



# Core Values

## Week 1: Community

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Last week, we concluded our 9-week series on the Gospel of John. I loved taking a deep dive into the unique characteristics that make this gospel stand out from the rest. The author uses contrasting themes, long winded personal conversations, and literary devices to reveal the true character of Jesus as the messiah. And near the end of the journey, Jesus goes on this 4-chapter conversation with his disciples known as the Farewell Discourse. In it, he tells them he is leaving, that the Spirit of Truth is coming soon to guide and remind them of Jesus's teachings. And then he offers this beautiful metaphor of a vine and branches.

**"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.**

**- John 15:1-5 NRSVUE**

This easy to understand metaphor is a challenge to the disciples, and later the first Christian communities, to remain connected to Jesus as branches

from the main vine. And by abiding in that relationship, dwelling, remaining steadfast, the community bears fruit and flourishes.

And down through history, Christian communities have flourished and grown, bearing fruit that fell and those seeds sprouted new growth, all coming from those first branches. Other times, communities and churches floundered. They drifted away from the true vine. Perhaps, like flowers in a garden, they picked up a disease and simply withered. Or maybe their life cycle simply came to an end and no more seeds were produced.

As a former hobbyist gardener, I've seen plants thrive or die for a variety of reasons. When Jessica and I bought our first house, we decided on a small plot in the corner of the yard for our first garden. We picked out what plants we wanted to grow, which seeds we wanted to buy, and how to build the garden.

We built three raised beds for our vegetable garden, plus a few smaller boxes for herbs and rhubarb. We learned a lot that first season. The first lesson is don't plant more than you can manage. Between the watering, pruning, fertilizing, and protecting the plants, it was a lot of work! Jessica is a teacher, so she was able to spend quite a bit of time out there in the summer months, but you guys...when those squash bugs show up, it's war. I remember her going out early in the mornings for some search and destroy missions. It was time consuming and hot and annoying.

The second thing we learned was how to read and understand the signs of each plant. We learned it's better to harvest vegetables at certain sizes. Don't let zucchini, cucumbers, and okra just keep growing forever. Have you ever tried to eat a giant okra seed pod? It's disgusting. It's like biting into an old, dried out piece of wood. There is no redeeming way to make those digestible. Pick them earlier. The same goes for zucchini and cucumbers. No one needs a zucchini the size of a small baseball bat.

The third thing we learned was that a healthy, thriving garden invites guests. Both good guests and the ones that just show up to consume things. We saw butterflies and lady bugs, worms and spiders. But there were also the birds that snatched up the seeds, bunnies that nibbled the lettuce, and squirrels that took one bite out of a tomato and then just tossed the rest on the soil. I hate squirrels.

Years later, we took a hiatus from gardening. It wasn't because of the squirrels. It was because we had kids. Did you know that raising kids is time consuming? We figured that out quickly. And now that Jack and Dottie are slightly older, we have begun dabbling in the gardening sphere again. Jess spent a lot of time this spring and summer planting, pruning, fertilizing, and tending to our flower gardens. Our backyard and patio have become a sanctuary for us to sit and relax and watch the days pass by. There's a very specific joy and happiness that comes from watching plants you care for flourish and produce flowers and attract hummingbirds and butterflies. Jessica comes from a long line of gardening lovers. We even have an old pewter sign in one of the gardens that was her grandpa Jack's: "The kiss of the sun for pardon, the song of the birds for mirth, one is nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth"

References to gardens, farming, and crops are all over our Bible. There is something inherently divine about the whole process. Life springs forth from the dirt, growing into a plant that bears fruit, ultimately falling to the ground to bury its seeds to start the whole process over again. And that is a key metaphor for life and our spiritual journeys. It would seem that God's appetite for renewal is insatiable.

This church, The Downtown Church, is part of God's story of renewal. For more than 100 years, the congregation that called this building home, was a well-tended garden, bearing fruit in this community. At one point, a thousand people were members here with multiple services on Sundays. This church, known as St. Paul, helped nurture and birth other congregations in the area.

But it slowly dwindled to the point that shutting the doors and turning off the lights was open for discussion. This well-watered garden was withering. There wasn't one thing that caused it to decline, one thing to fix. Its life cycle was simply ending. But there were people like Ruth, Shep, Nancy, Phil, and Maridel who were determined that seeds remained to provide life again.

Lori and I were hired to come down here and give it another try in fall of 2014, eleven years ago. The first, most brilliant thing Lori did, was establish a vision team. It was made up of people from the St. Paul congregation, younger families who came from Wesley UMC, community contacts, and people who walked away from church. The conversations were vibrant and exciting. We met weekly to talk about what a church looked like on the corner of Walnut & Jefferson in 2014. And after several months, we felt God had given us a vision for that kind of place.

**A church that meets in the middle of rich & poor, young & old, believers & nonbelievers. A place where Christ and the community intersect.**

We tell this story, not to pat ourselves on the back, but because it's an important reminder of where we've come from, and the value of tending this place with the careful eye of a gardener. We are but a branch of the true vine.

With a vision in place, the final thing the team did was set out a list of values that would help guide our decisions and clarify our direction. The vision is our preferred future and the values are the things that we lean into to guide us on the journey. The values of The Downtown Church are:

- **Community**
- **Acceptance**
- **Creativity**
- **Spiritual Growth**
- **Reflection**

So let's take the first one. Here's how we further defined it:

**Community: We live in relationship with others in Downtown Springfield and we have the obligation and privilege of positively impacting the lives of those in our community and the world.**

Looking at this wording now, I can see exactly what we were thinking. It was told to us by one of our neighbors across the street that this church had become known as the “grumpy old church on the corner” over the past decade or so. There were chains on the parking lot. There were signs around saying *no skating, no rollerblading, no biking*. Basically *no fun... go away please*. We knew we needed to change our public perception and become a welcoming place. A safe place. A happy place.

We got to work in the spring of 2015 and started hosting First Friday Art Walk Parties. It was a chance for us as a church to announce that things were changing on the corner of Walnut & Jefferson. We asked the uber-talented, Dena the Balloon Lady (have you heard of her?), to come out and make balloon hats for people. We invited musicians to play live music. We had fun things for the kids to do. And you know what...people came. They heard the music, saw the fun, and were drawn to the smell of popcorn.

We consciously made the decision to do something that reflected our newly minted value of Community. We were providing a place for the church and the community to intersect. And during those parties, people got to enjoy a song or two, get a snack, maybe even take a tour of the historic sanctuary they had always wanted to visit.

And we’ve continued to lean on this core value in how we use our facilities. We have a great partnership with Good Dads, an organization doing amazing work in communities around our state. We started hosting recovery communities like Al-Anon Family Groups, AA, and Adult Children of Alcoholics. Our building has been used by Springfield Little Theatre, Child Advocacy Center, Rare Breed, and Watching Over Whiskers among others. I

believe we have become known as a valuable public resource in the downtown and nonprofit community.

But I've been thinking a lot about these values. And when I see the word *community* now, I wonder if we missed the mark on creating intentional community within these walls. There are two sides to the community coin. Yes, we've done some really great stuff as it relates to fostering relationships. Dinners Together has been instrumental in connecting intergenerational strangers over a meal. Conversations took off and friendships were born. For a church without traditional Sunday School classes or small groups, we knew we had to figure out how to get people to connect. And it worked! But Dinners Together is not necessarily geared toward deeper, prolonged conversations or relationships.

There's a piece of scripture that nearly every church recites when they talk about the importance of community. It's about that first group of Christians in Jerusalem after Jesus's ascension.

**All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.**

**- Acts 2:44-47**

This is obviously a beautiful picture of an intentional Christian community. Maybe one that seems impossible in our modern world. And not just impossible in the sense that people did everything together, because let's be honest, sometimes we just need a break from people. But impossible in the sense of the time necessary to create community like that.

When we gathered families together in January, we asked them if they would be interested in creating small groups for regular meals, study, and prayer. The general consensus was that they just didn't have time to add one more thing to the family schedule. I totally get that. Our family is busy too. I would never force or guilt anyone into a group. Gross. But I do want to pose the question again because I think it's an important one. Would you be willing to even think about carving out a night a month to gather with other people in a similar stage of life and share each other's burdens? Share your joys. Share your homes and your meals. Because I tend to think that by doing that, by prioritizing a deeper, spiritual community, might be the way we keep this specific branch of the vine strong and healthy.

Community, like life and spirituality, is a both/and endeavor. It's not either/or. There's the community around us that we want to be a part of, a resource for, and a gathering place. But there's also the spiritual community we deepen when we gather together in smaller groups. Building a church into a healthy, fruit producing branch on the vine takes work. I learned many years ago that gardening isn't simply putting the plants in the ground. It's not about just enjoying the beauty around you. It's also about watering, fertilizing, and pruning to help the plants grow and thrive.

Will there be bumps along the way? Yeah, sure. But growing and maturing—I'm not just talking about plants here—is not a straight line. And here's the thing about making sure this garden that we're growing is strong and healthy: when the garden is producing fruit and flowers, sometimes guests come to enjoy the scene. Our goal here at The Downtown Church is to make sure this garden is well-watered and bursting with life so that the people around us get curious about what is going on inside these walls. And when they walk through the doors they discover a strong community, as close as family, that is an anchor in our community.