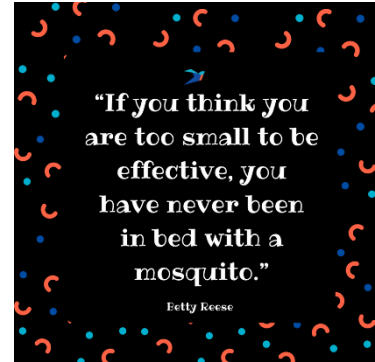


New Hope Sermon The Blessings of Community

Laughter is a balm for the soul and a blessing for our bodies, so I want to open with a power-point quote I found this week as I was preparing this sermon: “If you think you are too small to be effective, you have never been in bed with a mosquito!”



The amazing gift God gave to new believers after the coming of the Spirit was the gift of the church – the gift of a family who became community to one another – who laughed and cried and supported and strengthened and nurtured one another in their new walk of faith. And although in the eyes of the Roman society in which the church was birthed they were exceedingly small and insignificant, their effect rippled throughout the Mediterranean world and changed history forever.

The Biblical model behind this understanding of community is called the Body of Christ. Every Believer in Christ automatically becomes part of the global Body of Christ. Christ is the head and we are each individual parts of His body. This is how Paul explained it to the Ephesians:

¹¹ And he has appointed some with grace to be apostles, and some with grace to be prophets, and some with grace to be evangelists,^[a] and some with grace to be pastors,^[b] and some with grace to be teachers.^[c]

¹² And their calling is to nurture and prepare all the holy believers to do their own works of ministry, and as they do this they will enlarge and build up the body of Christ. ¹³ These grace ministries will function until we all attain oneness in the faith, until we all experience the fullness of what it means to know the Son of God,^[d] and finally we become one perfect man^[e] with the full dimensions of spiritual maturity and fully developed in the abundance of Christ.

¹⁴ And then our immaturity will end! And we will not be easily shaken by trouble, nor led astray by novel teachings or by the false doctrines of deceivers^[f] who teach clever lies. ¹⁵ But instead we will remain strong and always sincere in our love as we express the truth. All our direction and ministries will flow from Christ and lead us deeper into him, the anointed Head of his body, the church.

¹⁶ For his “body” has been formed in his image and is closely joined together and constantly connected as one. And every member has been given divine gifts to contribute to the growth of all; and as these gifts operate effectively throughout the whole body, we are built up and made perfect in love.

The blessing of community happens as each of us contributes to the growth of the Body because we are each using our gifts through the Spirit to build each other up into spiritual maturity and the image of Christ in us individually and corporately.

How does this happen? Ray Stedman, in his classic book: *Body Life*, says it's **through the one anothers**. “There are 50 one anothers in the New Testament. These one anothers... call us to a special kind of life together ... The New Testament lays heavy emphasis on the need for Christians to know each other, closely and intimately enough to be able to bare one another's burdens, confess faults one to another, encourage one another, exhort one another, admonish one another and minister to one another with the Word, song, and prayer. As we carry out the various ‘one another’ ministries of the New Testament-style Body life, ‘we all come to comprehend with all the saints, what is the width, length, depth and height of the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge’ (Eph. 3:18-19).

Notice that all the application and the commands of the one another are in the plural. We are commanded to meet consistently together for worship, and sustain our community as a commitment and a lifestyle. It isn't an optional thing to come to church. All our pressures of schedule need to be secondary to this top priority. Otherwise, we will lose the power of God in our lives and the flame of God's love will burn dimmer and dimmer. We are called as believers into the Body of Christ – into the family of faith and we need each other to become all God wants us to be: The Biblical principle (Eph. 4:16).is: *When each part is working properly, then the Body grows and builds itself up in love*

Stedman then validates this emphasis from history: "The early church relied on a twofold witness as a means of reaching and impressing a cynical and unbelieving world: Kerygma (proclamation) and koinonia (fellowship)...Pagans could easily shrug off the proclamation as simply a teaching among many, but they found it much more difficult to reject the evidence of koinonia. The concern of Christians for each other and the way they shared their lives in the same great diverse family of God left the pagan world craving and envying this new experience called koinonia....Koinonia calls for honesty and openness with other Christians and a mutual recognition that it is neither abnormal or unspiritual to have burdens and problems in our day to day Christian experience...The facades that say "everything is alright" when everything is anything but right have to fall. Koinonia means bearing one another's burdens...,it means to be willing to spend time with another person,...committing yourself to an authentic effort to relieve that person's pressures or discouragement, offering intense prayer, practical help or wise counsel, not just a superficial word of 'I'll pray for you'"

Ray Stedman, Body Life, reprinted 19, pp. 151-157.

So the first blessing of community is that **we belong to each other**. Mother Teresa said, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to one another." Let me give you 4 more one anothers that will ensure that our belonging is a blessing!

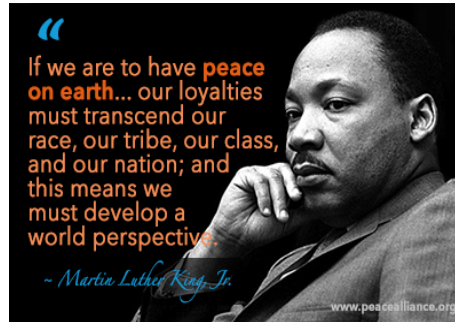
First, From God's perspective, the first mandate is that we visibly love one another – with a qualifier. This is not a sexual or gushy emotional love. It is love **AS Christ has loved us**. That is the love that and speaks and acts in terms of what will build them up. It is a love that **bear each other's burdens**.

I am reminded of the 4 friends in the gospel story of Luke 5 – 4 friends who carried their paralyzed friend to Jesus. We don't know how far they had to carry him but we do know it was a sacrifice. And when they got to the house where Jesus was teaching and couldn't get their friend in the door, they carried him up to the roof, removed the layers of roofing and let him down in front of Jesus. Sacrifice. Their compassion for his healing and faith that Jesus could do that healing is what drove them, and they were right. *Jesus saw their faith and said to the man "Your sins are forgiven." Instantly he become healed in his body and his soul. Jesus said, "take up your mat and go home and he stood up in front of them, took up what he had been laying on and went home praising God."* Luke 5. That's a Biblical model of the loving service of four sacrificial friends who created the way for extraordinary blessing to come to their friend – because they loved and served and bore his burden as they brought him to Jesus.

(pp.)Third, it is a love that serves – both the Lord and others as the Spirit leads us. And note the world behind this serve graphic. Remember it was the koinonia of the early church that made the church so powerful in its day – a fellowship that transcended race and status and money and power. And so it must be with us. We serve on God's kingdom agenda in the world, as this graphic pictures.



Dr. Martin Luther King says,



But it is not easy. So often churches split or create unresolved conflicts or factions because people aren't committed to the blessing of community when God's love permeates our relationships. They don't work through the hard times to belong to one another. They don't work through the differences in cultures and values and priorities that come from serving cross-culturally.

This is understandable, beloved. People feel comfortable when they are with their own kind. This is why churches around the world are usually so segregated. People want to worship with members of their own race and culture. So they join a church where everyone speaks their language and looks like them. But that's not what heaven is like! We will be part of a great throng "from every people, and tongue and kindred and nation" who are gathered around the Throne singing "*Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive blessing and honor and glory and power and praise!*" Our church's goal is to foreshadow that throng in heaven. And even Thurs. night the 12 who were here eating and studying the Bible together were from 9 nations! Praise the Lord!

Still, Paul recognized how difficult that diversity can be. So he prayed for the early Roman church: "*May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with each other in accord with Jesus Christ, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Romans 15:5-6). In Eph 4:1-6 using the language of urgency, he appeals to the Christians to be "*eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*" Eph 4:3.

Ajith Fernando, from his decades of experience leading Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka, says: "Any leader of a group of Christians would soon recognize that one of the most absorbing challenges he or she has is to help the group maintain its unity. Selfishness, misunderstanding, hurt, different ideas on an issue, a feeling of betrayal, and a whole heap of other things can cause disunity...Striving for unity is often an unpleasant task involving unpleasant confrontations; and we may be tempted to avoid it, but that would be dangerous to the health of the group. Over the years during times of disunity and not knowing what to do, I have sung over and over again the prayerful words of Rick Ridding's song, "Father, make us one." (Ajith Fernando, *Discipling in a Multicultural Context*, Crossway, 2019, p. 176-177)

This was clearly Christ's heart. In his high priestly prayer recorded in John 17 he prays: *I'm praying not only for them but also for those who will believe in me because of them and their witness about me. The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind— Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, So they might be one heart and mind with us. Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me. The same*

glory you gave me, I gave them, So they'll be as unified and together as we are—I in them and you in me. Then they'll be mature in this oneness, And give the godless world evidence That you've sent me and loved them In the same way you've loved me (The Message) Jn.17:21-23.

For this to be possible, beloved, we need to practice forgiving each other and providing a safe place for reconciliation of differences and healing of inner wounds. We forgive as Christ forgave us and because Christ forgave us - and strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

God is so committed to this concept of community that it is also seen in nature – in a lesson from the floating Brazilian fire ants.

“When placed in water, an individual fire ant will flounder, struggle, and then eventually sink. But when the fire ants band together they form life rafts that help them survive the flash floods of the Brazilian rain forests. As a unified raft, they can even travel for months before reaching dry land. An article in [the Los Angeles Times](#) summarized a new research study that has unlocked the secret of this natural mystery. After collecting a bunch of ants, scientists dropped them into containers of water. The ants quickly spread out and formed themselves into rafts. Each individual ant used its claws and the adhesive pads on their legs to grip onto each other. One researcher said, "At first it just looks like a tangle of bodies and limbs everywhere, but the longer you look at the picture, the more you're able to distinguish between different body parts and see the connection." Then the insects use air pockets that form around their bodies to keep themselves afloat. The article concluded, "The research sheds light on how deeply social insects act together: almost as if they're part of a super-organism [As one scientist said], 'The individuals acting together create this awareness of the environment that no individual ant has.' Amina Khan, "[Mystery of floating fire ants solved](#)," *The Los Angeles Times* (4-29-11).

I believe this is one of the unique blessings of our house church model. Because we are small and operate like a family, God is able to do things when we band together, like the Brazilian fire ants. And because we are committed to a global perspective, we are able to fulfill these one anothers across all our cultural distinctions and the differences in the experience, age, gender and status we each bring. It's in this realistic and challenging global context that we help each other grow into Christ's likeness together -by the power of God in our midst. In two weeks we will deal with the power needed to make this happen: the command to pray for one another.

Today we focus on the blessings of community as we belong together and others can fan the flame for God in our hearts alive, or admonish or call us back when we wander – in thoughts or deeds as they speak God's word gently and authoritatively into our lives. Or, love us by listening to our doubts and struggles and providing wise, gentle counsel. Or spur us on as they help bear our burdens and be strong in the Lord.

So let's pray St. Augustine's prayer together:

And let's choose to be a blessing to others today.

Our song of response is the traditional Western hymn: Make me a blessing. But we are talking of community here – not the individualism of the West, so I want us to change the words to “Make us a blessing, make us a blessing. Out of our lives may Jesus shine. Make us a blessing, O Savior we pray. Make us a blessing to someone today.” In Jesus' Name and for His sake. Amen. Dr. M.L. Codman-Wilson 9/8/19



**“Come, Lord, stir us up and
call us back. Kindle and
seize us. Be our fire and
our sweetness. Let us love.
Let us run.”**

—Augustine of Hippo