



ELIZABETHTOWN  
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Creating Healthy Relational  
Boundaries, Pt 3:  
Let's Get Together*

Romans 12:3–8

By Pastor Jason Haldeman

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777 South Mount Joy Street  
Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania 17022  
717-367-1000  
[www.ETOWNCOB.ORG](http://www.ETOWNCOB.ORG)



“Oh how good and how pleasant it is for God’s people to dwell together in Unity” or as the King James Translation says “Oh how good and how pleasant it is for Brethren to dwell together in Unity”. It is good and pleasant to gather together. So often we mark special occasions with friends and family. Celebrations and holidays are often highlighted by gathering together with one another. Many of us participate in groups, clubs, sports teams and find them to be rewarding. In fact, for all of human history we have found success in clustering together in tribes, or families or communities. Working together, sharing resources, goods and ideas. Gathering together for festivals or to worship. We are indeed social creatures, created by God to flourish in community with one another. It is in our very nature to seek relationships, and in many ways unhealthy, when we lack any meaningful connection with others.

This of course does not mean that identifying as an introvert, preferring alone time, disliking large crowds or recharging in isolation is at all a bad thing. We certainly all have varying degrees or levels of comfort in differing social situations, but for all of us human relationships and belonging is an important part of our health and indeed also our spirituality. Recent research and evidence points to something that I think each and every one of us may intrinsically already feel or know.... In America feelings of loneliness have begun to reach an all time high and many feel isolated, feeling they are without meaningful relationships.

The American Psychological Association released an article this year that opened with these words “According to a 2018 national survey by Cigna, loneliness levels have reached an all-time high, with nearly half of 20,000 US adults reporting they sometimes or always feel alone. Forty percent of survey participants also reported they sometimes or always feel that their relationships are not meaningful and that they feel isolated.” This may at first seem surprising and yet then also not so shocking at all. I think this is because we can sense this in the world around us. What this means statistically is that where you sit today either yourself or someone on your left or

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right is sometimes or always lonely, and sometimes or always feel their relationships are not meaningful and feel isolated.

And aside from the negative emotions and feelings associated with loneliness and feeling isolated, there are real physical consequences as well. This APA article goes on to say “According to a meta-analysis... a lack of social connection heightens health risks as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or having alcohol use disorder... loneliness and social isolation are twice as harmful to physical and mental health as obesity.” So this sinking feeling many of us have about increasing isolation and loneliness in the world has very real social, emotional and even physical consequences.

We have spent the past two weeks considering self-differentiation and the ways in which we care for ourselves with setting healthy boundaries. Today we will consider the relationships and community we experience in our lives specifically here at church.

We have already discussed the popular “One body many parts” scripture found in Corinthians. Today we look at similar verses in Romans 12:3–8:

*<sup>3</sup>For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. <sup>4</sup>For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup>so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. <sup>6</sup>We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your[a] faith; <sup>7</sup>if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; <sup>8</sup>if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead,[b] do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.*

These verses help to remind us that our own gifts, our personalities and our individualism are necessary as a contribution to

the body and community. One of the challenges we face, especially in church life, is balancing what we sacrifice as individuals to be a part of a community, with what we must retain as individuals in order to benefit the community in new ways. Sometimes, perhaps especially within our own Christian heritage, we paralyze ourselves from action because of an over-abundance of concern with disrupting perfect unity within the body. Even when it comes from a genuinely good and loving place, without boundaries, we end up sacrificing so much of ourselves that it is unhealthy for the community.

Something that has always stuck with me through years of First Aid and CPR training is a reminder that as a first responder you can help no one if in an effort to be a hero you become a victim. Rushing to provide care even with the best intentions, if not done safely with boundaries, will make the situation worse if suddenly you become an additional person in need of care.

Being in a healthy community may not always be easy but it is rewarding. This is one of the reasons that I have come to love my years at Camp Swatara so much. When it is done right, I believe communal living like that of summer camps can be some of the most important and formative experiences, especially for children and youth. It is the perfect experience to learn and develop ones own individuality within the context of a safe and loving community. There are many things that are special about camp:

1. Getting away
2. Learn who you are / who you can be / reinvent yourself
3. Forced to share space / define boundaries
4. Committed to community / want to be there
5. Depth of bonding / - 24/7

In fact, I am convinced that requiring all members of Congress to spend just a few days together at a summer camp facility, it

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could even be a really nice one, would reap incredible benefits. Can you imagine cooking and eating together, going fishing or hiking and then sitting around a campfire in large or small groups. Just a little bit of relationship and connection can go a long way.

The challenge we face as individuals and admittedly even as a church family is how do we make this happen? Today, despite being, “more connected than ever” most of us feel more isolated with fewer deep relationships. Part of the problem involves social changes that have been taking place for decades. Technology has often allowed us to “feel” more connected despite drifting apart. Many opportunities and busy schedules have not necessarily caused us to interact less with one another but may be affecting the quality and depth of those interactions.

There is this old story that is told about a sudden increase in depression that came to a village soon after washing machines started to arrive. The washing machines made doing laundry quick and easy freeing the woman of the village to do other activities. (I should add that this is a dated story so it is specifically talking about women of the village doing the laundry, but pastor Greg, after last week I am sure that if they were here today they would love to hear any of your tips on how they could do it better). Anyway, despite this incredible modern convenience being added to their lives there was a noticeable spike in the rates of depression throughout the town after purchasing a washing machine. You see, in this village the woman had traditionally gathered together down by the river to wash clothes, when they gave up the inconvenient manual labor of washing down by the river they also gave up an essential and healthy part of community.

I would venture to guess that this story resonates with many of us. We all likely wish we had better deeper and stronger relationships, and perhaps we feel we used to. We do not live in the same world as our parents and grandparents where community was potentially more ubiquitous and accessible because of sheer geography or common interests. I am sure

many of us wish we could find our own “river washing laundry group” (perhaps without the laundry labor part). But that is a helpful reminder to all of us that building relationships and community does take work. Perhaps not physical labor, but it does require us to make time, or to put ourselves out there, perhaps challenge ourselves to open up to healthy levels of vulnerability.

One of the challenges that many of us recognize is that like for many churches, it is increasingly difficult to know everyone because we no longer all live together in the same town, are related to each other or all grew up knowing each other’s families. Despite that challenge, this congregation remains an incredibly warm and welcoming church. It is not that individuals no longer want to get to know each other better and more deeply, we simply have found that more difficult with less opportunities. There is a near universal consensus that I have heard within this congregation about wanting to grow closer together. I hear from our older generations that they want to get to know those who have only started attending recently. I have heard from younger folks and new members a deep appreciation for our more established members and a desire to hear their stories. We know there are individuals who have attended together for years but still know little more than surface details about one another.

The reality is that with a church this size it is impossible for everyone to know everyone on a deep and personal level. However, it has become more clear to me and others that there is some real room for growth in increasing and deepening relationships within this church. And there are some ways we can work at this together.

First, going back to last week... We are all different, we all have our unique gifts and personalities and we must remember that others do as well. So as we seek to grow in relationships with each other, we should do so in healthy ways with our own individual boundaries that also acknowledge the boundaries of others. In any relationship or community, we sacrifice

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some of our own desires for others, doing this in a healthy and self-differentiated way is important.

Second, as a Christian community of faith we must look to Jesus as the example for our behavior and treatment towards one another. Going back to the scripture we can see Paul writes in verse 5 “so in Christ we, though many, form one body,” ... “In Christ”... We should seek to find our example in Christ and we can look to scripture for how we are to treat one another, the passage in Romans continues in verse 12 with...

*<sup>12</sup>Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. <sup>13</sup>Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*

*<sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.[c] Do not be conceited.*

*<sup>17</sup>Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

How we treat each other in communities really matters. If we are not holding out love to each other, if we are constantly leaving the same people to do the most challenging work, or not looking out for the vulnerable among us, we are creating unhealthy balances in our community.

The third thing we can do is take a risk and put yourself out there. This congregation offers a number of excellent opportunities; just take a look at the calendar in the bulletin. There are service opportunities, special interest groups, Sunday school classes, music opportunities. Many deep relationships have been formed over the years spending time together in these activities. I know that for many of you it may feel like schedules are so full you could not possibly add another group or activity. I completely understand. Perhaps there are other ways of putting yourself out there and increasing or deepening relationships here at church. Maybe by risking the awkward conversation with someone you don’t know



or even choosing to sit in a new pew or location in the sanctuary. Crazy right? As a habitual pew sitter myself I understand the struggle.

Next, We know that some of us are more social than others, so we have to remember to be invitational and show grace. We should not expect everyone to feel comfortable just showing for certain opportunities or events, sometimes it takes a personal invitation. Also since a part of being in community means openness to one another, we should be welcoming to any newcomers who may join established groups or activities. Or perhaps be prepared to graciously slide over or find a new place to sit if anyone does take me up on the challenge of sitting in a new pew. The bottom line is that if we are serious about increasing and deepening relationships within our church we have to welcome the process and those that come with it, expecting there to be some challenges along the way.

Finally, relationships happen over time and requires us to both share ourselves and listen to others. This does take time as well as trust and vulnerability. We have to be willing to learn from and about others as well as willing to share our own stories for the benefit of the greater community.

Pastors and commissions are also continuing to think of new ways to increase interaction and deeper relationship building. One of those new ideas is a small Groups program.

Over the past few months, a planning team has been meeting to develop a framework for a small groups program and recently a handful of small group leaders or facilitators have been gathering together in preparation for the start of this program in February. As is the case with any new program we are stepping out in faith, trying to identify many of the logistical challenges, but deeply committed to the idea that we want to provide additional opportunities for individuals within this church to increase and deepen relationships with others in this church community.

Over the coming weeks and throughout the rest of this year you will be hearing more about this small group program:

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- Focused on relationship building
- 8-10 people
- Meeting in homes
- About two times a month
- Multiple groups offered at a few different times during the week
- Commit through the end of the school year

Developing meaningful relationships is not easy... that is one of the reasons that many feel lonelier and more isolated today than in the past. But I know that communities like this one are uniquely well suited to help foster and grow relationships. Not only are we a church that practices great hospitality and Christian love toward one another, but there are increasingly more people here genuinely interested in developing deeper relationships in healthy and beneficial ways.

In a world that is becoming increasingly isolated and lonely, what better place is there to find a loving community? May we all work together with open arms and open hearts to walk beside each other, sharing our stories and strengthening our community. Not just for our own benefit, but for those who have yet to join us as we walk forward together.



