



God on Broadway

Week 4: Come From Away

Brian Mattson - 02/02/2026

Today we are talking about the power of community with the help of a little town on the island of Newfoundland in Canada. As we learned from the cast at the beginning of worship, Gander is a small town on the large island. At the time of the events on September 11, 2001, the population was about 10,000. Over the course of a few hours, as all air traffic was being grounded in the United States, Gander's temporary population swelled by 65%. International flights coming over the Atlantic were diverted to Gander's airport carrying 6,700 passengers, crew, and pets on 38 planes.

As the news spread across the world, people rushed to help where they could. It was a full-on crisis, and it required a full-on response. In the town of Gander, this tight-knit community opened their doors—very literally—to support the temporary guests. Once people understood that these “plane people,” as they became known, would be in town for several days, the folks in Gander emptied their closets and refrigerators to support the additional community members. They brought blankets and bedding, clothes and toiletries, dog food and diapers. The line of cars waiting to donate the supplies stretched two miles. What was once a small community with its own way of life and identity, was now stretched to include people from nearly 100 countries around the world. The people of Gander and the island of Newfoundland are isolated by geography, culture, and economy. They

lovingly refer to themselves as Newfies or Islanders, taking pride in their distinct way of life and location. But for a week in 2001, Gander showed the world the power of community in its ideal form.

How many communities do you consider yourself a member of? It can be a very broad descriptor, but can also be quite succinct. In my own life, I have been a member of a scout troop, a soccer team, and my youth group, among others. Maybe you are part of the theater community or the arts community. It could be the business community or the healthcare community. There are a million ways to define and delineate communities. They typically form organically around shared interests and hobbies, likes and sometimes dislikes.

Another way a community can be formed is through trauma. The world experienced a trauma on September 11, 2001, and Gander showed the beauty and potential of that specific kind of community.

Do you remember where you were that day? It was my generation's Pearl Harbor. A day the world stood still. It was a Tuesday morning, and I was in Coach Steinhaus's ACT Prep class chatting with my friends. Another teacher walked by and told Coach Steinhaus to turn on the TV. He flipped it on and we saw the buildings on fire. No one was really sure what was going on, but soon enough, the news anchors relayed that this was a deliberate act. An attack on America. The hallways were abuzz between classes. Some kids were anxious and scared. Others were angry and ready to go to war. Most of us were just confused. America had been at peace for most of our lives up to that point.

In one moment, things changed. And the way we rallied around each other was inspiring. The way the world rallied around us, standing with us, was a beautiful moment. The town of Gander was a microcosm of the entire world. An isolated community who threw open their doors and arms to share, support, and care for one another.

If only that could've lasted forever.

There was also the other side of that coin. Fear. Anger. Retribution. And those aren't just words to describe the military response. People became afraid of other people. Humans were divided up by skin color, language, religion, and location. In our collective hunger for justice, we feasted on fear. Lines were drawn deeper and darker. There was a very real sense of distrust amongst neighbors, allies, and partners in the global community and at home.

But for those five long days in Gander for nearly 7,000 strangers, community was forged from the fires of tragedy. Relationships and bonds were created that will last a lifetime. Tears were shared. Hugs were exchanged. Needs were met. Here's how the mayor at the time recalls the rapid assimilation into the community of Gander: "On the first day we had 7,000 strangers. On the third day we had 7,000 friends. And on the fifth day we lost 7,000 family members. That's how close we became to those people."

So how do we build community that looks like what happened in Gander? It's usually pretty easy to love and care for the people who look, talk, and act like us. It's another thing entirely to welcome complete strangers into our communities.

Any time a church talks about community, it usually lifts up the community in Acts 2. And for good reason. In this brief account of the church following Pentecost, we have a great description of a selfless, sharing community.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 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 all the people. And day by day the Lord added to

their number those who were being saved.

- Acts 2:44-47

This is community in its purest form, sharing all things: food, possessions, time, burdens, and joys. But this kind of community is a response. It is a product of an event or situation. Some theologians have proposed the idea of a pattern that is repeated in scripture and humanity. One name for it is the *Exodus Pattern of Faith*. In this pattern, there is a situation of distress, followed by an unexpected deliverance, which gives way to a response in community.

One clear example of this, hence the name, is the exodus of the Israelites from captivity in Egypt. This defining moment of the Israelites is not only something to recall and memorialize, but to include as part of their identity going forward. It all starts with a situation of distress. The Israelites are crying out in bondage under their Egyptian rulers. Joseph is gone and the Pharaohs have no memory of mercy and mutual respect for the Israelites. And those cries for help rise up to God.

Enter Moses, who helps deliver the Israelites from Pharaoh's army by crossing the Red Sea on dry ground. God tames the sea and then lets it loose to swallow the chariots and soldiers of the pursuers. A miraculous saving event that gives way to a people with identity. People in community who are changed forever. They are people with a name, a God, and a way forward.

This pattern is repeated throughout scripture, culminating in the crucifixion of Jesus. There is a situation of distress, the crucifixion, followed by resurrection, which then gives way to the birth of community—the church—at Pentecost. And just like the body of believers at Pentecost, the body of Christ's church is a quilt. An interwoven fabric made up of various parts: men and women, kids and the elderly, many languages and nations. All these separate parts are woven together to form one community.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

- 1 Corinthians: 12:12-14, 24-27

Biblical community isn't constrained by tribe or location, ethnicity or ideology. It's boundaryless. It's exemplified by Jesus in the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's love made real because it's not bound by the law, but bound by humanity. True community puts greater importance on collective responsibility and shared humanity than it does ideologies, languages, or locations.

That's why the story of Gander rings true to audiences. For a few short days, they showed the world what true community looks like. Gander's story will be told and retold for generations as a model to follow. Because here's the thing about the weeks, months, and years after 9/11—we are still sorting through the fear that was sown during those days. In the musical, *Come From Away*, they don't deny that there is fear, and anger, and distrust. But it doesn't define the story. Rather, their story is defined by understanding that there is an interconnectedness to humanity. And not just one to another, but also one to the whole, and one to creation, all woven together to work together.

It was baked into the rhythm of the created order we read about in Genesis. Humankind has a distinct responsibility to care for all of creation and to keep it healthy and flourishing. God's miraculous creation event culminates with

humans in Genesis one, formed in the likeness of God. And the beautiful poem that begins the biblical story gives way to a second creation story, focusing this time on the importance of social connections for humankind's work on earth. In God's evaluation of creation, God understands that, "It is not good that man should be alone." So God creates a partner. Aside from the man and woman aspect of the story, this passage tells us that the work of caring for creation requires community. It requires togetherness. It requires solidarity. It doesn't happen in isolation. This is the rhythm and order set forth by God in creation. The stories that follow in Genesis are all about how we—humankind—continually break this arrangement and seek our own ways. And the stories always involve God resetting the created order.

We are blessed with amazing potential and capabilities, but we are also cursed with short-term memories. We are forgetful people. We are selfish people. We are fearful people. Because we are all people. And when we forget that humans are interconnected, interrelated—family—cracks form in our foundation.

Have you seen any cracks lately? You know, I don't claim to know what the future will hold, but I feel pretty comfortable saying that it seems we've forgotten how closely connected we all are. We may not be at a tipping point or global crisis like 9/11, but we are at least at an inflection point. The choice is clear. We are either for each other or we are against God's preferred order for humanity.

That's the legacy of Gander's story. They chose to expand their community and become family to complete strangers. As the Canadian Prime Minister, Jean Chrétien, said at the time, "We realized that we were part of the global village... What is happening in one part of the globe is affecting all of us."

And so, like Gander, it's our responsibility to rush to the aid of people in our community who are in crisis. We can be the people of unexpected

deliverance, ushering in a healthier community. A patched up quilt of human connection.

In the song, *Blankets and Bedding*, the cast tells the story of doing whatever is needed to show up, provide, carry, and care for the so-called “plane people” in distress. There are plenty of “plane people” in this world who are hurting and desperate, scared and alone. Who don’t have a community. But that isn’t actually true. We are all part of the same family, the same community. And if God identifies with the low, the outcast, and the oppressed, then I am to identify with those same people. Our identity is with humanity, not power structures and authority.

One thing the “plane people” left behind was a giant thank you card stretching 20 feet or more. It’s hung up in the hallway of Gander’s high school. Almost every inch of it is covered with thank-yous and heartfelt words of gratitude for how the townspeople showed up and became community. One of the notes reads, “If we could only Ganderize the whole world, what a lovely little planet we would have.”

And that’s our call today, as it was back in Genesis. To work for the good of creation by working together. In community. As a family. I’m not sure what that looks like for you, what words or actions that might entail. But I know it starts with being willing to remove barriers and expanding what community looks like. We are in relationship with each other, and furthermore, need each other to Ganderize the world. Because when that happens, it’s a beautiful thing. As it says in Psalm 133, “How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along!”