

**The Messiness of Community:  
An Invitation to Intimacy, Truth-Telling, and Grace**  
by Christianne Squires

In 1975, Henri Nouwen published a book called *Reaching Out* in which he explored the movements from loneliness to solitude, from hostility to hospitality, and from illusion to prayer in the spiritual life. Early in the book, he shares an excerpt of a journal entry he penned during a recent trip to New York City, which began with this observation: “Sitting in the subway, I am surrounded by silent people hidden behind their newspapers or staring away in the world of their own fantasies. Nobody speaks with a stranger, and a patrolling policeman keeps reminding me that people are not out to help each other.”<sup>1</sup>

Nouwen wrote these words in 1975, and yet he could have written them today. Who is not familiar with this scene on the subway? Transpose it to any other public place—the airport, the doctor’s office, the car wash, or any coffee shop—and replace the newspaper with a smartphone, and you have the very same scene. What’s more, our distrust of our neighbors has increased, as catastrophic events like 9/11 dispose us toward perpetual suspicion and fear. The proliferation of information online has increased our awareness of ongoing danger and evil in the world while increasing our susceptibility to personal privacy violations. More than ever, we seem wired to distrust community and protect ourselves.

Yet this posture of “self first” is nothing new. From the beginning of the Scriptures through the end of its pages, we see this truth reflected back to us. Adam betrayed Eve in his moment of shame, telling God, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate” (Gen. 3:12, NRSV). Cain slew Abel, his brother, in a fit of jealousy. Abraham passed his wife, Sarah, off as a sister in fear for his life. Joseph’s brothers, incensed by his prophetic dreams and his role as their father’s favorite, threw him into a pit and then sold him into slavery. Moses attempted to right an injustice he witnessed among his Hebrew kin by killing an Egyptian and then fled when confronted with what he’d done. Years later, when leading the Israelites to the Promised Land, he contended almost continually with their grumbling, complaining, and blame. David’s brothers mocked him for being a shepherd boy, and Saul pursued him years later with murderous intent.

Accounts in the New Testament fare no better. The disciples argued among themselves about which of them was greatest, and James and John approached Jesus to seek sitting at his right hand, drawing the indignation of the other ten. Judas betrayed not only the Christ but also the Twelve with his traitorous act. Jesus’s three closest friends could not watch with him one hour in his hour of need—and then all the disciples fled. Saul persecuted the church before asking to be received among their ranks. Ananias and Sapphira lied to their community of trust. Paul and Barnabus broke fellowship in their ministry travels. And in the book of Revelation, we see the Son of Man reproaching the seven churches for the ways they failed to walk justly and love mercy in their dealings with God, each other, and the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Image Books, 1975), 24.

In such a broken system, is it any wonder we lack the trust true community requires? Is it so hard to believe we would wander our own way, content to rely upon ourselves and the private life with God we can cultivate alone? Should it surprise us that we choose to live defended, protected lives, armored up in isolation?

## God's Design

It is, indeed, understandable that we should live this way, distrusting community. And yet that is not God's way. From the beginning, God declared it was not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). In fact, his first words to the first man and woman, after blessing their existence, was, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28). He commanded them toward an experience of life that existed in community.

It doesn't end there. God called Abraham to father many nations. He birthed Israel through the renaming of Jacob. He named Moses their leader and then led them as a people. As Richard Foster writes, "God led the children of Israel out of bondage *as a people*. Everyone saw the cloud and fiery pillar. They were not a gathering of individuals who happened to be going in the same direction; they were a people under the theocratic rule of God."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus, in his life of ministry, chose the Twelve and then extended his work through the seventy. He drew three—Peter, James, and John—especially close. And then, in the coming of the Holy Spirit, we see the birth of the church, where "all who believed were together and had all things in common. . . . 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 the people" (Acts 2:44, 46). Thousands were added to their number as they lived this way together. And finally, through the beloved disciple John, we are given a vision of the end of days of a city that exists in perpetual adoration of God and in harmony with itself (Rev. 21–22).

## Our Response

Through the demonstration of the Scriptures, then, we see we are meant for community. But how do we live this way? How do we bridge the gap between God's design and our inherent self-reliance and suspicious disposition toward one another? Is there any hope for such a life to exist among us?

I contend that there is—and furthermore, that attending to this aspect of our lives is an essential component of Christian spiritual formation. To get to a place of living in health in community, we find that three factors are key: 1) an intimate relationship with God, 2) a receptivity to truth-telling, and 3) an openness to the messy reality of our shared humanity. Each of these three factors is a necessary component of the healthful formation God intends for us in our human experience. Let's explore each of them in turn.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline*, 3d ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 176.

## ***1. An intimate relationship with God***

It may be surprising to hear that our life in community begins with our personal, intimate relationship with God, but it does. Here again, we are guided by the examples found in Scripture. We're told Moses spoke to God as one speaks with a friend. Abraham, too, spoke with the God of the universe directly. Joseph communed with God in dreams. David freely penned psalms declaring his heart's praises and protestations. The major and minor prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and all the rest—knew an intimacy with God that allowed ample room for confessions, arguments, and tears. Jesus maintained the perfection of intimacy with the Father, declaring himself unable to speak or do anything apart from the Father's direction. Peter spoke with boldness and received a friendship with Christ that endured and absorbed all his missteps. John leaned upon Christ's breast. Paul encountered the resurrected Christ in a burst of light that blinded him for days and propelled him into a days-long form of solitude with God.

It is perhaps fitting for us to notice that each one of these individuals, from a place of intimacy, went forth to lead communities. From the moment of the spoken covenant of God over him, Abraham gathered his family and headed to Canaan. From the back-and-forth conversation with God that conveyed his unexpected calling, Moses led Israel out of Egypt and toward the Promised Land. David reigned as an unlikely but beloved king of a nation. The prophets proclaimed the truth of God to the people of Israel. Peter became the rock of the church. John wrote to the "little children . . . fathers . . . [and] young people" he led into the truths of God (1 John 2:12–13). Paul founded numerous first-century churches. And Jesus led the disciples as well as the crowds that followed him through all the towns and villages. Intimacy with God leads us toward community, indeed. It cannot help but do so.

Yet the opposite is also true. When Adam and Eve broke communion with God, following a path other than the one that prescribed for them, it led to brokenness between themselves, as Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent and they covered themselves with leaves to hide their shame. When David departed from the way he ought to go, taking Bathsheba as his own though she was married to another man, the result was intrigue upon intrigue that eventually led to murder. In the New Testament, when Saul trusted his own righteousness, this led to the persecution and killing of countless believers. Furthermore, his later encounter with the risen Christ thrust him back toward community, as he sought to be forgiven and folded in among their number. In all this, we see that intimacy with God grounds our lives and propels us toward community, while a lack of intimacy with God leads us to broken fellowship with our fellow man.

## ***2. A receptivity to truth-telling***

Truth-telling plays an important role in community life as well, just as it affects our intimacy with God. We see in the life of David, for example, that it was the confrontation of Nathan the prophet—and David's receptivity to that

confrontation—that restored his soul. Once David confessed, Nathan told him the Lord had put away his sin so he would not die.

Truth-telling preserves Abraham’s soul in relationship, when King Abimelech confronts him about the lie he told concerning Sarah, saying, “What have you done to us? How have I sinned against you, that you have brought such great guilt on me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that ought not to be done. . . . What were you thinking of, that you did this thing?” (Gen. 20:9–10). Abraham confesses, and this not only leads to King Abimelech giving him sheep, servants, oxen, and land, but also to God hearing the prayer of Abraham to grant children to the king. We begin to see that truth-telling can lead to confession that is restorative on both a human and divine level.

Jesus provides us with a similar model for truth-telling in relationship. Yes, there is the clear reality that he came to speak the truth to those he met and taught and to offer himself as Truth incarnate in all he did. But in his closest relationships, he also demonstrated an openness to self-disclosing vulnerability that manifested itself through truth-telling. He voiced his discouragement at their lack of understanding and his disappointment in the ways they let him down—most notably when they fell asleep in the garden after he’d asked them to watch and pray with him. In this, he models for us that speaking the truth of our experience in relationship, even when it means speaking hard things, is a necessary part of our health in community.

On the other hand, we see that those who chose *not* to live in truth faced dire consequences. When Moses could not face the confrontation of his murderous act against the Egyptian, he fled the scene and tended sheep in the wilderness for forty years. (Thankfully, when God met him many years later at the burning bush, Moses had learned how to better enter into difficult conversations, as he fired one question after another at this God who took the time to answer every single one.) We also see that Ananias and Sapphira, in choosing to lie about their offering to the community, died on the spot. And from Paul’s letters, we learn that those who taught any gospel other than the true gospel were to be cast out of their communities. Living in truth and speaking truth to one another comprise essential pieces of communal living.

### ***3) An openness to our messy humanity***

While truth-telling is a necessary component of God’s intention for community, it is the forgiving grace we carry toward each other’s messy humanity that makes such truth-telling redemptive and restorative rather than destructive. As Henry Cloud has been known to say, “In the same way Truth (without grace) can be called Judgment, Grace (without truth) can be named License.”<sup>3</sup> We need both grace and truth to live in the fullness of God’s intention for us, just as Jesus, “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14), modeled for us by coming to this earth—speaking truth and yet coming near, descending into a world of complexity and struggle to be with us in it.

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Cloud, *Changes That Heal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 23.

Being God incarnate, his was a model for relationship that existed from the beginning. When God set this world and its system in motion, he moved toward Adam and Eve, creating a model for relationship that depended on their participation for its fulfillment. When they failed to live up to their side of equation, that carried consequences (truth)—and yet God could not help but move toward humanity again (grace), this time approaching Noah and setting another system in motion. Later still, he moved toward Abraham, then Moses, then Israel again and again through its many prophets.

In our need to learn relationship, then, we learn from the model of our God, one who moves toward us in our frailty, speaking truth and yet never failing to come back again and again when we fail to live up to it. We see this grace and truth extended to Peter on the beachside at breakfast—the invitation to feed Christ’s sheep even after he’d denied Christ three times before Christ died. And the early church continued this example. When conflict arose among them, as in the feeding of the widows, they assembled, discussed, and created a fitting plan for moving forward. When Paul came among the community of believers after his conversion, seeking to become part of their number, those who knew his past spoke their fear. Yet Barnabas proved instrumental in helping bridge the divide between persecutor and persecuted, dousing their difficult shared history with grace. When Paul observed Peter failing to abide the eating standards he knew Christ’s freedom made possible, he spoke to Peter in truth and then continued in fellowship with him.

The message in all of this is the reality of our shared humanity. Will we live with each other in the truth of this reality? Will we let one another be human, offering each other grace even as we “provoke one another to love and good deeds” (Heb. 10:24) by speaking the truth in love? It ought to be so, as it is our shared humanity—messy though it is—that puts us on equal footing with one another before God. We are humans, all of us, each with blind spots and growing edges. We need each other to grow into the people we’re meant to be.

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