *being with* Him. In essence, Jesus wanted to form a community.

Disciples as a Community: Have you ever thought about the disciples as the first Christian community? (Now they didn't know they were Christians yet - that term had yet to be invented) but they were doing what Christians do: spending time with Jesus, listening to Him and doing what He said. These twelve men, a handful of women and Jesus would spend almost three years traveling, working, talking, listening, cooking, eating and resting together.

**Whenever you want to understand a community, you need to understand how it began and what holds it together.*

Disciple's community through Jesus: And so we must not miss the essential detail that this first Christian community was initiated because Jesus drew them together. This is what we mean when we say that the disciples had community through Jesus. It was only through Jesus' invitation that they ended up together.

Some were married, some were single. Some were old, some were young. Some came from educated families, some came from blue collar jobs. Some were political activists, some wanted to withdraw from society. These men did not have a common affinity for any political, social, recreational, occupational or financial agenda - they simply had been invited and so they only had community *through* Jesus.

Disciples' Community in Jesus. You would think that such a group would not last very long. Surely once the twelve were gathered together they began talking (and worse) they began listening to each other. They would have quickly realized how different they were from each other and, if they were held together by preferences, tastes or culture, the group would have dissolved. But they didn't, they stayed together. Why? Because their community was not only initiated by Jesus, but held together - by unity in Jesus.

What the Disciples' Community was Not: The disciples were *not* a group of young men who were all equally fired up about a new religious movement and so became a team that started a world religion.

Instead they were a very diverse, unlikely group of strangers who found themselves in a community only because it was initiated through and held together in the person of Jesus.

Now stay with me - in the same way.

Redeemer is *not* a church of like-minded people who are all excited to start a new church together because we share the same religious preferences. No. If that is who we are, then we are not a Christian community.

Redeemer is a Christian community only to the extent that we have heard the invitation of Jesus - come and follow me. And we are held together by unity in Jesus - remain in me and I'll remain in you.

Different Sort of Community: Do you see how this is different? Do you see how the disciples' way and therefore our way of interacting with each other is so different from the way most communities operate? It is very important to understand this, because if you do - then a church like Redeemer will make sense to you, but if you don't - then most of what we do will seem very strange.

Transition: Let's talk about how Jesus reveals Himself through this very different way of being in community. And let's talk about just three places where this revealing takes place. Worship, Small Group, Unlikely Friendships. (*Repeat: Jesus revealed in His community through our worship, small groups and unlikely friendships*).

Sunday Worship: When we gather together, like we've done tonight, we are not gathered around the fact that everybody likes one style of music. Each of us have different tastes and preferences - and so taste in music is not what invites us in and holds us together. Some of us would prefer a more formal service, others of us - less formal (The Marotta household is divided on that one!) So it can't be degree of formality that holds us together. Take a moment to look around the room. I bet you see a few faces that look a bit like yours but most of them do not - we are not gathered and held together by common age, or race, or sex, or life-stage.

The Individual Call: No, we are gathered because each of us, as individuals, have heard the invitation of Jesus. Perhaps that invitation came long ago when you were a child, or maybe it came more recently. Maybe you're here simply because someone else invited you. But you're here. You could have been somewhere else, but you're here - and Jesus invites you to move closer (to Him and to each other) - to move from the crowd into community.

And we respond to this invitation as individuals. Your parent or spouse or roommate or friend cannot respond for you. The disciples first came as individuals - that's why we are given their names. Only later, as the rest of the story of Jesus and his disciples unfolds, are they referred to as a group.

The Corporate Unity: The movement is from the individual identity to the corporate identity. And that's how Redeemer began. First with a roster, a list of names of individuals. But as we move closer to Jesus and to each

other, we speak of ourselves more and more as a church family - with a corporate identity. This doesn't mean that the individual is lost or replaced, but rather that something new is gained - a new identity as a *member of this community of Jesus*.

Summarize: So, when we gather together for worship, we come as individuals responding to the invitation - through Jesus, but we come to be unified with each other in Jesus - to embrace a new identity as a member of His community. And thus Jesus is revealed in His community via our worship.

Small Groups: But Jesus reveals Himself in smaller communities as well. Do you know that the reason why we hope that every single individual is a part of a small group - is so that Jesus might be revealed in these smaller communities? How does that happen? It happens in the same way it does in worship but on a smaller, more intimate scale.

Resisting Affinity Groups: When you walk through the doors of somebody's home to participate in a small group, do you know why you're not there? You're not there because you share the same life-stage, age group, interests, tastes or preferences as the other members. It is not an affinity group. You are there, as an individual, because you have heard the invitation of Jesus and you are seeking to move from the crowd into community. The small group only gathers through Jesus - He is reason and means for the gathering. And so small groups resist becoming affinity groups by only gathering through Jesus.

Welcoming Christ in Each Other: But then once you're through the door, you'll either experience a sense of fellowship and camaraderie (closeness, membership) with the other people or you will not. You know what gets in the way? When you are looking for something else besides Christ in each other. When I start looking for a common bond through shared interests - I will either fool myself into thinking I've found Christian community (when what I've really found is *myself* in someone else) or I will be disappointed

(because the other person has not met my expectations for what community feels like).

Both of these miss the point of Christian community. When the disciples met one another, they were gathered through Jesus and they were connected, unified in Him. Do you think they *felt* particularly close in the beginning? Probably not. It was probably awkward. They probably annoyed each other. Did that mean they hadn't found community? No! They had found the best community - but one unlike any other they had experienced. They had to learn a new way of being with other people - they had to learn that what they had in common was Jesus and that was enough.

It is more than enough for us as well. In fact, it can make our small groups the most reliable, consistent kind of community in this city - because they are gathered through Jesus and unified in Him. And that is so much more stable than our life-stage (which changes) and our preferences and interests (which also change).

Summary: So Jesus is revealed in His community via our worship and our small groups - which are both gathered through Him and held together in Him. Lastly, Jesus is revealed in His community via our *unlikely friendships*.

Unlikely Friendships: By unlikely friendships, we mean friendships that would never naturally occur, but that do because of Jesus. These are friendships between people of different life-stages, different ages, different sexes, different levels of maturity, different skin color, different economic means, different interests. These friendships are so unlikely that they puzzle anybody looking in from the outside and beg the question how can you be friends with that person? What could you possibly have in common with them? The answer is simply Jesus. Jesus is the commonality - the friendships is made possible through him and sustained in Him.

All of us are looking for friends. Many of us are looking in the natural places - people that look and act like us. Has it occurred to you that one of the ways God might answer your need for friendship is in unlikely person? Someone you know, but you've never thought of them as a potential friend - because they are so different from you. If you are hungry for friendships, as I am, then let me encourage you to open yourself to the possibility of developing a friendship with someone through and in Jesus as opposed to through and in something else. This will be a new thing for many of us - but if we open ourselves to the possibility and are willing to persist through the newness and uncertainty - then we will see Jesus revealed in our midst - revealed in His community through our unlikely friendships.

Summary: Let me summarize before we conclude. When Jesus called the disciples to Himself - He formed a new community - the first Christian community. They were gathered through Him and held together in Him. Jesus reveals Himself in His community here: via our worship, our small groups and our unlikely friendships. All of these things become signposts in our lives and in our city that point towards the reality that these strange, diverse people are gathered together and held together by a different means than any other community in town. Our gathering and our unity, despite all of our differences become a means by which Jesus is revealed.

Bonhoeffer: Bonhoeffer discovered this - as many Christians throughout the ages have discovered this. It is not a new idea, it is an ancient reality - going all the way back to Jesus and His first disciples. And therefore it is real and it works no matter where you are, what year it is, and what sort of person is in front of you.

Towards the end of Bonhoeffer's life, he found himself imprisoned in the Flossenburg concentration camp, facing execution. In his last weeks and days, he never stopped participating as a member of the community of Jesus. And his fellow prisoners were drawn into this. Men and women, young and old, healthy and wounded, english, german, french, russian,

polish. No common culture, no common language, no common political conviction - but what they had was an invitation to community through Jesus and bond to each other in Jesus. And it was enough, more than enough. And it is more than enough for us.

May Jesus be revealed in *this* community - as we gather together through him and are bound to each other in Him.