
Church as Community

A transcript of Roland Hearn's presentation at the Authenticity in a Culture of Masks Retreat

Welcome back. We are going to move into this really essential topic of understanding the Church as community and the transformational power of love. It is absolutely essential that we unpack that idea that we spoke about in the last session. It is in the Church that this transformation takes place.

The receiving of divine love continually makes us more like Christ. As I open my heart to the love of God, he is continually shaping me into his image and making me more like Christ. It is the very defenses that we have created across our lives to the thought of our shame-shaped identity being discovered that resist love. You see that when you try to relate to somebody and they throw up walls, or they just act out of their defense mechanisms. Those defense mechanisms are designed to hide their shame, but it is those mechanisms that are blocking the transformational power of love. So we need to bring those defense mechanisms down.

Discipleship is creating a context in which we can help one another receive love. When we think about discipleship, it is much more than simply learning stuff about Jesus. It is actually creating a context where we help each other lower our defense mechanisms, so that love can do its transformational work.

Love can be received in many ways, and it is our responsibility as a church community to multiply those ways. Wesley's concept of the "means of grace" provide many such ways. To act in love toward each other creates the context of grace. It is vital that we remember that God has already begun the process through God's prevenient grace. When we are speaking with somebody that has not come to that step of faith, we need to understand that God's prevenient grace is already working in them. It is already drawing them into the place of love. At the very, very least level, they have a desire to be loved, even if they believe it is impossible. That's prevenient grace.

Just thinking about Wesley's means of grace, sometime go and google "means of grace" and see what comes up there. There are lots and lots of actual practical things that we can do to make space for grace in our lives and in the lives of others.

As love transforms us, our need to protect our fearful hearts is reduced; we willingly give ourselves over to our identity in Christ. Our defense mechanisms, designed to protect that which is feared as unacceptable, collapse before the force of love. We live lives that are not self-protecting because our self is in Him. We are therefore more able to give ourselves to valuing love – love that others experience as worth.

Our communities of grace become healing communities as the defenseless (love-filled followers of Jesus Christ) gather for His glory. Our sacred task is to create communities of worth where the power of love can transform each other in an environment of openness.

The five marks of a healing community are the keys to wholeness. These five marks are what you will find in a church that is moving people to a place of transforming love. The five things are trust, safety, vulnerability, belonging, and affirmation.

Let's unpack that a little bit. First of all, let's look at trust. Trust requires an unshakeable commitment to honest struggle. The creation of trust is not about perfect performance but about transparent process. Trust exists not in our confidence that another will not hurt us, but in the person as God sees their worth and potential. We choose to trust people, not because they will never hurt us, but because we see them as God sees them, and we open a way for them to find more love. When we trust each other in the Church, it is not that we trust each other to be performers, what we are trying to have is an open process where we are open and vulnerable with each other, so we can see each other's struggle. That's what creates trust.

This of course is 1 Corinthians 13:7:

[Love] always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (NIV)

...bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (NASB)

Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything. (JB Phillips New Testament)

These are fantastic words in the context of trust because it is so easy for us – remember what we said about the characteristics of shame, that it is a threat to trust – it is so easy for us, out of our place of shame, to not trust. But 1 Corinthians 13 says, “Love always trusts.” That's a radical statement and we can work really hard to try and make that mean something other than what it does say, because we don't like it. But it is shame that tells us not to like it, because if we trust people and they hurt us, where it hurts is at our own sense of worthlessness. If indeed our identity is found in Christ, then being hurt is a transitory experience because we can find our way back to Christ.

Therefore, trust becomes something that we give people even when there is not necessarily an expectation of trust. We have to think that through. What we need to be able to communicate to people is, “I fundamentally trust you, even if your performance doesn't necessarily warrant trust, or it isn't trustworthy.”

The second thing is safety. A safe environment involves a commitment to providing a space where one will not be intentionally hurt or shamed. It is an empathetic environment. It is not one in which there is no possibility of being hurt but one where pain is understood and shared. Hurt that may occur comes as a result of the frailty of our humanity and is an expression of shame – it is dealt with honestly and apologetically. To apologize is to express empathy. An inability to apologize is an expression of shame and undermines safety.

You know that the best thing you can do to create a place of safety is to be willing to apologize. Somehow we struggle with this. In fact, I was in a board meeting a couple of months ago and one of the board members said, “I have been a Christian for X number of years, and I never apologize because I've never done anything wrong.”

I immediately knew that person had to step down from the board because that is just not true. The incapacity to apologize meant that the shame walls were so thick in their life they couldn't possibly be a leader in the church.

It is such a great gift to people to say, "I'm sorry." Have you ever seen how in a conflict, the conflict is going on – bang, bang, bang, bang – and then one person says, "You know what? I'm sorry." The conflict just dies. It falls apart. When we say, "I'm sorry," we are saying, "I acknowledge your pain." Rather than saying, "I'm trying to protect my pain," we are saying, "I acknowledge your pain, and I wouldn't want it to be that way." That is an expression of love. It's incredible to me how quickly "I'm sorry" finishes a conflict. That's what creates a safe place in the church.

Thirdly, vulnerability – The most terrifying attribute of the healing community is that it is a place of vulnerability. It is a place where those engaged in the ministry of healing are the ones who live unguarded lives. There must be a willingness to live at the place where we can be hurt if there is going to be true healing. Vulnerability is something that scares us all. Vulnerability is me opening up my life so you can see my struggle. The reason it is so hard is because shame convinces us that if people can see my struggle they won't love me, they won't like me, they will disconnect, they will judge me, all of those things. In fact, that often does happen. At least the judgement part happens. But vulnerability is based on our identity in Christ, not on our identity in shame. We are set free from that place so we create this space of vulnerability. It becomes this incredibly powerful way of bringing transformation into the life of the church.

If you go back and look at the Day of Pentecost, you see the Holy Spirit come. Preceding the Day of Pentecost, there are fifty days where the people of God gathered in the upper room. I am going to suggest that as those people gathered during that time, they had been through this incredibly traumatic experience where they had lost the one who had meant everything to them, and they received him back again. That put them on an emotional rollercoaster. Typically, when people have been through those kinds of extremes, they do become vulnerable. They start to talk about their struggle. I would suggest in that fifty day period, those people became incredibly vulnerable to each other, because of the experiences they had been through. They talked about their doubts and their fears and failures. While I cannot guarantee it is true, I like to think that what made it possible for the Holy Spirit to be poured out on the Day of Pentecost, it was actually the vulnerability that made it happen in that upper room.

While we maintain the ever-present possibility, and reality, of being entirely sanctified, it is in the context of being constantly sanctified, transformed, and healed. That means that while I am being transformed, there is more to come. The vulnerability is going to be about the process and will include my failures.

Next is belonging. We must offer the gift of belonging before we can offer the grace of transformation. We cannot point to people's inadequacies and suggest some type of transformation is needed prior to acceptance. Acceptance comes first. To belong is the beginning of honor. One of the most valuing things you can do for people is to say to them, "You belong here." The church needs to be a place of embrace. When a person comes into the life of the church, it is actually a gift. They are giving us their journey. For us to stand back and judge, based on them not adequately fitting our parameters is a terrible betrayal of the Gospel.

So we create a space where people belong, even when their lifestyles are dramatically opposed to what we might value. Transformation comes after belonging, and if we want it to come before, we can never expect God to be able to use us in the process of bringing love and Christ to their life. This is Peter's statement, "...for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." (1 Peter 2:10) You belong.

Finally, affirmation. The rhetoric of the healing community is of one another's worth. Every opportunity to point to the reality of worth must be taken if we are to be a healing community. We affirm by listening. We listen to people. We don't keep talking. We listen. We affirm by acknowledging both struggle and success. It's often easy to say, "Oh, you've done a great job. That's great!" It may be affirming in that way, but it is equally affirming to listen to a person's struggle and to empathize with them in their struggle.

We affirm by allowing free choice. We let people come, and we let people go. As a pastor, that is something I had to deal with greatly. I always wanted people to be in church every Sunday, and I would have a way of talking to people when they didn't turn up, to let them know that I wasn't happy with them. God saved me. I got converted. I realized that I didn't have to control people's church attendance. In fact, I got to the place where I realized that people coming to church out of duty wasn't a helpful thing. I have to confess, I have actually met people at the church door and said, "You know, it's been three months since you've missed a Sunday. Why don't you not come next Sunday?" I encouraged them to think about getting out of just doing it out of duty, and do it out of love and grace. Obviously, I knew some more about what was going on in the background there, but church attendance can't be the measure of our Christian experience, right? When I attend church because it's just what I do, I'm not adding to the healing community. I attend the church community because I long to be a part of that. I love being a part of it. It's the thrill of my life to be a part of that. That's the motivation.

We affirm through ministry being an expression of giftedness not institutional requirements. I can say a lot about this, but I will try and keep it brief. Letting people do things that they are gifted to do is affirming. Making people do things that they don't want to do is not affirming. We affirm by recognizing personality differences and experiential predispositions. I've been around Christians long enough to know that some Christians think all Christians ought to be this way. They ought to look this way. They ought to dress this way. They should vote this way. They should go to these places. They ought to say these things. They ought to...whatever it is. But we affirm by allowing variety, allowing difference, and affirming those differences. We affirm by highlighting in our conversations with each other what we value and love about the other.

Now, often times in this conversation, we talk about trying to create shame-free spaces and shame-free churches. I have often had people say, "Well, there is a good process to shame. Shame is the barrier that surrounds us and keeps us inside the law. We know if we cross the boundaries of the law, we will feel bad about ourselves." A shameless person is a person that isn't held back by those boundaries, so we don't want people to be shameless. I make a distinction between being shameless and shame-free. In the first place, shame does create boundaries around which people don't want to cross, but let me suggest that whatever effective boundaries shame can create, love can create a much better one. While shame does create a boundary, if love was the boundary, we wouldn't need shame at all.

Let me try to flesh out these differences between being shameless and shame-free. To be shameless is to create a defense mechanism against personal shame that is impervious to any form of challenge. It is a pathological condition. To be shame-free is to discover our identity in Christ, have our memories healed of their sting, and to be daily transformed from the habitual psychological patterns of shame. To be shameless is to have no restraint on inflicting pain upon another. Shame is often seen to have a positive guiding and controlling impact upon a community, and to be shameless is to live without regard to those restraints. To be shame-free is to be guided by love as our restraint rather than shame.

These things come together to create what, for me, is a vision of the future. In order to see where the church can be, we must see it for what it is intended to be. No vision for the church can be truly complete if it does not include bringing healing from shame and hope for a shame-free community. Any vision of the future must reflect the reality of truly transformed lives united together by a God-given passion to bring that same transformation to those that have not received. To make that transformation available to the shamed is to create shame-free communities that understand the imperative of the five keys.

Many pastors and church leaders are dominated by the thought of being a model Christian, having a model home, living a model fiscally responsible life, modeling competency. That's a burden that many pastors and church leaders carry. I'm a church leader. I've got to model what it is to be complete in Christ. But to be a model pastor or church leader is to model the five marks of healing. It is not to be competently above every struggle. To be an effective pastor or leader is to lead with love. We cannot afford our leadership to be marked by shame.

So what we actually model is the transformational process of love. That's what leaders model – not competency, but in their vulnerability - displaying what love is transforming them into. I wonder what would happen in the life of the church if that was the task we took to heart; if as leaders we would say, "I don't need to uphold the standard of perfection and performance. What I need is for people to see that in my humanity, God is faithfully bringing transformation."

I am a different person from what I was ten, fifteen years ago - even five years ago. I like myself. I like the way God has shaped me, but that has not been my reality for most of my life. I know how awful a human being I am apart from the grace of God, very controlling, very manipulative, very demanding that I am right, very on top of things. As a pastor, I always wanted to make sure the right thing happened all the time, because if it went wrong, it reflected badly on me. As God began to transform me through love, what I have increasingly found is that I don't need to control anything. The results are so much more God glorifying when I take my hands off and people arrive at that place of love and grace on their own than it is when I control them to get them there. It's an amazing wonderful thing.

Phineas Bresee, the founder of the Church of the Nazarene, said, "We are debtors to every man," and of course every woman. This was written over 120 years ago. "To give him the gospel in the same measure in which we have received it." So let's throw our hearts open. Let's live vulnerably and allow grace to transform us from a controlling shame identity to the identity of glory and grace. Then give others that grace in the measure that we have received.