

Title: Plumb the Depths
Text: Ephesians 3:19 and Various
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Like most kids in Australia, I spent summers in the water. Long, hot days were wasted away at Camperdown swimming pool with my family. When I was really little I was only allowed in the shallow end of the pool. There was even a time when I had to wear floaties. Remember those? I can distinctly remember splashing around in the shallow end of the pool thinking would I ever be allowed up the deep end. Up the deep end the water seemed bluer. Up the deep end were the diving boards and the excitement and terror they promised. To my young mind the day I could jump in the deep end seemed a life time away.

This month our theme has been community. Our focus text is drawn from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Paul's prayer for them and us is this. Will you read it with me?

I ask that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.
(Ephesians 3:17-19 The Message)

Today we are going to take up Paul's challenge; we are going to plumb the depths of God's love, specifically as it is experienced here at Newlife.

You see, in the end, community is a gift we participate in.

Here at Newlife we are very up front. If you call this church home we encourage you to be a part of a small group community. These are so fundamental to our church we say we are not so much a church with small groups, but a church of small groups. We currently have 42 such groups. The promise and possibility of these groups is that in community we plumb the depths of God's love for us.

What I want to do this morning is name three of the many marks of biblical community that it is my hope and prayer that you will experience in a small group here at Newlife.

In Biblical Community we Enjoy Hospitality

Jesus was known by his opponents as a friend of sinners and tax collectors. Make no mistake; this was a term of derision. In the culture of the day you were the company you kept. There were elaborate and unwritten rules about who you should eat with. Your reputation could be enhanced or trashed simply by who you sat down to a meal with. Jesus was a Rabbi – a recognised teacher of the law. Rabbi's don't eat with tax collectors, prostitutes and lepers. Jesus did and he scandalised the establishment.

During his ministry Jesus offered radical and open hospitality. Hospitality is one of the marks of biblical community. Luke records what happens after the Holy Spirit comes on the church at Pentecost:

They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship...they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.
(Acts 2:42a,46b)

The church has always been a fellowship, a community that receives and celebrates the hospitality that God offers all of us and then offers that hospitality to others. For centuries the church did not have any buildings except homes to meet in.

Hospitality was one of the most important and earliest ministries the church offered. It was such an important ministry, Peter and others wrote about it:

Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.
(1 Peter 4:9)

When we offer and receive Christian hospitality we celebrate the radical nature of the love of God. Through Jesus' life, death and resurrection we who were estranged from God are now his friends and members of his household. Not only are we no longer estranged from God, we are no longer estranged from each other. The church is a community of natural enemies who are made friends by the grace and mercy of God.

The other day Sue and I went to drop off Emily to a friend's place. Her friend lives in a gated community. I pulled up to the intercom, dialled the number and eventually someone answered. I told the man who answered that I was there to pick up Emily. There was an awkward silence. I got the feeling I was intruding on his space. I soon discovered the problem was Emily's friend lived at number 9 and I dialled number 19. Sue laughed in the front seat and Emily rolled her eyes in the back seat.

Almost 30 years ago the first gated community in Australia was built here on the Gold Coast up at Sanctuary Cove, and I am only guessing here, but I think we are probably leading the country in developing communities behind walls.

We live in a city full of strangers.

We live in a city with closed gates and security intercoms.

We live in a city craving hospitality.

We live in a city desperate to experience a church with its doors opened wide and its arms ready to enfold.

Biblical community will always offer hospitality to friends and strangers alike. The writer of Hebrews puts this challenge to us:

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.
(Hebrews 13:2)

The church at its best will always open its gates wide to welcome the stranger with life-changing hospitality.

Just as a side-note, I get a little concerned when I hear that some of our small groups are not open to receive new members, even when they have room. Now sometimes there may be good and valid reasons. But often the reasons offered are just excuses. For example, some groups say that they have developed a sense of trust and openness amongst themselves they don't want to risk. Fantastic – that is just the sort of community others not in your group desperately need to experience as well.

In Biblical Community we Discover Accountability

There is a three word proverb about truth. Let's see if you can help me finish it. It simply says 'The Truth...Hurts.' How many of us know that giving or receiving truth will sometimes be painful?

There is a story told of an elderly woman who walked into a small country church. A friendly usher greeted her at the door and asked her, "Where would you like to sit?"

"The front row please," she answered.

"You really don't want to do that," the usher said. "The pastor is really boring."

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"Do you happen to know who I am?" asked the woman.

"No," said the usher.

"I'm the pastor's mother," she replied indignantly.

"Do you know who I am?" the usher asked.

"No," she said.

"Good."

The truth may well hurt, but Jesus promises us a deeper truth; 'The truth will set us free.'

In Christian community we learn to tell the truth – to God and each other. More than that, we learn to hear the truth and discover liberation with it. Paul says this to the church at Ephesus:

Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

(Ephesians 4:15)

Unless we hear the truth about ourselves we will never ever grow. We will forever be splashing around in the shallow end of the pool; we will never plumb the depths of God's love for us.

I have always had a vivid imagination. As a child I created elaborate stories in which I was the star. It usually involved sport. In my imagination, I was the full forward for the Essendon football club who kicked a 60 meter goal after the siren to win the grand final by one point. In my imagination 100,000 people screamed my name. I was good at pretending – even when my imagination created a 'me' so far removed from the real 'me' as to be ridiculous.

Some of us have become great pretenders – great actors. We are brilliant at projecting a perfected image or a sanitised version of us. We are terrified of what people will think of us if they really knew who we were – our struggles, our fears, our pain. We desperately need to hear the truth about us that promises to set us free. In community we find a safe place to hear and tell that truth as we discover the gift of mutual accountability.

In Greek culture actors were called 'hypocrites'. Hypocrite actors would literally put on masks to play multiple roles. The church is full of recovering hypocrites – actors who have put down their masks and dared to be real.

In Christian community, and especially in small groups, we can stop pretending, take off our masks and hear the truth that sets us free.

Small groups are not a recent invention. Right from the beginning the church has met as small groups of believers where people experience close and intimate community. More than two hundred and fifty years ago John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had the brilliant idea to form small groups he called Bands. In these groups Wesley said people had the privilege of watching over each other in love. Before a person joined a group they were asked a series of questions, which included these:

- Does any sin, inward or outward, have dominion over you?
- Do you desire to be told of your faults?
- Do you desire to be told of all your faults—and that plain and clear?
- Consider! Do you desire that we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear concerning you?
- Do you desire that in doing this we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?
- Is it your desire and design to be on this and all other occasions entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart, without exception, without disguise, and without reserve?

Here is another way of summarizing these challenging questions; are you prepared to take off your mask?

I need to hear the truth about myself from people who know me and love me.

Just over ten years ago I was six months into a new job as a key leader in the Uniting Church in South Australia. It was a scary big job that was stretching me and that I loved. As I drove home one day, a friend rang me on my car phone. He rang me to tell me what a fantastic job I was doing – what a great start I had made – how I had grown in the role. He went on like this for about five minutes. It was fantastic! As he spoke I sat straighter in my car seat, I started to think to myself – ‘He’s right, I am really good – in fact I am better than good – I’m great.’ By the time the conversation ended I was pretty sure the church had never had a leader as good as me. Then I got home.

I told Sue about my conversation. Basking in the glow of over the top affirmation, with my ego inflated to an all time high, I did what anyone else would do in that situation – I went fishing for more compliments. After telling her what my friend had said, I asked Sue, ‘So do you think I have changed much?’

I can so clearly remember the scene. Sue was slicing carrots for dinner at the sink. She did not even turn around when she responded to my question. As she continued to slice the carrots she said; ‘Have you changed much – apart from being greyer and fatter – no you haven’t changed much at all.’

Ouch!

I need to hear the truth. The truth, as painful as it might be, sets me free.

The truth is scary. The truth can hurt. But the truth sets us free.

Here is the truth; we are all sinners – we have all failed God and those we love in large and small ways. And many of us are trapped in habitual sin. Here is even deeper truth; God can liberate us from even the deepest and darkest sin. And the path to liberation is through confession - through openly and honestly acknowledging our sin to God. Wesley’s questions have their foundation in this promise in scripture:

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.
(James 5:16)

We need community where we can take off our masks and hear and speak truth, where people know the real us, not the pretend us – where we can discover liberating accountability.

Perhaps my favorite preacher, John Ortberg, tells a story from his own life of discovering such accountability:

One of the most important moments of my spiritual life was when I sat down with a longtime friend and said, "I don't want to have any secrets anymore."

I told him everything I was most ashamed of. I told him about my jealousies, my cowardice, how I hurt my wife with my anger. I told him about my history with money and my history with sex. I told him about deceit and regrets that keep me up at night. I felt vulnerable because I was afraid that I was going to lose connection with him. Much to my surprise, he did not even look away.

I will never forget his next words.

"John," he said. "I have never loved you more than I love you right now." The very truth about me that I thought would drive him away became a bond that drew us closer together. He then went on to speak with me about secrets he had been carrying.

If I keep part of my life secret from you, you may tell me you love me. But inside I think that you would not love me if you knew the whole truth about me. I can only receive love from you to the extent that I am known by you.

Do you have some 'no-secret' friends? Do you have people with whom you can let down your guard, stop pretending and take off your masks?

Christian community offers us this astonishing possibility; No-secret friends with whom we can share mutual accountability.

In Biblical Community we Receive Encouragement

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The writer of Hebrews says this:

Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

(Hebrews 3:13)

Let me state the obvious; if you decide to follow Jesus, in a sense, this is when your troubles begin. Don't get me wrong, when we become a Christian we discover grace and mercy and forgiveness and love unimaginable. But we also enlist in a battle and war that will last a lifetime. We battle with our own flesh that still wants to live for self rather than God. And we struggle in a culture that has embraced godlessness rather than God. We become strangers in a strange land. In this struggle against sin and the world we need all the encouragement we can get. We need to know we are being cheered on, prayed for, listened to and even cried with. We need people to share our sorrows as well as joys.

Over the years I have been blessed with people who have encouraged me in so many ways. That encouragement has nourished and sustained me through difficult times.

This is my encouragement file. Every now and then I will receive a card or note from someone encouraging me. Years ago I began the habit of collecting those notes and cards. I collected them, not because I pull them out at night to read them, but to remind me that I have a reservoir of encouragement to draw on and a community that loves me, both of which can sustain me even in tough times. I have an electronic version of this file where I collect encouraging emails.

Do you have a reservoir of encouragement to draw on? Do you belong to an encouraging community that helps sustain you – that cheers you on?

I love the encouragement I get and can offer in my small group. The other night in my small group, as we always do, we finished our night praying for one another. We shared stuff that we are going through – in our families, at work, health issues, spiritual struggles – the joys and pains of life. When we do this we plumb the depths of God's love for us and each other.

Mike Yaconelli tells a wonderful story from little league baseball. It was a championship game. The stands were packed with spectators – mainly families of the players. It was the last innings and the team into bat was one run behind but with the bases loaded and two players already out. The equation was simple, if the last boy to bat got a hit the team would win and he would be the hero. Let me read what happened in Yaconelli's own words:

The first pitch was swung at and missed. 'Strike one!' the umpire yelled. The families from the other team cheered, but his family cheered even louder, 'It's okay Carl. No problem. You almost hit the ball! Now clobber the next pitch!'

'Strike twoooo!' the umpire yelled after the next pitch. Pandemonium broke out. Both teams and their families were yelling back and forth to each other, Carl's family and team were encouraging him, the player and the family of the defending team were taunting. No one could hear themselves think. Wrinkles appeared on nine-year old forehead as he waited for the next pitch. The ball left the pitcher's hand and everything went very quiet as it sped

towards Carl. It seemed to take forever to cross the plate, but cross the plate it did, and Carl swung with all his might.

But he missed. 'Strike threeee!! You're out!'

Not only was Carl out, the game was over and he was the cause of the loss.

The winning team went crazy, their families swarmed on to the field and everyone was dancing, laughing, cheering and celebrating. But not Carl's team. As Carl's team member walked dejectedly off the field, they mingled with their families and then headed back to their cars in silence. Except for Carl.

Carl was still standing at the plate, devastated, alone, his head down in disgrace. Suddenly someone yelled, 'Okay Carl, play ball!' Startled Carl looked up to see his family spread out over the field. Grandpa was pitching and Dad was catching. Mum was at first base, Uncle David was at second and the rest of the family had covered the other positions.

'Come on Carl, pick up the bat. Grandpa's pitching.' Bewildered, Carl slowly picked up the bat and swung at Grandpa's first pitch. He missed, and missed the next six pitches as well. But on the seventh pitch, determined to hit the ball, Carl smacked the ball to left field. His aunt ran, picked up the ball and threw it to first base in plenty of time, but the first baseman – Mum – must have lost the ball in the sun because she let the ball go right through her hands into the dugout behind. 'RUN', everyone yelled.

As Carl was running to second, the first baseman recovered the ball and threw it towards the second baseman. Amazingly, Uncle David was blinded by the sun as well. 'Keep running!' yelled someone, and Carl headed for third base where the throw went at least two feet over the head of the baseman. 'Keep running Carl!' And Carl ran for home, running as hard as he ever run. The ball was thrown with dead accuracy as the catcher, blocking the home plate, waited to tag out the runner, but just as Carl and the ball reached the home plate, the ball bounced in and then out of the catcher's mitt and Carl was safe!

Before Carl knew what was happening, he found himself being carried around on Uncle David's shoulders while the rest of the family crowded around cheering his name.

One person who was watching this amazing even told a friend, 'I watched a little boy fall victim to a conspiracy of grace.'

In this world we will stumble and fall. In this world we will fail in large and small ways.

But as I run for home, knowing that there are friends who will always cheer me on, a community of encouragement who will cheer for me to run and run and run and never to give up – that is enough.

Eventually I was allowed to take off my floaties and go to the deep end of Camperdown pool. It was every good as bit as I thought it would be. I loved jumping off the diving boards; first the one metre and then the three metre springboard. I was a hopeless diver but a graceful belly flopper. But my favourite thing was to do the pin drop, jump in feet first and straight as I could with my arms rigid by my side. When I did it right, I would make no splash as I dropped into the water and my feet would gently hit the very bottom of the pool. I had plumbed its depths.

The depth of God's love for us is discovered in community. The sad reality is that too many of us have for years have splashed around in the shallows of the Christian faith – not taking the risk of diving into the deep end. Is it time for you take the risk?