



*Cliff Loesch*

Cliff Loesch serves as the pastor of University Friends Church in Wichita, Kansas. He is also the presiding clerk of Friends United Meeting. Cliff is married to LaVonna (Leach) Loesch and they have two grown children, Parker and Molly. Whenever possible, Cliff enjoys playing the upright bass and riding his motorcycle.

*BIBLE READING: Romans 12:3-13*

Is community a gift from God or something that we create and nurture?

Art Gish (*Living in Christian Community, 1979*) says it is a gift—but also something that is fragile and must be constantly nourished; there are forces around us which seek to divide us, to tear apart our sense of community and our love for one another.

There was a dead stoplight in my town this week. When stoplights are working, the community functions pretty well. But when the power goes out at a stoplight, it seems that we don't have a very clear, shared understanding about how to function smoothly in community. Some people aggressively take the right of way whether it's their turn or not. Other people wait and wait for the perfect opportunity.

All of us are part of many communities. Even the people at the dead stoplight formed a little temporary community, our only goal being to function together well enough to get through the stoplight. But other communities have a greater impact on me: my church community, my family, close friendships, and other groups where I feel connected to others on a personal level, where I draw strength and empowerment for living and the power to stand up for the things that matter in this world.

I believe, as Art Gish said, that community is a gift from God. But it is also true that community needs to be cultivated and cared for like the beautiful garden that it is.

What can we do to nurture community around us?

*SONG: The Servant Song*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Loving God, show me where I am not being careful to nurture healthy community. Give me the courage to be real in the communities within which I live.*

—Cliff Loesch

*BIBLE READING: Ephesians 3:14-21*

I grew up attending a church in a small community in the panhandle of Texas, and my family went to church whenever something was happening. When I think of the years I spent at Booker Friends Church, I remember the fun we had: a group playing volleyball after church, or a bunch of us hanging out at the Dairy Queen or Pizza Hut. The spiritual aspects were memorable too. As I grew older there were opportunities to dialog about faith at a deeper level. Booker Friends gave me a very solid foundation of biblical knowledge over the years.

Unfortunately, this kind of community is hard to find. We lead such fragmented lives that it is logistically difficult to spend much time together. But simply placing ourselves in the company of others—having friends over, meeting someone for coffee, getting involved at church—is a good start. Working, serving, playing, and laughing together, sometimes disagreeing but loving anyway—that’s how community develops.

Thomas Kelly, a Quaker writer, describes the purely social horizontal (person-to-person) relationships that often displace the horizontal-vertical when the person-to-person relationship is *in God*. He says that not everyone finds that depth of community, that we just get too wrapped up in the horizontal-only part of it (*A Testament of Devotion*, 1941).

In our longing for community, I pray that we will be successful in our quest, experiencing the deeper dimensions of community as our life with others is permeated with God’s loving presence.

*SONG: The Bond of Love*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, our Maker, anoint our community in ways that make you the center of every relationship. May we carry the sweet fragrance of Jesus to one another and to the world.*

—Cliff Loesch

*BIBLE READING: Romans 12:9-21*

A few years ago, a neighbor told me that when he was a professor back in the 1960s during the Vietnam War, the faculty of the university where he taught was so divided over United States involvement in that war that they could not even have faculty meetings to discuss the affairs of the school. So they decided to have separate faculty meetings for a while. That amazed me. You have this idea that people should be able to work together in spite of their differences—that folks should be able to leave some things at the door when they come into a meeting.

And you know, sometimes I have that same thought about Christians; that we should be able to handle differences better than most because of our core teachings about grace and mercy and forgiveness. And what about our Quaker perspective—the idea that God could actually be speaking through the person who holds a point of view exactly opposite to our own? And that the best way forward is not necessarily through one way or the other way, but that the conversation and the give and take between perspectives—along with deep listening to the Spirit—can potentially yield something better than either side could have envisioned on its own.

I think we all share a strong desire for unity—and for a deep sense of community with others. And love. And peace.

At some level, everybody has to want to make it work. And everybody has to go through a self-emptying process to achieve deeper community that includes respect and peace. “So come on people, now...try to love one another right now!”

*SONG: They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God of miracles, prepare me to truly listen for you, even through those whose opinions are opposite to mine.*

—Cliff Loesch

*BIBLE READING: James 4:1-12*

I read a humorous article by Tom O'Donnell that championed the cause for standing desks instead of sitting at a desk all day. He said, "Sitting all day is killing you!...I was once a standing-desk skeptic...but after I made the switch four days ago, I could immediately sense a difference in how I felt: way more self-righteous." I was struck by his facetious confession, envisioning him towering over those desk-sitters with a self-righteous smirk.

James 4 says, "God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble." It's not just God who is opposed to the proud, so are we. What is our reaction to those who act like they know it all and communicate to us that we basically know nothing? I have to confess that I don't always react very lovingly.

But compare the smug "stander" with people whose lives demonstrate a humble awareness of their own shortcomings. They're gracious and loving toward others because of that self-awareness.

Pride is a barrier that almost nothing can get through. Pride even blocks God from the door. Proudful, self-righteous people don't recognize it, and it does no good to tell them. They still won't see it—and they'll judge you for telling them. Self-awareness has to come from within, or from God's gentle battering ram that is constantly trying to push through that locked exterior. When humility opens the door, God's grace flows in like a rushing river.

*SONG: Who Am I?*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Open our eyes, gentle God, to areas of pride, and show us how to humble ourselves before you and before others.*

—Cliff Loesch

*BIBLE READING: Romans 8:28-39*

Every day of my life I have more things to do than I can possibly accomplish. I finish a lot of things, but there is always much more that I need to do. The feeling that I'm never done, or that I'm never caught up, follows me around every day.

A favorite story about St. Francis describes the time he was hoeing in his garden and was asked what he would do if he suddenly learned that he would die at sunset that day. He replied that he would finish hoeing his garden. What his answer says to me is that he felt he was already doing exactly what God had given him to do in that moment, trying to live a *God-directed* life rather than a *self-directed* life, and not letting other people or other situations dictate how he should live.

How was Jesus able to stay grounded and centered, no matter what was happening outwardly? Jesus knew who he was and he knew his mission in life. It was his goal to live a God-directed life, no matter whether people were praising him or putting him on a cross.

It is possible to gain a sense of God's presence in each and every moment and to recognize the love of Christ in every part of life. We may not see exactly how things work together for anything good like verse 28 tells us, but we can be certain that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

*SONG: Step by Step (Rich Mullins)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: I want to live every moment with you and in you, God, my purpose and my guide. Help me keep my eyes on you.*

—Cliff Loesch

*BIBLE READING: James 3:13-18*

Whenever greed rears its head, that is a peace issue. Whenever there is intimidation, that is a peace issue. Whenever conflict escalates between one group and another, that is a peace issue. Whenever the needs of the less-powerful are not considered, that is a peace issue.

We need to ask ourselves, what is the consequence of greed, or lack of sharing; or of putting too much strain on the environment; of revenge; of envy; of giving in to the powerful; or of just trying to stay out of it all?

Sometimes we hear the slogan, “No justice, no peace.” Justice and peace go hand in hand. When people feel they are victims of injustice, they are less likely to be willing to live in peace with others. Working for peace is not easy. And the best decision where peace is concerned will not always make everyone happy.

How might the Spirit be leading each of us to work for peace? The Spirit may lead you to examine the ramifications of your inward thoughts and feelings toward others. You may be nudged toward promoting equality in order to diminish injustice. The Lord could plant a seed in your heart to consider long-term environmental sustainability—to help ensure a better world for your own great-great-grandchildren. Perhaps you will see ways to make a difference in your own world for peace. Maybe you will even see a way to help bring about a more peaceful world.

Working for peace is deeply rooted in the heart of our faith. May the Lord help us become better builders of peace.

*SONG: Lord, Make Us Instruments of Your Peace*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God of all peace, show me where I can help build peace in your name.*

—Cliff Loesch

*BIBLE READING: John 6:24-35*

We eat a lot of fresh strawberries in the summer. I eat them every day, sometimes twice a day. You have to do that to get them all eaten before they start to spoil—so there is no point in holding back. Just eat them to your heart's content. Otherwise you'll end up throwing some of them away in just a few short days, and it's not good stewardship to let them go to waste. So I say just eat them up—and feel good about it.

I think there is a general lesson for life in here someplace.

Jesus made the point in John 6, that we should work not for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life. So how do we live our lives so we are working for that which endures?

In the conversation with Jesus here, the people mentioned the wilderness experience when their ancestors were given manna to eat every day. When Jesus told them not to work for the food that perishes, they remembered the manna.

When I think about strawberries that don't last very long, or when I think about manna that only lasts a day, the life lesson that I gather is this: Grab each new day. Enjoy what God has provided today. Use up all the grace and love and mercy and forgiveness that you can. Don't save it for tomorrow—use it all today. Every bit of it. There will be more tomorrow. Plenty more.

Have you gathered any grace or love or mercy today? Use it on somebody today. Use it all.

*SONG: Great Is Thy Faithfulness*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Oh loving God, everything you are has been lavished on me—more than I need, more than I deserve. But gladly I receive it all, and I only ask that you show me how to lavish it on others as well.*

—Cliff Loesch