**Fellowship – Caring For One Another**

**John 15:12-17; 1 John 1:1-4; Acts 2:42-47**

11/8/15

Thought for Meditation:

Unless the fellowship in the Christian assembly is far superior to that which can be found anywhere else in society, then Christians can talk about the transforming love and power of Jesus till they are hoarse, but people are not going to listen very hard... *Michael Green*

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All three of our Scripture lessons this morning have a common theme. In the passage that Joan read, Jesus commands us to love each other. At first glance that command seems impossible. “Joe, I know you really can’t stand Wayne, but I’m commanding you to love him! I want you to think of him as the greatest guy who ever lived.” That is an absurd idea. You can’t force yourself into an emotion. Thankfully, love is not an emotion that you need to feel toward someone.

Jesus tells us that love is something you do. It is an action, not a feeling. It is serving the other person. And the ultimate service that Jesus points out, is dying for the other person. The greatest act of love is giving up your own life so that someone else might live. That is what Jesus did for us. That is the type of love we are called to have for each other – love that serves.

Notice that Jesus doesn’t think of us primarily as servants. We are his friends. We have a relationship with Jesus not because of what we do, but because he chooses to love us. Jesus loves us and calls us his friends. Therefore, we are called to love each other.

Leo Tolstoy told the story of a time he was walking in a city. He passed by a beggar who asked him for money. Tolstoy stuck his hands in his pockets and realized that he didn’t have any money with him. Tolstoy said to the beggar, “I’m sorry, my brother, I have nothing to give you.” The beggar smiled and replied, “You have given me more than I asked for – you have called me brother.” Jesus looks at us and calls us brothers and sister. He calls us friends.

Our second lesson this morning is from the first letter of John, the first four verses of the first chapter.

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life (1 John 1:1).

The word of life John is referring to is Jesus. He existed from the beginning of time, but then he came down to the earth. John was one of the disciples who lived with him. He heard him, he saw him and touched him.”

This life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us (1 John 1:2).

Then John gives us the purpose of what he is saying.

We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3).

The reason Jesus came to the earth was so that we might have fellowship with God and with God’s people.

On my study leave last week I spent some time reading about the Trinity, God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. One of the basic ideas of the Trinity is that within God there is a relationship of love. There is fellowship between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Through Jesus, by the power of the Spirit, God welcomes us into that fellowship. The result of that is joy.

We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete (1 John 1:4).

Joy comes from knowing that you are loved, knowing that you have friends. We have friends, we have fellowship, with God and with each other.

Our third scripture, in Acts 2, is a picture of that joy in the early church. This passage follows immediately after Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came on the disciples, with the tongues of fire and the speaking in foreign languages. Then Peter preached a sermon and three thousand people became Christians and joined the church. Then we get a description of the life these early Christians had together.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 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 2:42-47).

One of the characteristics of the early church is that they were together. They spent time with each other. They ate together and worshipped together and they shared their possessions with each other. It says that they had all things in common, and the Greek word for common is the same as the Greek word for fellowship, or community. Fellowship is the theme of all three passages.

This is the third sermon that focuses on the new mission statement of Sharon Church. Back in September we heard the first part of our mission statement which is sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. We have received this incredible gift of God’s love in Jesus. We are called to share that love and share that message with our neighbors and friends, with our community and with the world around us. The second part of our mission statement is that we are all called to grow in our faith. As one person said, “God loves you just as you are, but God loves you too much to let you stay just as you are.” We are called to grow in our understanding and develop our relationship with Jesus.

The third part of our mission statement, which is what this sermon is about, has to do with fellowship. Fellowship means that we are all part of the body of Christ. When one part hurts the whole body hurts. When one part rejoices the whole body rejoices. We belong to the community of faith. We are a family. We love each other, serve each other and care for each other. If you look at our mission statement the word fellowship isn’t actually in there. However, the concept is there when it tells us that our mission is to care for those in need. Our mission is to share the good news, to grow in our faith, and care for each other.

Deep inside us there is a longing for relationships that matter. We want, we need, friends who will care for us when we are hurting, friends who will sit with us when we are sad, friends who will stay with us when we don’t know what to do. Craig Barnes tells the story of a time he was riding on the subway in Washington, D.C.

It was the evening rush hour. The platform of the Washington, D.C., subway stop was jammed tightly with exhausted people decked out in rumpled gray and navy suits, clutching briefcases and bags containing more work than they could possibly complete in the night ahead. Everyone was lost in their own private thoughts. Some drifted back to the pressures of an office they had just left. Others fretted about stress at home, where they were about to return. No one was unaware of other people around them, but they didn’t focus on them either.

On this evening, while waiting for the train, I couldn’t help but notice a huge illuminated sign in the middle of the platform, looming just above people’s down-turned heads. The sign portrayed beautiful young people with very white teeth, sitting at a table, laughing and holding on to each other.

It was such a strange contrast – all of us isolated, crowded individuals standing alone in a dimly lit station beneath a bright advertisement promising that, if we just tried this toothpaste, we too could have friends who would laugh with us. No one stared at the picture, but no one could miss it. For most people, it became a small, unnoticed memo in the back of their minds that asked, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful to be a part of something like that?” *Craig Barnes, “Sacred Thirst,” p94-95*

Wouldn’t it be nice to have a place that brings us joy, a place where we know we belong, a place where we know we are loved, sometimes even in spite of who we are or what we do? That is what the church is supposed to be. We know that isn’t always what the church is like, but that is our mission – to be a place of fellowship.

Most of the churches where I have been a pastor had a fellowship committee. The name itself seems a bit of an oxymoron – fellowship and committee don’t necessarily go together. The primary task of the fellowship committee was to coordinate the fellowship hour after worship. They made sure that someone provided coffee and donuts, or cookies or snacks of some sort. This fellowship hour was a time to eat food that most of the people didn’t really need and talk about things that don’t really matter – how the Steelers are going to do and the weather and other totally inane topics. Then these committees made sure that someone was there to clean up afterwards.

Don’t get me wrong. I enjoy the fellowship time after worship. Our Coffee Café is wonderful. I would enjoy it more except for two problems. First, I love donuts, but it is impossible for me to eat one donut hole, which is all I really should have. My problem is that I tend to take one donut hole, shove it in my mouth and grab three more, and then take a regular donut in my other hand. The second problem is with our schedule I often need to rush out to get to Sunday school. In most congregations the time of fellowship is usually nice, but I would suggest that they are just a glimpse of what fellowship is all about. They point to the reality of what the church is, or at least should be.

Let me suggest that true fellowship includes at least two things. First, fellowship provides us with relationships with people with whom we can celebrate life. We celebrate our blessings and victories. We celebrate God’s love. I’m going to say more about that over the next two weeks. Second, fellowship helps us build relationships with people, friends who will share our struggles with us.

In 2005 there was a wonderful movie called “Coach Carter.” Does anyone remember it? It’s a true story that took place at Richmond High School, out in Richmond, California. Richmond was a town like Wilkinsburg, or Homewood. It was a depressed area and the high school was not very good. The dropout rate was way above the average. There was crime and there were gangs. Ken Carter had been a basketball star at the school years earlier. Now he owned a successful sporting goods store. He returned to his alma mater and became the coach of the basketball team.

He set out to change the attitude and the performance of the team. He set very high expectations for the team members and was very strict. They had a dress code and they had to keep their grades up. They had to be respectful in their behavior.

Timo was one of the better players on the team, but he had an attitude. He didn’t like all the rules, so eventually he quit the team. After a few days he realized that it was a mistake so he went to Coach Carter and asked to get back on the team. Coach said that he had to do 2500 pushups and 1000 suicide drills by Friday. It was an impossible task, but Timo tried. While the rest of the team was practicing he did pushups and ran suicide drills. By Friday he had not reached the goal. Coach Carter was impressed with his hard work, but said that he had failed. He asked Timo to leave.

As Timo was walking out, Jason another member of the team, spoke up. He had actually had a fight with Timo that was part of Timo’s leaving the team. Jason said, “I’ll do pushups for him. You said we’re a team. One person struggles, we all struggle. One player triumphs, we all triumph. Right?” Coach Carter agreed, and so Jason and the rest of the team did extra pushups and suicides until the goal was completed. Timo was allowed back on the team.

That is what fellowship is all about. If one person struggles, we all struggle. One person triumphs, we all triumph. We share the victories and support each other in our defeats and struggles. We care for each other and share God’s love with each other. Through Jesus Christ we have fellowship with God and with each other.

In invite you to stand, and join with me as we recite together the mission statement of Sharon Church:

*The Mission of Sharon Community Presbyterian Church is to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, welcome and encourage all who want to grow in faith, care for those in need and celebrate the glory of God in worship and in our daily lives.*