

# The Value of Community

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Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

In the first few chapters of Ecclesiastes, the author, described as the Evangelist, introduces various themes. He looks at life and sees how much people toil, working hard to achieve all kinds of things. Much of what he sees he describes as “vapor.” So much that we strive for “under the sun” or in our earthly lives just doesn’t last. But, we can find joy in eating, drinking, and accepting work as God’s gifts to us. In chapter three the Evangelist, focuses on time, and how God is unlimited, while we are limited. At the end of the chapter, he repeats how “there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work.” Do you enjoy your work? Do you receive each day’s tasks as gifts from God? It makes a huge difference if our focus is on trusting in God’s leading and working together, rather than trying so hard to accomplish things just on our own...

In chapter four that we read today, the Evangelist notes that the work some people do involves oppressing others, and acquiring more and more for themselves. In contrast to this, he encourages the idea of working together in community, for the good of all. The chapter begins with the oppression that the Evangelist sees. Through his repetition of certain words, we can see the intensity of his emotion at the evil he sees. In the first verse he expresses the word “oppression” in three different ways: “...I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed – with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power – with no one to comfort them.” He also repeats that there is “no one to comfort” the oppressed... People work hard out of envy for each other. As we strive and compete to gain more and more, it’s easy to end up oppressing people along the way because we are focusing mainly on ourselves. The Evangelist recognises this and repeats his declaration that this too is “vapor” and a “chasing after the wind”.

In earlier chapters, he describes vapor in terms of positive things that fleeting, such as the satisfaction we get when we’ve accomplished something. It isn’t long before all our accomplishments “under the sun” (in this world) are forgotten. Vapor can be positive like feeling the cool mist of a waterfall on a hot day, or it can be negative like the stench of poisonous gas. In this section, the Evangelist uses the word “vapor” negatively to describe the evils of selfish oppression and envy.

In our world, so many people compete, trying to gain more and more. We may dream of having enough, and often what we have feels like never enough. The Evangelist encourages us to be satisfied with what we have. In verse six he says, “Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil, and a chasing after the wind.” In English we have a similar saying, “A bird in hand is worth two in the bush.” We may have caught one bird, but we may be greedy to have the two birds we see in a bush. By trying to catch the other two birds, we can easily lose the one we’ve already caught. At the end of chapter 4, the Evangelist talks about a story which supports the value of wisdom over riches. Verse 13, “Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king, who will no longer take advice.” It isn’t clear who the actual story is about, and scholars have debated where it is from. I guess the people who first heard the words of Ecclesiastes would have understood who the Evangelist was talking about here. It’s a message about the value of wisdom, and the importance of listening to others and seeking advice, working together with others. Yet, in the end there is no guarantee of success, even for those who are wise.

Coming back to the Evangelist’s emphasis on community, I’d like to spend time now, taking a closer look at verses 9 to 12, “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other, but woe to the one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.” Often, this section is used to encourage single people to get married. The image of the “threefold cord” that does not easily break could represent the husband, wife, and Christ all working together in a marriage. It is true that marriage works better when there is a common focus on Christ and that helps

keep the marriage together when there is stress. But, if we look at what is written in other parts of the Bible, the Apostle Paul encourages people to remain single, if possible. Marriage is not for everyone. For some, they will be happier staying single. In Ecclesiastes, the point is not that it's better to be married. It's whether one is married or single, there is great value in being a part of a larger community.

This section of Ecclesiastes encourages community. "Two are better than one" points to the value of community. Imagine how people lived in the time of the Bible. Often people needed to travel. There were no cars or electricity, and they travelled for days on foot, needing to camp along the way. One person travelling alone may stumble and fall with no one to help them up. One person may run into trouble if they are alone, trying to survive a winter night without any heat. One person may be attacked or oppressed by others if walking or working alone. But, with more than one person working together, much can be accomplished. The weaknesses of one can be covered by the strengths of the others. When one falls, there are others to help the person up. With two or more people trying to keep warm on a winter night without heat, their body heat can help for their survival. If one person is oppressing others, two or more people can stand up against that oppressor. There's a saying that "there is strength in numbers." Maybe that's one reason that people often had large families that stuck together. One snowflake can't do much, but put a bunch of them together and you can stop traffic.

If we look at Jesus, we see that he worked in community. He had community with his closest disciples, Peter, James, and John. Then, there is also the wider groups of the 12 disciples, the 70 that Jesus sent out to do mission, as well as the crowds of people that followed him. Jesus was almost always connecting with community, eating with the outcasts, or debating with the religious leaders. He gives the disciples an example of prayer, which assumes prayer within community, with statements such as "Our father in heaven...give us this day our daily bread...forgive us our trespasses..." and so on.

After Jesus returns to heaven, the disciples establish his church, made up of various groups in local communities. Paul writes letters to various churches encouraging them on aspects of building healthy communities. He says things like, "encourage one another," "love one another," "bear with one another" (*shinobiai*), and "forgive one another." These are all things that can only happen in community.

For people in the Anabaptist/ Mennonite churches, community is very important. As we look at how the early church functioned in the Bible, we see how the Spirit of God works in and through the community. We believe in interpreting the Bible in community rather than just relying on an educated leader to tell us all the answers. We say Jesus is the centre of our faith, community is the centre of our life, and reconciliation is the centre of our work.

In Canada, the focus on the individual is much stronger than in Japan. I often struggle with the temptation to focus only on my own things rather than pay enough attention to others. In Japanese culture, people are raised to think about the good of the group rather than just their own thing. But recently, it seems like people are more and more focusing on their own things, and less on the welfare of the larger community. It seems like this happens more in the city than out in the country. What do you think? In the city, many people feel lost, without true connections. Our communities easily become just online friends rather than people with whom we work and experience things, learning life together. This lack of connection and true community has quite a negative effect. Henry Cloud in How People Grow writes, "Virtually every emotional and psychological problem, from addictions to depression, has alienation or emotional isolation at its core or close to it. Recovery from these problems involves helping people get more connected to each other at deeper and healthier levels than they are."

We are small, but our MJCF church community is so valuable! To be able to be a part of this group is a gift of God. Once we deeply realise just how meaningful it is to be a part of a church community, maybe part of our calling is to learn to admit when we need help, and to ask for it. The other side of

this would be for us to look for opportunities to share with others. Is God calling you to reach out to someone who is alone? May God grant us the courage to admit our need for community, and to invite others in. Let's pray.

Loving God, we are sad at the oppression and evil that happens in our world. So many are suffering, and sometimes we are a part of the problem. Forgive us for times when we've focused only on ourselves. Teach us to be content with what we have, and to share with others as you lead. Thank-you for the gift of community. We pray for the courage to step out in the opportunities you give us to connect with others, through Christ our Lord, Amen.