



A Bible Study from the LCMS Northern Illinois District

Incarnate Community Bible Study Sermon Notes

Session I Designed for Community



Helping congregations be more centered on a rich life of Word and Sacrament,
with congregational support in transitions as well as time of joys and sorrows.





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Incarnate Community
LCMS Northern Illinois District Bible Study and Sermon Series
Week I Designed for Community – Sermon Notes
Pastor David Gaddini

Genesis 1 and 2

Scope of the Series

Here's how Kris Whitby describes it:

“Our world changed with the pandemic, and we learned to adapt to a world where we lived physically distant. This study is designed to now invite people to return to an ‘in person’ community of faith by exploring the God-given blessings that come as the followers of Jesus gather around His Word and Sacraments.”

“This four-week study and sermon series is intended to engage participants on the value and blessings our Lord gives when the local church shows up ‘in person.’ Over the past 18 months, I’ve heard many followers of Jesus say they’re not returning to church until the pandemic passes, if at all in person. The surveys from folks like Barna have indicated that as many as 1/3 of active Christians are saying they’re not coming back to an in person community of faith. Yet, we know there is value when our Lord gathers His Church together as the community of faith. As I approached this study, I realized the challenge is that the Scriptures do not directly talk about the value of being an “in person” Church ... they presume it. My goal was also to give participants the chance to discuss the value of being the community of faith, in person, without setting up a negative contrast to what churches have been able to do through online ministry. Online proclamation of Christ is a gift and blessing, but I believe if it were to completely supplant in person community of faith, there would be something incredibly lost in that. Hopefully the four sessions reflect that balanced approach.”

Scope of this Sermon

Kris Whitby asked four of us in the NID to pull together some homiletical helps for anyone who wants to leverage the Bible study as a sermon series. While the whole series is about the need and importance for community, this first week is about how God has designed us for community. It's what God intends his creation (us!) to experience. It's the platform from which we're meant to do life, even with God. Our expressions of community are actually meant to reflect the sense of community that God himself experiences.

What follows is a splattering of insights to help you preach God's design for community out of Genesis 1 and 2.



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Intros

You can start by setting the stage of where we're going these next four weeks: God has designed us for community.

- Mention how the NID is pulling together a four-week study on community.
- Draw some language out of the "Scope of this Series" paragraph above.
- Tease out how God wants us in community. Or how we find the fullness of what God intends for us in community. Or how obedience to God calls for community. Or how sin fractures community. Or how avoidance/refusal/rejection of community is sin. And certainly how God restores community, even broken ones.
- You may need to make explicit what we mean by community – actual shared life together, filled with all the joys, pitfalls, struggles, and sufferings of doing life with other human beings. This means time spent together, investing in each other, putting up with each other, sacrificing for each other, seeking commonality in Christ with each other, and the like.
- You may want to contrast alternate kinds of communities that exist today – virtual communities, Facebook, name-only memberships without life done together, geographic communities where individuals have little contact with each another. ... All have blessings yet are poor substitutes for actual in-the-flesh togetherness for which we're designed.
- This may be tired in your context, but possibly talk about how COVID-19 has fractured community. People have stopped gathering. Some are isolating out of fear. Others have found a convenient reason to trade life together for autonomy and independence. Or laziness. (Watching church on my couch is easier than getting up and getting ready to go meet with other people.) Add to that the divides between maskers and anti-maskers, vaxxers and anti-vaxxers, and how it splits us. ... All of this on top of the individualism and isolationism already so rampant today. It's all a bit on the nose, but sometimes sermons have to be.

Whichever way you go, don't get bogged down here. Just set the stage and get going. God has designed us for community.

The Passages

Next, I'd move right into the Bible. Let it speak for itself and be the springboard for whatever you want to draw out.

The NID group study suggests one of two passages: Genesis 1:26-31 and Genesis 2:15-25. Here's the highlighted verse in each:

- Genesis 1:27 - *"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."*



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- Genesis 2:18 - *“Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’”*

Both show how God designed us to be in relationships with others. Both set up the male/female complementarian relationship. Genesis 1 focuses more on how the relationships we have with each other reflect the relationship God has within himself. Genesis 2 focuses more on how even in God’s good creation, it is not good if we are not doing life with other people.

I recommend focusing on life together (community) as God’s design for all people, not just husbands and wives and not just in a male/female context. Don’t make this a marriage sermon. At most, give marriage a brief mention as an example of the joy and struggle of doing life together with those closest to you (plus the fracturing that occurs, as well as Christ’s redemptive healing).



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Threads to Pull On

You can go in so many directions. Here are some different lines of thought you can choose from. There's more here than you can do in one message, especially if you average 10 minute sermons over 40. Don't try to do it all. Just pick a thread or two and personalize it, or weave them together as you'd like. Different approaches are in bold.

Genesis 1:26-28 + Living out God's Purpose and Design

If you go with Genesis 1:27 and if time allows, consider the whole Genesis 1:26-31 context. It gets you important bits like God's intention and purpose for humanity (and therefore Jesus as the one who stands in place of humanity) and sets up the good/not good dichotomy between Genesis 1 and 2.

The OT is long. Like 622,000 words long. We need a few anchors to help us navigate. Genesis 1:26-28 is a load-bearing verse.

- Describe what a load-bearing wall is. Give an example. Show a picture of a load-bearing wall doing its job. Show a picture of what happens if you remove it. Take a video of you removing a load-bearing wall in your own house. Let the congregation laugh at your plight.
- One of the seven most important passages in the OT for tracing its theology and themes. (Leave them wondering on the other six.) Get these seven and you get the theological trajectory of the OT. (And so, the NT.)
- Key passage for God's plan for humanity in this world. Key to understanding His purpose for community.

Genesis 1:26-28 is God's mission statement for humanity. Here's the picture.

- After six days of forming the whole cosmos in all its wondrous variety, God creates humanity.
- God is the king over all creation but tells humanity to rule the earth. Twice. It's the accent point. He also tells them to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Later in Genesis 2:18, to work and care for/nurture the garden. (Some describe it as "Serve and Protect.")
- This is what it means to be the image bearers of God. We are His agents (or any number of other terms – vice-regents, governors, ambassadors, representatives ... all provide a number of tie-ins to other Biblical ideas and words), established and instituted by God to rule/govern His creation on His behalf.
- While theologians suggest all kinds of possibilities for the meaning of "image of God" (intrinsic characteristic of humanity, soul/spiritual side, etc.), I think the best way to look at it is as an office/calling/job description. We're made to be God's representative on earth. (If you want to go deeper, here's a good article in



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the Lexham Bible Dictionary: <https://drmsb.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Image-of-God-LBD.pdf>

- God makes humanity *and puts us in His stead to rule and care for His creation.* That is our purpose. It's a collective purpose we do together. Community by design.
- (All of this sets up Kingdom of God motifs and is central to the passage but goes beyond what we can do here.)



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Image of God as a vocation is reflected in the Biblical language

- Genesis 1:26 – “God said, ‘Let us make [hu]man in our image ...’ That’s *icon* if you’re an LXX lover; *tselem* in the MT.
- What’s an “icon”? Show a picture of an icon on your phone or laptop, or a liturgical icon, as a visual link for your hearers. An icon is a visual representation of something, like an app or a person. Humanity is God’s *icon/tselem*.
- Same word as idol. An idol is a visual representation of a god. Humanity is God’s visual representation on earth. (Read anything by John Walton on Genesis 1-2 to see how creation is portrayed as God’s temple.) While the Hebrew word *tselem* is not the only one for idol, nor the most common, they’re all pretty synonymous. The Hebrew word “shadow” also seems to relate. A shadow is a projection of an object. Humanity is God’s “idol” (visual rep) in His temple (creation). We are God’s “shadow,” His visual projection.
- As His icon/image/idol/shadow, we represent His presence and exercise His authority on earth.
- This has huge implications for a passage like Colossians 1:20, which says Jesus is the “image” of the invisible God. Jesus is the ultimate icon. God’s ultimate “idol.” Not just because of His divinity, but because He took on full humanity, including humanity’s original purpose. He’s a tangible and visual display of God as what humanity is supposed to be. Jesus does what humanity fails to do and what humanity undid. Christ, the ultimate imager. Not only God, Jesus is the ultimate human being.
- Renewed by Christ, this is what the church is supposed to be. Together in Christ, we are God’s temple (accent the plural language – 1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:19; Matthew 18:20 “where two or three ...”) Together in Christ, we are His presence and image. An individual relationship with Jesus is so important, but it’s when we gather in Jesus’ name that we become the full expression of what God wants us to do and who God wants us to be.

A rabbit hole: God put people in charge. Are you having trouble with this idea? It sounds crazy!

- Identify what some are probably thinking: How many of us think it would be better if people weren’t involved in God’s plan? “Just make things the way you want them, God.” “Just bypass the human element.” “You can do it better than we ever can.”
- Sometimes it seems like life would be a lot better if people weren’t involved. We mess it up. We cause hurt and regret it. We get hurt and feel alienated or angry. So we flee from relationships because of the complications and hurts. Cancel culture, ghosting, demonizing. ... Friendships, marriages, social circles, teams.



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How many flee from churches because of a few people, or for that matter from any community? How many of us pastors do the same thing?

- Through “people” is God’s way. A quick mention of Psalm 8 might help anchor the astonishment even this Biblical author felt over the whole thing. Accent the incredulity in 8:4 – *“Who are we that you would ... !?”*
 - Exegetical fodder: Even though Psalm 8 is often used in relation to Jesus (Matthew 21:16; 1 Corinthians 15; Ephesians 1:22) the dots connect because Jesus is God’s representative human. E.g. Hebrews 2 shows the supremacy of Christ over the angels and creation, but it does so because Psalm 8 is about humanity’s supremacy and authority over the angels and creation. Jesus fulfills God’s intention for humanity. (This is also why Paul can say crazy things like we’ll judge the angels; cf. 1 Corinthians 6:3).
“Son of Man” language tends to trigger a divine, messianic connotation because of Jesus’ self-adoption of the term from texts like Daniel 7. But keep in mind that “son of man” is the common OT expression for a human (think Ezekiel) and that the point of Daniel 7 is to show that a *human* (i.e. “son of man”) is coming to restore humanity’s God-ordained rightful rule over the beasts/animals that are rampaging with uncontrolled impunity.
- Every human is an imager of God. Not animals, plant life, AI, or more highly intelligent life forms hypothetically yet to be discovered. “Image of God” is our role and our calling on God’s authority. By God’s design, we do this together.

You have a role to play, and you don’t go it alone.

- Genesis 2 starts with a garden and Revelation 21 ends with a city. A city is bigger than a garden. Go with me. A city is an overly-developed garden. God puts humanity in the garden and tells humanity to work and care for it (Genesis 2:15). It’s an extension of the Genesis 1:26-28 mandate to rule over it, fill it, and subdue it. We’re supposed to develop what God has started. Adam and Eve may have walked alone with God in the garden. A city requires people to walk together in community.
- Accent a positive aspect. The work is vast. How can we do this except with each other? My wife grew up Mennonite. She lived among the Amish. Ever seen a barn raised by a community in a day? God calls us to do more than build a barn. To build his church. To better his world. Is it effective to do it alone? Ecclesiastes 4:9-12.
- Or accent a negative. We’re in a world at war. Spiritual war (Ephesians 6). Sin has taken the world. The devil is on the prowl. You don’t go into battle alone. We need each other to make it through. To win. To survive. If community does nothing more than bring some pleasantries into our lives, we can take it or leave it. But in a war, community is essential.



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- Use examples of the epic task together. Luke needs Han. Han has Chewy. Behind all three is a community called the rebellion. Bilbo needs Gandalf. Frodo and Sam. Behind them, the Fellowship. The Band of Brothers of E Company in the 506th. Sweet Tooth and Big Man. Your favorite sports team (would a single player have any chance alone?). Pick an analogy. Just make it clear. We have a greater purpose and task than our own lives. We need each other.
- 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 is a nice biblical illustration of this.
- Ask the questions: How are you playing out your role in God's design and story? Who are you doing it with?

"Very good" is not perfect.

Genesis 1:31 – *"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."* A lot of us casually describe life before the fall as perfect. It's a bit misleading because it depends what you mean by that word.

- Certainly free of sin, and so "perfect" in regard to the effects of sin. But it was not as though the *telos* had arrived. (Remember *telos*? Translate as completion or fullness. Or better, the end game.) Teach them the word. They'll think you're amazing.
- Important trajectory here: God gave humanity the start of something, not the completion of it.
- Together, humanity's job is to build on what God had made.
- HS is renewing that within us and through us. Philippians 1:6 and 2:12-13.
- Emphasize "very good." The actual words matter. This isn't being pedantic or grasping at straws.

Playing off of "very good," something's "not good" in God's creation.

- Adam is alone. Genesis 2:18 – It is not good for the man to be alone. So God makes a helper suitable for him.
- Even if God's creation is all as it should be, it's not complete without others. You were made to be in community.
- Marriage is a natural expression of this. The most naturally intimate connection and oneness we strive to have.
- But it doesn't end here. Male and female as imagers of God highlight complementarian roles we're called to have with each other. We not only need each other, we're designed to work together for God's greater purpose.
- It's not good to be alone. Some solitude is refreshing, but too much goes against God's design. Challenge those who choose too much isolation to believe God actually knows what's better for them. Encourage those who find themselves more alone than they

God's design for us to be in community reflects His nature as one who is in community.



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- God says “*Let us make [hu]man in our image, in our likeness ...*” We’ve all gotten the question on why God says “Let us ...” Who’s he talking to? Three options:
 - *Plural of majesty*. As in a King referring to himself as bigger than a singular being. It’s a weak option that’s pretty much out of favor due to lack of linguistic evidence.
 - *Proto-Trinitarian*. Possibly a hint at the three-in-oneness of God. Far be it from me to downplay the Trinity – there’s certainly a truth you can play off here – but exegetically speaking, most Biblical scholars go another way.
 - *God’s Divine Council*. Put another way, His angelic entourage. Just like kings have courts, God is portrayed in the OT as having a court. (Think Job 1; 1 Kings 22, etc.) This option implies that by this point God has already created the host in heaven. (When? Who knows.) He’s telling them, “Here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to put humanity in charge of this thing.” God includes them. (For diversionary interest, look up Divine Council in any good Bible dictionary. Michael Heiser’s *Unseen Realms* is also a great intro. Or check out Reed Lessing in the CPH Commentary *Isaiah 40-55*, p 105, where he comments on the Divine Council in Isaiah 40:1.)

God is working with others. Does He have to? No. He could have done it solo. But He chooses to nonetheless. How much more should we who are finite and limited participate together with others? (Point of warning: Don’t imply that angels were co-creators. Stay away from Gnostic traps. Rather that God included them in the decision-making process.)

- Here’s the point. God exists in community. Not even God goes solo in all His monotheistic glory. He designed us to be in community and this reflects His reality as a being in community.
 - Within the Trinity, it’s fascinating that the three persons are together as one – a good working model for any community. Because love shares. Love gives. Love has a recipient. We see it within God Himself as each person of the Trinity constantly elevates the other. Jesus glorifies the Father and sacrifices Himself in obedience to His will. The Father gives Jesus the name that is above every name, investing in Him all power and authority. Jesus points to the Spirit. The Spirit leads to Jesus. And the Father gives up His beloved son for the sake of the world. You can play off the essence of community found within God as the root for community we’re designed to experience.
 - Following the Divine Council thread, God is literally portrayed as doing His work in conjunction with other beings. He didn’t have to. But He chose to. And we can argue if He chose to, there’s something good here. You can play off the paradigm of following God’s paradigm and model.



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- God is relational and God is communal. Somehow bring it home that being made in God's image includes reflecting His nature and reflecting His ways. Reflecting God's image means mirroring how God operates within community.

Broken Community

Whatever thread you pull on, an easy transition is into how the fall (and our sin) destroys community.

Since the focus is Genesis 1 or 2, it's easy to use Genesis 3. An effect of the fall is the fracturing of community.

- The man and woman blame each other for what went wrong. Clearly a wedge between them. Relationship divided.
- The two who became one are split. Each is looking out for themselves. Neither sees the situation as "in it together."
- They hide from God. The communion (or community) they once had with Him is fractured. "Walking together" is mired by separation and alienation as they hide from Him. No longer naked and transparent. Now we're covering.
- You can play off all kinds of ways we experience this fracture: Husbands and wives, within families, friendships, schools, churches, local communities, the nation, nations. ... Most significantly, our tendency to run from God.

If you want to push your message to the 90 minute mark, open the door on what it means to also be in the image of Seth (Genesis 5:1). Two images battling with us. Might Paul call these "flesh" and "spirit"? Think Romans 8, Galatians 5, John 3 ...

Jesus Restores God's Design for Community

Any NT passages talking about Jesus healing the rift in fractured community will reasonably work as Gospel proclamation. Here's two I particularly like. Unpack either or pick another you like.

- Colossians 1:19-23 - *For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation – if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.*
- Ephesians 2:13-17 - *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who*



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has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.

You know the Gospel well. Share how Christ forgives, heals, and helps our brokenness and our broken communities.

Some quotes and bits to help ground Jesus' restored vision for community.

You can splice any of these into your outline or round off your message by painting a picture of what community looks like according to God's design.

- “Ideally, however, the church itself is not made up of natural “friends.” It is made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything of the sort. Christians come together, not because they form a natural collocation, but because they have been saved by Jesus Christ and owe him a common allegiance. In the light of this common allegiance, in light of the fact that they have all been loved by Jesus himself, they commit themselves to doing what he says – and he commands them to love one another. In this light, they are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus' sake.” D.A. Carson, *Love in Hard Places* (quoted in *Unoffendable*, p 139)
- God's design for community means forgiveness. And patience. Bearing with each other and humility. We're to reflect His grace and mercy. We'll hurt each other when we do life together, and we'll disagree. Community doesn't often come easy. But it's what God wants. Use or read Colossians 3:12-17.
“Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”
- Fellowship is a process. If the Holy Spirit is in the process of sanctifying us, deepening fellowship will become a process, too. Like the process of grafting, we



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grow into oneness with each other. Give illustrations or show examples of how grafting works. (See Anthony Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit*, p. 407 for more)

- Acts 2:42-47 always works as a great picture of God's community. Highlight the use of plurals in the language and their intentionality – *they devoted to fellowship* (it didn't just happen spontaneously), they met daily, they met in their homes, they ate together, they sacrificed for each other, they were glad about it ("with glad and sincere hearts"), they, they, they ... And it wasn't a closed-off clique. "The Lord added to their number daily ... "

Concluding Thoughts

Wrap it up. Restate where you've taken them and a couple key take-aways. Just make sure to highlight that God has designed them to be in community.

Outlines

There's a lot of data here. Now that you're drowning in possibilities, maybe a few quick outlines will help you find a flow.

Outline 1: Follow the major headers

1. Intro
2. The passage + one or two threads
3. Sin Breaks Community
4. Jesus Restores God's Design for Community
5. One take-away from God's Restored Vision for Community

Outline 2: Creation, Sin, Redemption

1. That first community
2. Broken community
3. New community

Outline 3: Vision

1. God has designed us to be together. He loves people and loves the world.
2. The Bible tells the story of God's rescue operation for the world.
3. Tell the salvation story.
4. God has a role for you in the unfolding of His story.
5. Highlight your church's role to play. (Use "we" language.)

Outline 4: Unique, yet Together

1. God wants to do something in you and through you.
2. You are the image of God. And that is a calling.
3. God is by nature in fellowship/community. Each person of Godhead elevating and sharing love towards each other. He includes his Divine council. Bedrock from which we derive our sense of community and His will for community.



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4. We're also individuals, each with our own distinctions.
5. Designed to love/enjoy each other, serve each other, and bless the world. Like God. Together.

Outline 5: Call to Community

1. Community is in your nature.
2. It violates your nature to break with community.
3. God is calling you to His community.

