

From:
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Living a whole life
attentively ...
*together ... in the
real world ... for
the good of all ...
in response to God

4* Living as Community

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It's the Sunday after Thanksgiving, four in the afternoon, and I'm busy making sweet potatoes and stuffing for twenty-five. Sarah's at the other house setting the table. I run over to get some butter, and we banter about whether it's better to set two separate tables in the kitchen (for more seats) or to keep them both together (so we can all face each other). We have this same argument every year. I finish the potatoes—fifteen minutes late—and Leah helps me carry them to the other house. I walk past the garden to the back door, which enters to the kitchen. Rodney and Marcus are at the sink doing dishes. I notice that the tables are still together.

The Sunday after Thanksgiving is an annual feast day for the extended family of the Rutba House community. We are a community of Christians who try to pray together and support one another in the kind of practices this book is about. I live here with my wife, Leah, our son, JaiMichael, and nine other folks (this week). We're a group of married and single people who share two houses, food, money, and a common life of prayer and discipleship. Sometimes we call ourselves a "new monastic community" because we've learned so much from the monastic movements that

have carved out space to live as countercultural communities throughout the history of the church. But our annual Thanksgiving feast is a good reminder that we're really just a big family, extended beyond the ties of biology because we've become brothers and sisters of Jesus.

Before dinner we gather in the living room with sparkling grape juice in Mason jars to remember the past year and toast the good gifts God has given us. I look around at the faces and wonder how we ever got together. A carpenter who used to teach English. An ex-con who works the door at a blues club. A single mother who cleans up at a nursing home. A mother of three who shares kid duty with her husband while they're both in graduate school. A college student who lived at Rutba in high school, home for the holiday with two new friends. A computer analyst. A retiree. A six-month-old baby.

This is the community God has given us. We're black and white (and shades between), rich and poor (according to the IRS), formally educated and streetwise. We're an odd bunch—a "peculiar people," you might say. Maybe an act of God is the only thing that could have brought us together. We raise our Mason jars to give thanks and sing a classic from our neighborhood church: "Thank you, Lord. . . . You been so good. . . . I just want to thank you, Lord."

*Longing for Life Together

Sociologists call places like Rutba House "intentional communities," and I'll admit that it takes a good bit of intentionality to make life together happen. But I don't know that good intentions are what brought us together. Sometimes people who stop in to observe our communal life will say something like, "Oh, this is so beautiful . . . you must be saints." But we're always quick to clear up their misperception (if they stayed another day or two, I suspect it would clear itself up). "No, we're not saints," I usually say. "We're broken people who live together because we know we can't make it on our own."

Living as community is the practice of sharing our lives through mutual care and hospitality with all of God's people so we can be reconciled to the God who made us (Eph. 2:15-16). Truth is, when Jesus calls people to follow him, he calls all of us into community. "I ask . . . on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word," Jesus prayed, "that they may

all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (John 17:20-21). The great gift of God's incarnation in Jesus is that we are all invited into the beloved community of God's family.

This beloved community takes many different forms. In the early church, community emerged in the homes of wealthy Christians who invited poor neighbors to eat and worship with them. For much of church history, the local parish has been a place where Christian brothers and sisters connected as members of an extended family in their village or town. During the liberation struggle in Latin America, "base communities" of people who read scripture together and worked to put its liberating message into action developed among poor campesinos.

There is no ideal form of Christian community. In the places where we are, the practice of living as community calls us to ask, "How is God leading me deeper into life with other people?" I should confess at the outset of this chapter that I'm no expert on community. But I've felt the need to share life with others, and I've received the great gift of people who are willing to share their life with me. I feel like I know what Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, was talking about when she remembered her life as "the long loneliness" (also the title of her autobiography). "We have all known the long loneliness," Day wrote, "and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community." I don't know a better summary of what life is about.

That deep desire for connection—for the embrace of others who love me and help me know who I am—has been like a song in the background of my life since I was a child. I grew up in a tobacco farming community that was disintegrating as the sons of farmers took jobs in the city and migrant workers did more and more of the fieldwork. Like many sons of Stokes County, North Carolina, I left in search of something better. A few years later, on the campus of Eastern University in the suburbs of Philadelphia, I fell in love with the poetry of Wendell Berry. His descriptions of a place in Kentucky reminded me of the hills in Western North Carolina and the voices of men who sat on Coca-Cola crates at John Brown's Country Store and told stories. And I grew nostalgic for a community I'd never really known—a community that had, perhaps, never fully existed. Yet, somehow I knew community was what I was made for. The long loneliness inside of me whispered that I could not rest until I'd found a life to share with others.

Community is “in” these days. Real estate agents offer homes to up-and-coming young Americans in planned communities. College students and young professionals stay connected through virtual communities of social networks and second-life alter egos. Community gardens, community art collectives, and community coffee shops have become the hallmarks of hip urban life. Madison Avenue knows this, of course. Not long ago, an automobile manufacturer was promoting sales through ads that urged car buyers to join “the Saturn community.” Marketing firms create ads that touch a deep human need. What is more, they touch it at a time in history when the social fabric that holds communities together has been stretched thin by the pressures of a highly mobile economy. The more fragmented life becomes, the more we feel our need for community.

Take, for example, the promising college graduate who decides to go to law school. Let’s call her Christa. She was born in New York City, when her parents were in grad school there. Christa’s family moved to Atlanta when she was three, but she really considers Buffalo home because that’s where she moved with her mom to be close to family after her parents divorced. She went to college in Chicago, graduated at the top of her class, and has applied to law schools in three different states. Whichever school Christa chooses, she knows she probably will have to spend her summers somewhere else if she wants to get the best internships. And she hopes to clerk for a Supreme Court justice in DC after graduating.

If you had a chance to read Christa’s blog, you’d know that Christa longs for community and commitment. Throughout college she volunteered as a tutor at an inner-city elementary school. She fell in love with the kids there and found meaning in her time with them. She really wants

“ We have all known the long loneliness, and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.—Dorothy Day ”

to get married and have a family herself but feels like she needs to settle down first.

Christa dated a few guys in college but didn’t want to get too serious. She’s afraid of reliving her parents’ failed relationship. She was in a Bible study in college with some girls who really helped her to grow and took care of her, but Christa never found a church where she felt at home.

Now Christa is back in Buffalo for the summer. She’ll be moving soon, so she takes Sunday mornings to catch up on sleep. With a little more time to reflect, though, she admits that she’s not satisfied. Her life feels scattered. She wants more of the stuff that matters and knows law school won’t provide it. How is she going to find what she really longs for?

Christa’s deepest hunger is for community. In her quest to find who she is as an adult, she has felt the long loneliness and her need for the mutual care of a life shared with other people. She feels alone—but in fact she is far from the only one who experiences this hunger. This is a desire that she shares with all human beings.

Of course, Christa’s socioeconomic situation has shaped the options available to her in this quest for belonging. Because she went to college and has access to the Internet, Christa connects with friends on Facebook. If she had grown up in East L.A., she might be exploring her identity with the group of guys who gather after work to play soccer four nights a week. If she had been born in inner-city Detroit, she might have joined a gang. If she’d been a poor girl in West Virginia, she might have signed on with the army.

To say that the desire for partnership is a basic human desire is not to say that any of us necessarily knows what to do with it. A seemingly endless quest for connection sends some people reeling from one unhealthy relationship to another. The long loneliness has been the driving force behind the Ku Klux Klan, the Bloods and the Crips, the Khmer Rouge, and the Interahamwe of Rwanda (just to name a few not-so healthy communities). The more deeply we feel the need for community in a fragmented world, the more likely we are to create exclusive communities where we feel safe. Wanting desperately to keep the little community we have, we are tempted to cast out anyone we think is not like us.

You don’t have to be living on the edge to succumb to this temptation. While the poor may band together in gangs or hate groups, middle-class Americans also form exclusive and unhealthy communities along lines of

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race, class, and nationalism. It's no accident that one of the most unifying causes for middle-class Americans in the twenty-first century has been the “war on terror.” Without a deeper vision for community, we easily identify ourselves by saying who we're against.

We long for community—all of us—but our longings can be turned toward good or evil in a world broken by sin. The question is not really whether we'll live in community. We are always a part of many communities because the fabric of our lives is interwoven with neighbors near and far—even with the earth itself. But how do we know what good community looks like? How can we keep from following a natural desire to an unnatural and destructive end? We need a story we can trust that tells us who we are.

*What People Were Made For

I grew up on the Bible, memorizing verses to back up the doctrine that my church thought important. Most of those verses were about how Jesus died to save me from my sin. Eventually I decided to study the biblical languages. When I did, I discovered that almost all the “yous” in scripture are plural. This startled me because I had learned to read Scripture as if it were written to *me*. I had to sit down and reread the whole Bible. What difference does it make if this whole book is written for a people called to walk with God in the world? I started at the beginning and read about how God created everything in the beginning, carving out a space in the midst of chaos to make a home with people. Genesis 1:27 really jumped out at me:

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

I'd been told all my life that I was special because I was created in the image of God. But I'd never listened to what Genesis said that image looked like—namely, a “them.” When God went to create humanity, he created a community. Or, maybe I should say *they* created a community. “Let us make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness,” Genesis says (1:26, emphasis added). Could this mean, I wondered, that God is not a *he* but a community who in turn was *creating* a community, “according to our likeness”?

When I went to seminary later and read some good theology, I learned that my question had actually been pondered by others for centuries. Christians have long read this verse as an early indication of the Trinity, in which God is three persons forever giving themselves to one another so fully that they are also one being. God is the beloved community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To be created in God's image is to be made for life together.

When you read the New Testament with this in mind, you notice how Jesus is always inviting people into a new community (often through actions that echo God's work of forming community among the twelve tribes of Israel). Jesus calls twelve disciples, interprets Israel's law for them in the Sermon on the Mount, insists that outsiders are welcome in God's family, heals people who are broken by oppression, expands the boundaries of what it means to be family, denounces corrupt religious leaders, reteaches God's manna economy by feeding the five thousand, and proclaims the year of Jubilee. After doing all of this, Jesus explains to his disciples that the way of God's community is so counter to the selfish ways of the broken human community that it is going to get him killed.

At Jesus' lowest point, his little community of disciples runs off and leaves him. Peter refuses to admit that he ever knew Jesus. It's hard to imagine a more broken community than this one. But Jesus gets up from the dead to prove that God is able to overcome the very worst brokenness. The resurrected Jesus tells his disciples that if he ascends to heaven, he will send the Holy Spirit to enliven their communal life with the very same power that was in him.

In the book of Acts we read about how God's Spirit came on the disciples at Jerusalem and inspired a life together unlike anything they had known before. “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions,

but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all” (Acts 4:32-33). Suddenly there was a community of people who lived together peaceably, sharing what they had so that no one was needy.

People who heard about this community were fascinated by it. The good news about Jesus wasn't just a set of propositions about how God could fix their sin problem. It was a concrete community that promised to fulfill their deepest longing. It's little wonder that Acts says, “And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

I'm a follower of Jesus today because I stumbled into a little Christian community just as I was beginning to ask critical questions about the church in society. I wanted to know why Jesus said “blessed are you who are poor” (Luke 6:20) while most of the church was eager to achieve middle-class comfort. I wanted to know why Jesus blessed the peacemakers (Matt. 5:9), but many Christians waved the flag in a time of war. I wanted to know how in the world you could give to whoever asks (see Luke 6:30) if the beggars are always begging and the hucksters are always hawking their wares.

As I was asking those questions, God led me to a community of imperfect people who opened their door to strangers, visited with homeless friends on the street, shared their incomes in mutual care, and talked about Jesus with an authenticity I hadn't witnessed before. As I got to know those folks, I learned of other communities like theirs all over the country. Beneath the radar of American Christianity, many of them had been living the way of Jesus quietly for decades. As I visited and talked with these communities, I realized that they didn't think they were doing anything very new. They'd simply joined the long tradition of communities who have tried to live in the way of Jesus since the book of Acts.

*The Witness of the Saints

In almost every era community movements have arisen to ask, *How can we live the way of Jesus faithfully in a new time?* One consistent stream of these communities is the movement known as monasticism. When the Roman Emperor Constantine offered his favors to the church and transformed it from a persecuted minority into the established imperial religion, men and

women now remembered as the desert fathers and mothers went out into the Egyptian wilderness to discern a new way of life. Monasticism was born in the way of life these desert Christians developed.

One leader of early monasticism, Pachomius, was born in Upper Egypt at the end of the third century, the son of a Roman soldier. He grew up knowing next to nothing about Christianity. When he was a teenager, he ended up in prison, not for causing trouble but because of political changes. A prisoner of war, he sat in a barren cell, uncertain what fate awaited him.

While Pachomius was in prison, some people came by every day to slip food into his cell. These weren't his guards but people coming to help him of their own will. Pachomius asked one of them who they were and learned that they were followers of a man named Jesus who had told them to visit prisoners and feed the hungry. Impressed by the generosity of those Christians, he joined them when he was released from prison. He learned from a desert father named Palemon how to live as a hermit and followed that way of prayer and simplicity for a number of years. But in a recurring dream, Pachomius saw Christians living together in community that filled the earth with “sweetness”; this life was like “honey covering the earth.” Deciding the dream came from God, he set out to found a

12 Marks of a New Monasticism

- 1 Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire.
- 2 Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us.
- 3 Humble submission to Christ's body, the church.
- 4 Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life.
- 5 Hospitality to the stranger.
- 6 Nurturing common life among members of intentional community.
- 7 Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18.
- 8 Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation.
- 9 Care for the plot of God's earth given to us along with support of our local economies.
- 10 Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children.
- 11 Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate.
- 12 Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life.

community for monks at Tabenna. Today Pachomius is considered the father of communal monasticism, also called cenobitic monasticism.

Such movements have emerged over and over again in church history. Monastics inspired by the communal way of life developed by Saint Benedict in fifth-century Italy still pray and work in communities of vowed women or men all over the world. Other Christians have created communities of Christian brothers or sisters who went out into the world to serve God among the poor. When the advent of a cash economy transformed social life in Europe, for example, two wealthy Italians from Assisi, Francis and Clare, renounced their own privileges to start orders (that is, ordered communities) of this kind, in celebration of God's great sabbath economy. The point of monasticism is not that everyone should live as monks do. The point is that, with God's help, we can make it possible for people in different times and places to develop life-giving ways of being in community.

There is a new monastic movement today. The grassroots emergence of communities of intentional discipleship, which has been happening in Western Christianity for about seventy-five years, gives me great hope that we can indeed follow Jesus in a post-Christian era. This is one of the main places where community is flourishing in the church today. But these communities do not exist for their own sake. The proliferation of new monastic communities is a sign for the whole church that the world is hungry for the way of life Jesus taught and practiced. The practices that mark new monastic communities may have to be modified in different contexts, but they offer hope that people can receive the gift of God's way in the world.

*Demonstration Plots of the Kingdom

A Ugandan friend tells me that when he was growing up in the village, farmers used to travel to towns to see the demonstration plots planted by agricultural schools. In these plots they could observe new irrigation techniques and the effects of various planting methods. They could taste the cabbage that had been grown in a new way and compare it with cabbage from their own fields. The demonstration plots existed for the good of all the farmers in the region.

Because Christian community always exists for the sake of the world, the reconciliation and mutual care that we practice within the church is

“ Like leaven in the bread dough, we live the beloved community . . . so that the world can see something of the life that's really life. ”

meant to be like a demonstration plot for the whole human community. Christians don't practice community for our own sake. Like leaven in the bread dough, we live the beloved community all people were made for so that the world can see something of the life that's really life.

I'm greatly encouraged by the Christian Community Development Association, a network of six hundred churches and ministries that have sprung up over the past twenty years in America's blighted urban neighborhoods. Focusing on church-based indigenous leadership development, these ministries offer a holistic vision of God's kingdom through job programs, worship services, prison reentry programs, schools, health clinics, summer camps, and housing programs.

For CCDA churches and ministries, “thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven” is more than a prayer to God. It is an invitation to get to work, ensuring that each person in their neighborhoods has what he or she needs to flourish as a child of God. The community God has made them part of inspires them to work for the betterment of the neighborhoods and the creation of a different kind of community for all people. CCDA emphasizes the importance of commitment to a neighborhood and its people. “If you're not going to stay fourteen years,” I heard one CCDA leader say, “don't come.” His point, of course, was that community takes time. You can't create it overnight. In places where trust has been broken and people have been abused, it may take a whole generation to build genuine community.

Community takes time wherever we are. In a highly mobile culture, we have to be intentional if we are going to get our roots in deep enough to find the waters of belonging in the communities where we live.

A Christian family living on a suburban cul-de-sac one day realized that they didn't know the names of anyone in the neighborhood except

the couple who had just moved in next door. So they invited the new folks next door over for dinner. They shared with them their desire to know their neighbors, and both families said they'd try to meet someone else on the street. A few years later, this little cul-de-sac in the suburbs has a dinner together at one family's house each week. They share garden tools and babysit each other's kids. The ones who are interested sometimes pray together. It's a nice reminder that, wherever we are, Jesus is right there. And that if you love your neighbor as yourself, you are far more likely to end up sharing life with your neighbors.

Many people go to church looking for something like this kind of neighborliness. However, just showing up once a week for worship with a large group of strangers is rarely enough. One of my friends has described the difference she experienced between just going to church and becoming an "intentional churchgoer." At a Thursday-night Bible study in a local parish she attended as a young, single woman she found a space to know others and get involved in their lives. "Supported and challenged by one another, transformed into an intentional family of prayer and sharing, we were a small community within a larger one," she writes.

Small groups are a wonderful way to carve out space for community within local churches. People who make the effort to know one another, pray with one another, read scripture together, and talk honestly about discipleship almost inevitably end up eating together. In the breaking of bread, we begin to realize what it means that because we eat one loaf, we are members of one body. And church is no longer the place you go (or don't) on Sundays. It becomes the people who help you remember who you are.

A church that forms community around food isn't only a better community for its own members. It can also foster community with neighbors and friends who are not part of the church. My friend Fred Bahnson manages the Anathoth Community Garden, which was started by a United Methodist church in North Carolina. After a brutal murder left everyone in their rural area afraid, this congregation had a vision that connection to the land could be an important part of the healing process for all. And so this church decided to start a garden where anyone could come, put in a few hours a week, and take home fresh produce in season.

Fred tells me that the garden has become a place where old farmers talk with college students from the nearby universities. Kids doing community

service work beside grandmothers who grew up gardening. A Zen Buddhist has become one of the most active members of the garden. He brings his famous stir-fry to garden potlucks and enjoys the fellowship. Without much fanfare, a little Methodist church has created a space where friendship can happen. And a neighborhood that was traumatized by murder isn't as afraid anymore. This neighborhood is becoming a community.

*Finding a Place to Practice Our Faith

A few years ago I was asked what I liked most and what I liked least about life at Rutba House. The best thing about community, I replied immediately, is knowing that there are people who love you, even though they really know you. And then I added this: the worst part is trying to love all those other people, even though you know them.

I don't want to give anyone the false impression that community is easy. I'll never forget the time I was speaking in class about God's gift of community and a Korean student in the back row raised his hand to say, "You know, I grew up in a tight-knit ethnic community. I felt suffocated, and people were always in my business. I've had enough of community."

I had to admit that he had a point. Community can be pretty messy. Any group of people can devolve into an insular, self-serving club for the self-righteous. Or it can spin apart when well-meaning people focus so much on reaching out that they forget to take care of their own brothers and sisters. It's hard to strike a balance between caring for one another and remaining open to outsiders.

All communities also have to deal with money, sex, and power (the traditional monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience are an attempt to address these issues head-on). Most communities mess up sometime with all three of these issues. Community doesn't make people perfect. As a matter of fact, it usually helps us see better how imperfect we are.

The Rutba House offers hospitality to people who are homeless for one reason or another. Most of the long-term members of our community are white and fairly well-educated folks who grew up in stable families. Most of the guests we host, however, are poor and black. They've spent much of their lives scrambling to survive.

Now, I would like to think of myself as a good and generous person who shares with people in need out of the goodness of my heart. But after

living with needy people, I know that's not true. I'm easily annoyed when I feel like someone is lazy. I don't like to feel like I'm being used, and I'm not very good at talking to people about it. There's a part of me that wants to kick difficult people out of my life (I call this "the other 'F-you'"—the curse that says, "Forget you").

But even though community has exposed my selfishness, it is also the context where Christian practices have begun to make sense for me. My self-defensiveness has led me to say things I wish I hadn't said. In order to go on sharing life with people I've hurt, I've had to ask for forgiveness. I see now that forgiveness is tied up with conversion—that to be forgiven is to be changed. Some of our hardest guests have held my hand and helped me on the way to holiness.

The sort of radical practices that Mary Emily Briehl Duba writes about in her chapter on "Peacemaking and Nonviolence" are much easier to imagine in the context of community. One church in Chicago decided to harbor AWOL soldiers during the Vietnam War. Members made the decision in a discernment meeting where one of the members said to another, "If the police come and find the soldiers in your house, I'll take care of your family until you get out of jail." Followers of Jesus can never forget that this way of life got our Lord killed. But neither should we forget Jesus' words from the cross to his mother: "Woman, here is your son" (John 19:26). In community we are not left alone, even by death.

Making a good living is another practice that is facilitated by the practice of living as community. After all, individuals and single-family units don't often have much wiggle room when expenses are subtracted from income at the end of the month. Sharing resources in community creates new possibilities through an economy of scale. By sharing space, for example, individuals can significantly reduce their monthly expenses. But you don't have to share a house to live in community. At a church in Iowa a member who works for a large software company came to his fellow church members saying he was going to have to move his family to another state in order to keep his job. The church prayed together and decided it was best for the family not to move. They pitched in and paid the guy's monthly salary until he found a new job in their town. Stories like that make me think Jesus was telling the truth when he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me . . . to proclaim release to the captives" (Luke 4:18).

This church was helping the family to make a good living, but it was also helping them engage faithfully in discerning God's call at a point of vocational crisis. As noted in the chapter on discernment, reflection on vocation needs to happen at least partly in community. If vocation is about knowing who we are and how we fit into God's story, other people who love us and know us well often see our vocation more clearly than we can ever do alone. Wherever that genuinely happens, community is formed.

L'Arche (which means "the ark" in French) is an international network of small communities where people who are mentally disabled are the "core members." Living with them are people who are "temporarily abled." These residents recognize the essential dignity of their disabled friends by sharing life together, not as helpers but as people who genuinely need each other.

L'Arche was started by Jean Vanier, a promising young PhD in philosophy who asked his priest what he should do with his life after grad school. Vanier recalls that the priest said, "There are two disabled men living in a house down the street. Go live with them." Vanier was so transformed by

“The cry of people with disabilities was just a very simple cry. Do you love me?—Jean Vanier”

the experience of living with those two men that he has spent the rest of his life living in community with people who are mentally disabled. "The cry of people with disabilities was just a very simple cry," Vanier says. "Do you love me? That's what they were asking. And that awoke something deep within me because that was also my fundamental cry. . . . I knew the need to be both accepted and admired." Vanier has gradually learned a wisdom that his academic pursuit of philosophy had not provided: the wisdom of love. Finding a place where we know that people love us is crucial to all of us as we discern our vocations.

But if everyone needs community, that doesn't mean that we all have to find it in the same place. Sometimes when I talk about new monasticism, someone will ask, "Are you saying that everyone needs to live in

intentional community?" I always say, "Oh no! That would take a very large house."

Life in community is not for everybody. At their best, communities like L'Arche and Rutba House are laboratories where Christian practice can be explored for the sake of the whole church. You don't have to live with the mentally disabled to learn that you need people who love you. But wherever you are, what Vanier has learned is true. Christian community is about finding those relationships that make a life of faithfulness possible where you are.

I know a group of women who gather to pray together once each week. Over the decades, they have prayed one another through marriage difficulties and child-rearing challenges, church conflict and financial crises. On more than one occasion, they have acted to become the answer to one another's prayers. When Mary knew that Sylvia was struggling to care for a sick child, she would regularly drop by with dinner in a casserole dish. Ann, who is a teacher, has intervened for more than one of the other women's children when they were having a hard time at school. Some women have come and gone from the group. They've all suffered loss. But each of them knows that they are loved by God and by God's family.

This kind of community is more and more difficult to sustain in a highly mobile and extremely fast-paced culture. Who has time to sit and listen to the same people every week for years? After all, the people you commit to may just move next year . . . or next month. Indeed, some of them almost certainly will.

But community is not an ideal. It doesn't happen when perfect people get together under just the right conditions. Community is the discipline of giving ourselves to others because we know we need them. Doing so, we open ourselves to all the heartache that life with others will inevitably involve. But we also open ourselves to God's gifts, including community itself. For in the end, community is always a gift.

On a small college campus in Tennessee, I ran into some students who were trying to take seriously the call to community. Living together in dorms, these guys had experienced how proximity allowed them to know one another's lives well. But they also knew that their lives were very much the same. So they started asking how they could share life with people who are not like them.

Not far from their campus, they discovered, there was a house where men who had been in prison were living together to share expenses and hold one another accountable. The students started going over to eat with these men once a week. After a while, the guys in the halfway house asked if some of the college students wanted to live with them while they were in school. Now a couple of rooms in the house are set aside for college students to live with the ex-cons every semester. Students who have lived there say they learned more from the experience than they did in most of their classes.

Like the ex-cons who are transitioning back into society, those students don't live together forever. Some stay for a semester, some for a year. They graduate, get married, join churches, have kids. They may go on to be lawyers, doctors, teachers, or entrepreneurs. But they are different. They know deep down in their bones that the people who end up incarcerated are not unlike them. They've learned how prison exposes the weakness of our social networks. They know, as Dorothy Day said, that "the only solution is love." Wherever they go, they are people who will work to build up community not only because they need it, but because we all need it to survive.

*Coming to the Table

It's Monday, the day after our Thanksgiving feast at Rutba. After fasting from breakfast and lunch (which we especially needed after eating like we did yesterday), we break our fast on Mondays with our weekly thanksgiving—what the church calls Eucharist (*eucharistō* is Greek for "I give thanks").

We gather in the same living room where we sat together yesterday offering toasts. In silence we remember the past week. One member confesses a lack of trust that has been making him anxious. Another confesses anger. We try to tell the truth about our brokenness—how we have failed to trust Jesus and have hurt one another. We admit that community is hard. We can't do this by our own strength.

But then we also remember, in the words of our simple liturgy, that "in the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven." In God's great story our fragmented lives have been re-membered—put back together again—by the love of Jesus. And now here we are at Jesus' own table. "To eat the Body of

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Christ and to drink the blood of Christ,” declared the fifth-century bishop Augustine of Hippo, is to be “incorporated in the unity of His Body.” Jesus gives himself to us as bread and wine. So we share the gift with one another.

I turn to Dan, tear off a piece of the loaf, and say, “this is the body of Christ.” I watch as he chews, and I trust that he is becoming what he eats. In what can only be described as a mystery, Dan is becoming Christ’s body for me.

Our weekly thanksgiving is a simple act, often filled with the sounds of children crying, the kitchen timer beeping, a guest knocking at the door. But I think it’s where we remember that community is coming to the Table by faith. The Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann wrote that “we [offer] the bread in remembrance of Christ because we know that Christ is Life, and all food, therefore, must lead us to Him.”

All of our eating points to this mystery: that, somehow, we are the body of Christ. So we eat together with one another, with our neighbors, and with the strangers who show up at our door. Sometimes we get the feeling that we might have “entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2). And sometimes we say with the psalmist “you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (Ps. 23:5). But we keep coming back because we believe this practice of living as community opens us to life with God. We keep coming because we’ve seen enough to know that this way leads to life.