

# I BELONG...

CORE VALUE SERIES



## **I Belong to a Strange Community**

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer  
Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN  
September 17-18, 2011

No 1:           The Value of Community  
Scripture:    1 Peter 2:9 KJV

This is a great day in the history of Autumn Ridge for we dedicate THE CENTER. We thank God for this wonderful provision. We have planned and prayed for this day for a long time. Now that it has arrived we celebrate the grace of Christ and the generosity of his people. We have chosen this Grand Opening of THE CENTER to launch a new series on community. For we long for THE CENTER to be a place where thousands of people find friendship with God and with one another. Community is the reason we built THE CENTER. It is a fantastic resource for the wider community of Rochester as well as the immediate community of our own church.

If you are new at Autumn Ridge it will be helpful for you to know that our mission is: **LOVING GOD. SERVING PEOPLE.**

This is a summary of Jesus' explanation of the most important commandment which is to, **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength and . . . love your neighbor as yourself."** (Mk 12:30-31)

Supporting this mission are six biblical values. Under loving God there is **scripture, worship, and discipleship.** Under serving people there is **service, community and compassion.**

For the past three years we have been examining these vital values at our weekend services.

We have already looked at scripture, worship, discipleship, and service. Now we are going to look at the **VALUE OF COMMUNITY.**

Christian community is a statement that we belong to the Lord.

Paul tells us, **"You are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ." (Romans 1:6)**

This is the starting point of community

Jesus Christ invites us to have a relationship with him.

Because of the cross we can be his friends.

Christian community is also an acknowledgement that we belong to one another.

Paul reminds us, **"That each member belongs to all the others." (Romans 12:5)**

If we belong to Jesus we belong to his family.

We will be related to each other for all eternity.

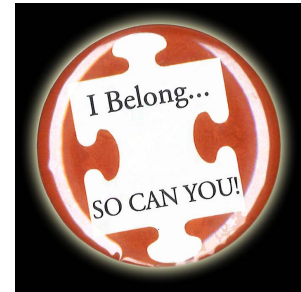
Our goal for this series is illustrated by the button that I hoped you picked up as you came into the sanctuary.

It states **"I BELONG . . . SO CAN YOU."**

Life is a puzzle but there is a place for each of us.

If you are not part of community you leave a big hole.

We need you.



In the next six weeks we are going to think about what it means to belong to Jesus' new community.

We start today with **I BELONG TO A STRANGE COMMUNITY.**

I want to grapple with this unusual observation that we are a strange community by asking two questions and making two observations.

The first question is: **WHAT IS CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY?**

The answer is found by watching what Jesus did with his disciples in the three years he spent with them.

During that time Jesus loved his disciples. He supplied their needs. He taught them. He corrected them.

He stimulated their faith.

He sent them out in his name.

He encouraged them and he guided them.

Then he told them to do the very same for each other.

This pattern of community that Jesus had with his disciples was followed by the first church and it was one of its outstanding features.

We are told, **"All the believers were together and had everything in common." (Acts 2:44)**

Those first Christians worshipped, worked and witnessed together. They ate together.

They shared their possessions as needs arose.

This made an enormous impact on their neighbors.

Luke tells us, **"Everyone was filled with awe . . .and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."** (Acts 2:43 & 47)

I would suggest that this same type of Christian community has never been more important, for we are living in an age when the individual seems increasingly insignificant and as a result many feel lonely.

Christian community is God's answer to that isolation.

It tells us that we matter to God and to others.

The second question I want to ask is: **WHAT MAKES US STRANGE?**

Perhaps you say, "I didn't know we were."

Peter insists that is the case.

The King James Version captures it well when the Apostle writes, **"You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, that you should show forth the praises of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."** (1 Peter 2:9)

Now I am sure you would agree that some are more peculiar than others but all of us are strange because we are called to live differently.

Once we become followers of Jesus we don't go on living the way we did before. A transformation takes place.

Right from the very beginning of the church the world looked on and said "these Christ followers are odd."

In the first century it was the practice to discard unwanted babies on the garbage dump and leave them to die. The Christians would go out and rescue these infants and adopt them into their own families and people said "that's strange."

Back in those days slaves were considered to have no value. If you didn't like your slave you could kill him but Christians not only rejected that attitude they invited slaves to join the church.

As a result the early church was filled with slaves who were treated as brothers and sisters and outsiders looked on and said, "That's strange."

Everywhere Christians went people thought they were strange.

The people of Athens told Paul, **"You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears."** (Acts 17:20)

Peter writes about the impressions others had about the first Christians when he said, **"They think it's strange that you do not plunge with them into same flood of dissipation and they heap abuse on you."** (1 Peter 4:4)

The reason for this strangeness is that we serve a strange God. He was totally self-sufficient.

He needed no one and yet he created us. That's strange.

This God made a perfect world for us to enjoy but we messed it up.

So he sent his only Son to come and rescue us and we beat him up and nailed him to the cross.

Jesus shouted, "Father, forgive them" and the onlookers said "that's strange."

So they buried him in the ground but he rose on the third day and people said "that's strange."

He told his church to go into the whole world with a message of hope and healing and still today people are saying "that's strange."

The New Testament is jam packed with instructions on how God's people are to be strange.

We will look at three of them today.

First, we are strange because we **consider others better than ourselves.**

That's very strange in a world that tells us to look out for number one but it is part and parcel of being a Christian. Paul writes to the Philippians, **"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourself. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interest of others."** (Philippians 2:3-4)

That's the reason we built this campus.

We said "it is not for us."

It is the reason for THE CENTER.

Our Building Committee said, "It is not just for us."

Jesus considered others better than himself and he wants us to do the same.

It is the reason why we are building the **Compassion Evangelical Hospital in Guinea.**

You may remember when we had our Sharing Hope Campaign 18 months ago that we set aside the first \$150,000 to build a surgical wing for the hospital in Guinea.



Most of us will never meet the people who will benefit from that surgical wing but we consider the suffering people of Guinea better than ourselves.

We have great health care in this community. They don't. In Guinea one in 60 women die in childbirth.

One in five children die before the age of 6.

We are concerned about that so we are doing something about it.



Then we are strange because **we confess our faults.**

That is not normal.

Our country is in a deep economic recession because some important people made very irresponsible loans that caused the housing market to collapse.

But no one stood up to take responsibility and apologize.

Christians are to behave differently. James tells us, **"Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."** (James 5:16)

Now that works best in a small group where we can be honest with each other and trust each other and confess our faults to one another. That is important because unconfessed sin holds us in darkness and breaks our fellowship both with God and with each other.

It tears apart the body of Christ.

It robs the community of Shalom.

Sometimes we try and relate to each other from positions of strength. We talk about our gifts and achievements. But true fellowship begins when we meet at the point of weakness which binds our hearts together in love.

When I am willing to be open to you about my personal needs, risking your shock or rejection, and when I am willing for you to be equally open with me, we find ourselves both on level ground at the foot of the cross, the place of God's healing and grace.

It is strange fact that we find it easier to confess our sins privately to a holy and sinless God rather than openly to another unholy and sinful friend.

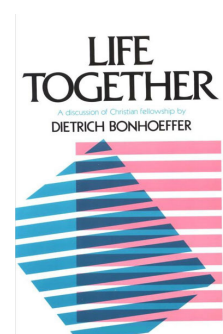
Why is that the case?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer provided a profound answer.

Many of us are familiar with his famous book "The Cost of Discipleship." But Bonhoeffer also wrote another very important book called "Life Together."

It is a magnificent commentary on community.

Bonhoeffer writes, "We must ask ourselves whether we have not been deceiving ourselves with our confession of sin to God, whether we have not rather been confessing our sin to ourselves and also granting ourselves absolution. Is not the reason for our countless relapses and the feebleness of our Christian obedience to be found precisely in the fact that we are living on self-forgiveness and not real forgiveness."



We are unlikely to experience real forgiveness until we confess our sins to each other and then pray for one another to be healed.

A common feature of the great revivals of the church in history has been this open confession to one another.

As concealed sin is brought out of the darkness, the light of Christ is able to shine as never before.

Fellowship and unity are restored and the Spirit is free to move once again with power.

Then we are strange because **we care for the outsider.**

It has been said that the church is the only organization in the world that exists for the benefit of nonmembers.

We care for the outsider because Jesus did.

He left the glory of heaven to come and live among outsiders like us.

He spent time talking to people nobody else would.

He called Zacchaeus who was a loathed tax collector by name when he was hiding in the sycamore tree.

He talked to hated Samaritans and one of his most famous stories made a Samaritan the hero.

For the Jews the Samaritan was the quintessential outsider but Jesus turns him into an insider.

Jesus makes it clear that anyone in need is our neighbor regardless of their race, color, creed, or class.

The fact is that more people have been brought into the church by the kindness of real Christian love than by all the theological arguments in the world.

And more people have been driven from the church by the hardness and ugliness of so called Christianity than by all the doubts in the world.

Tragically there are many outside the love and grace of God. Jesus calls his church to turn these outsiders into insiders. That's how we want THE CENTER to be used.

In the years to come there will be many who will visit THE CENTER feeling alienated from God and other people. But because of relationships that are made there and the truth that they will hear and see there they will be turned into insiders who know the love and grace of God in their soul.

**NOW TWO OBSERVATIONS** about Christian community.

First, **we are to be weird in the right sort of way.**

It is okay to be weird. It is not okay to be a weirdo.

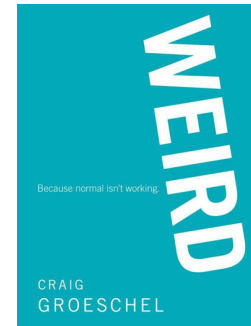
We have got to admit that sometimes we Christians are just bizarre.

A year ago I was in Harmony and I went to a store. I noticed that the ladies working there used safety pins rather than buttons on their blouses. I asked them

why. And they said it was the rule of their bishop. Buttons are worldly but safety pins are godly.  
I am sorry but that is just loony.

Some of the legalistic rules that we Christians have devised have driven people from Christ.  
Our strangeness is to be a magnet for Christ.

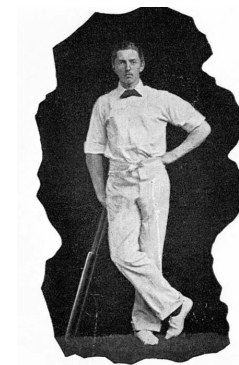
A recent book talks about the strange community that God's people are to be a part of. It is called "Weird".  
The premise is that normal isn't working so we better try weird. Here is a quote, "Normal people are stressed, overwhelmed and exhausted. Many of their relationships are at best strained and in most cases just surviving. Even though we live in one of the most prosperous places on earth, normal is still living paycheck to paycheck and never getting ahead . . . simply put, normal isn't working."



Christians ought to be weird as Jesus was weird.  
Our weirdness is to come from living like him.  
At our Elder Board meetings each month one of the Elders gives a report on a book that has encouraged or challenged them to live the Christian faith with passion and integrity.

This month Bill Brown spoke about C.T. Studd, who has long been one of my heroes.  
Studd was born into a very privileged and wealthy home.  
He was a brilliant cricketer who captained Cambridge University and played for England.

But then Jesus Christ got hold of C.T. Studd through the preaching of D.L. Moody.  
Studd gave up his international sports career and people thought that was weird.  
He joined Hudson Taylor as a missionary in China.  
And the whole nation said "That's weird."  
Once in China he dressed and lived like the Chinese and the other expatriates said "That's weird."



C. T. STUDD

He became very ill and had to return to England.  
When he recovered he went to be a pastor in India and people said, "That's weird."  
He became very ill so again he returned to England.  
His father died and left him a fortune which he gave away and people said "That's weird."

He came to America to help start the Student Volunteer Movement. Then he went to Africa, where despite terrible health he stayed for the rest of his life.

Take a look at this photo.

The beautiful building at the bottom is Tedworth House where C. T. Studd lived in England.

The shack at the top is where he lived in the heart of Africa.

People looked at that contrast and said "That's weird."



Studd's explanation was simple. He said, "Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell. I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell."

C.T. Studd has been dead for 80 years but his weird legacy lives on. He founded the World Evangelization Crusade which continues to send ambassadors of Christ to places where the gospel has never been heard.

It attracts men and women who realize that normal isn't working and that God has called us to be a strange community who live differently.

We want to encourage you to be strange this week.

In your bulletin you will find this card.

It reads, "Hi, we don't know each other but I wanted to pay for your drive through order. I did this because we are called to make a difference in our world as followers of Jesus Christ. Enjoy the rest of your day.

A friend in the car in front of you".



If you happen to be going through a drive through this week you can offer to pay for the people behind you and then ask the cashier to give them this card.

I promise you they will think you are weird.

As an alternative note the people in church today.

Follow them to the drive through.

Make sure you are the car behind them.

Get a free lunch.

Some of you are experts on being strange so I want to invite you to be creative. Please let me know what you did this week to demonstrate that you belong to a strange community of Christians.

The second observation is this. **When the church ceases to be strange it ceases to be strong.**

There is always pressure on Christians to conform and be like everybody else. Indeed there are those who say we will be more effective if we fit in. But it is our very strangeness that makes us effective. We can make a difference because we are different.

So how do we join this strange community?  
At Autumn Ridge we do this through small groups.  
We love to get together in big groups for worship but we grow as disciples and as friends in small groups.

Let me tell you about the men's group I belong to.  
We have a lot of fun together.  
Last Sunday afternoon we went to the gun club and we fired handguns and assault weapons and rifles and shot guns. Some of the guys took their sons and I took my daughter.  
We had a fantastic time celebrating our second amendment rights and then went back to Tim's home for a wonderful barbecue.

But we also study together.  
We are starting a new study this Wednesday on the gospel of John. We take turns leading it and we use an excellent commentary to keep us on track.  
We try and be honest with each other and share things of importance in our life and we pray together.

If you would like to be part of a small group just take out your Welcome Card and write on it "I want to join a small group".  
Put down your name, phone number and email.  
Then drop it in the offering bag, or if you prefer you can stop by the Ministry Center.  
We will get back to you and introduce you to a group of wonderfully strange people.