

EMBRACE – THE RETURN TO A BIBLICAL COMMUNITY

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Introduction

In 2003 there was a woman in Holland names Janet Roes who chose to marry...herself. She wore the white dress, did the wedding ceremony and invited friends and family. She was one of the first. But in the last decade, the trend of marrying yourself has become so popular that people are now doing it in the hundreds, everywhere from Japan to Italy, from Australia to the U.K. to the U.S. So popular that it became a theme on some mainstream television shows. Articles have been featured in many well known magazines, and even some celebrities have followed the trend. A term was created for it. It's called "sologamy." Of course, it's not a legally binding marriage, but it hasn't stopped Janet and others from doing it.

So why weren't they content with simply being called single? They technically were still single anyway, as actress and social media influencer Adriana Lima confusingly posted to her 11 million Instagram followers after marrying herself. She wrote, "I am married with me. Yes Ladies, love yourself and yes I am single."

Now this may seem like a very high form of self-idolization. Of putting oneself ahead of everyone and everything else. It may seem like it is the ultimate expression of narcissism. And that may be true. But that's not why I'm telling you about this trend. I'm telling you about this trend because it reveals something much deeper. Something that touches each and every one of us here today and watching online.

It reveals the innate fear that every human being on this planet has experienced or may be experiencing right now. Perhaps even more deeply seated than our fear of being alone...is our fear of being rejected.

By someone saying that they are married to his or herself, they have created a barrier between them and the rest of humanity. They have created their own protective bubble of isolation.

C.S. Lewis put it like this: "If you want to make sure of keeping your [heart] intact, you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable."

Last week in our series called *Stronger Together* you heard Pastor Steve talk about what it means to Exalt God. This morning we're going to dive into the second E – Embrace. We'll explore God's concept of embrace through His word. What does it mean to embrace? To let down our guards and become closer to others in this community of believers? And how do we do that when maybe we've been hurt in the past or made to feel like we don't belong?

Turn with me in your Bibles, or follow on screen as I read from Philippians 2:1-4, "Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others."

In unpacking this passage, we notice the very first thing Paul says is, “if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, [and] if any comfort from his love...” but what does it mean to be united with Christ? What does it look like to truly embrace God?

1. EMBRACING GOD

Did you know that in a recent study conducted by Pew Research Center, it was discovered that 173 million self-identified Christians and Catholics in the U.S., and 250 million in Latin America believe that Jesus is NOT the only way to eternal life? Let me repeat that. The majority of self-identified Christians and Catholics in the U.S. and Latin America do NOT believe Jesus’ own words when He says in John 4:16, “I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.”

How can that possibly be?

When World War II wrapped up, the western world entered into a new era called post-modernism. One of its markers is the need to carve out our space and rights as individuals, which in and of itself is not a bad thing. But it also means – from society’s perspective - everything is open to interpretation. Including our personal take on what it means to be a Christ follower. Because of this influence, the church is rapidly losing our understanding of how to live out life day-to-day in the context of a faith community that we’re accountable to, and who is accountable to us.

Last week you heard Pastor Steve talk about the sovereignty and holiness of God. Though the world may change, God’s character never does. He is the I AM. We often talk about how God accepts us just as we are...but do we do the same for Him?

We not only read but experience in our lives as followers of Jesus that God is the embodiment of love. That, even though He created such a vast universe, He loves this tiny species called humans so much that He sacrificed His son to save us. We pray and He listens. We ask and He provides. We know that God is pure and holy, that, according to 1 John 1:5 “...God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.”

But what about some of God’s other characteristics? Can we accept that our God is not only loving and holy, but fierce and powerful?

Can we accept that our God refuses to share His glory with others and is possessive of us?

In Isaiah 42:8 we read, “I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols.”

And in Deuteronomy 4:23-24 God’s people are warned to “²³Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the LORD your God has forbidden. ²⁴For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.”

This is not human jealousy, where we envy that person who has the bigger house or better job. It is a statement of fact. A revelation of how passionately He loves us. We belong to God, and He expects us to be as committed to this relationship as He is.

And how does God view this exchange of love? We need look no further than the Song of Songs – a book of the Bible which is in essence a metaphor for the intensity of God’s passion for His people. It

reads in chapter 8:6 “Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame.”

So we know that our God is intense. But He is also in charge.

Can we accept that our God wants to have rulership over every aspect of our lives?

Let’s be honest, at times we all need our space. From the busyness of life, from the demands of work and family. Sometimes we just want to unplug and get away for a while. To be refreshed. But there is no escaping from God. Which is fine when we’re behaving the way we should and when the blessings are flowing.

But life is not always like that. And sometimes, we don’t want to listen to God or live up to His high standards. Just ask Jonah. Like any respectable Israelite, he hated the people in the city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. They were a war-oriented nation, who were the enemies of Israel. When God instructed Jonah to go to these Gentiles and call them to repentance to avoid destruction, Jonah tried to run. But God pursued him and wore him down, until eventually the bitter man did as instructed, being instrumental in saving half a million lives in the process.

To embrace God is to know that He is large and in charge.

David puts it like this in Psalm 139:7-12 “⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? ⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. ⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, ¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. ¹¹ If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ ¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

God is so intimately involved in our lives that, for those of us who have accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour, He has actually taken up residence inside of us in the person of the Holy Spirit. God is intent on transforming us from the inside out. And there are times that level of involvement can be seriously uncomfortable. Especially when we’re struggling with sin or want to do things in our timing instead of His.

Let’s face it, at some point we’ve all wrestled with these more challenging aspects of God’s character. The truth is we cannot fully comprehend Him. We can only go by what we read in scripture and experience in our own lives. That God is all in, loves humanity passionately, is self-sacrificing, hurts for us and is hurt by us, is wise and powerful beyond our comprehension, and will totally, utterly work things out for the good of all creation - no matter what it might look like in the moment.

Which is where faith comes in. When we return to our main passage and read Philippians 2:1a again, “Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, [and] if any comfort from his love...” let’s look at it with fresh eyes. The word here “encouragement” is translated in the NIV from the original Greek word *paraklēsis* (pa-ra-klēe-cese), which is a term referring specifically to drawing strength or receiving comfort.

And the phrase “united with” might conjure up an image akin to being married. That two become one. That’s incorrect. A better translation from the original Greek would be ‘to be engulfed by.’ If Jesus were cosmic Jell-O, we would be the little bits of fruit inside of Him. Our strength comes from fully embracing Jesus’ identity as our own.

As Paul says in Acts 17:28, “For in him we live and move and have our being.” It is all or nothing with God. And embracing all that He is, not just the warm and fuzzy parts, leads us into experiencing our lives and relationships in truly profound ways.

Which brings us to our second point, embracing others.

2. EMBRACING OTHERS

The reason I’m preaching this week is because in addition to overseeing Family Life ministries, I’m the Small Groups Pastor – and the concept of Embrace is very much about encouraging those in our church who are not yet connected with others to participate in our community by joining a small group. So why then am I up here talking about people marrying themselves and how we should embrace God for ALL of who He is, not just the parts we’re comfortable with?

Because I’ve spent months and months praying for the Small Groups Ministry, seeking the Lord’s wisdom and guidance. And He has made it very simple for me. I am not a sales person. You are not my customers. And Small Groups is not a product that requires a marketing strategy. It is a way of life that was patterned for us in the Bible. A way of life we are not only meant to follow, but *need* to follow if we’re to stay on track.

Do you remember the stories in the New Testament of the brothers James and John, two of Jesus’ apostles? They were constantly seeking glory for themselves, trying to elevate themselves in God’s Kingdom. Their first claim to fame – which earned them the nickname “Sons of Thunder” – was when they asked Jesus if they should bring fire down from heaven to destroy Samaria...simply because the people weren’t particularly welcoming.

The second was when (using their mother as the go between) they asked if they could be seated at the right and left hand of Jesus when He returned to heaven. And though Jesus rebuked them both times, it was their fellow disciples – in other words their small group members – who gave them a stern talking to and a reality check.

And when the apostle Peter was completely devastated - by how he had denied knowing Jesus when the Lord was arrested and about to be crucified - it was this same group of disciples that came around Peter afterward so they could collectively mourn the death of their Messiah.

Regardless of James’ and John’s egos or Peter’s gut-wrenching betrayal, they stuck it out, together. Even when the early church started after Jesus went back up to heaven, this group of twelve led together and found their way back to each other whenever possible once the gospel started to spread.

If we’ve learned anything during this Covid crisis, it’s that it is unhealthy to isolate ourselves from others. It is even worse for those of us who are believers but aren’t truly plugged into our church community. Because without others to speak into our journey – and without our voice speaking into theirs – we can go so far off course that eventually we become no longer recognizable as Christians.

We have to look no further than those hundreds of millions of people who claim to be Christian, but deny Christ as the only way to heaven, to find an example of how easy it is to stray from the truth.

Back in the Apostle Paul’s time, the church in Philippi faced a similar crisis. After hearing about divisions and discord amongst God’s people while in prison, Paul wrote a letter to the Philippians encouraging them to once again find the common bond they shared in Christ.

The same bond that we are meant to experience today.

Our Bond As Believers

We move along in our main passage to the second half of verse 1 as well as verse 2, in Philippians 2, which reads, "...if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind."

That phrase "common sharing in the Spirit" means mutual participation in the mystical body of Christ. It means we are family. It means that the blood of Christ binds us to one another even more strongly than our own biological family. If you've accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, you have become my brother or sister. We are bound together not only in this life, but for eternity.

That sounds a bit uncomfortable doesn't it? I mean, on the surface, yeah sure, eternity together, great, woo hoo! But what about with that person who said something unkind to you? Or the one who always interrupts everyone and is really opinionated? Or the one who isn't behaving in any way shape or form the way YOU think they should behave as a Christian. Eternity...with them?

Yes...and no. In 1 John 3:2, it reads, "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

In eternity, we will each be the best version of ourselves because we will be fully transformed into Christ's likeness. But right now, right now school is in session. We're meant to learn what it means to journey together. And the only way we can do that is by doing life in close contact with one another.

The reason I pressed in on some of the more uncomfortable attributes of our great God is because we tend to shy away from them. And if we tend to shy away from God, who is perfect and holy, doesn't that open the door for us to turn away from each other – people who are decidedly imperfect?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian pastor and anti-Nazi activist during Hitler's Regime, understood that God's people need each other, and sometimes that looks messy. He wrote:

"The community of the saints [that's us] is not an 'ideal' community consisting of perfect and sinless men and women, where there is no need of further repentance. No, it is a community which proves that it is worthy of the gospel of forgiveness by constantly and sincerely proclaiming God's forgiveness..."

Which brings us to the next phrase in our main passage in Philippians 2. When Paul says, "if any tenderness and compassion..." he means toward one another. This phrase in the original writing actually translates to "bowels and mercies," which sounds a bit bizarre but means this – that our relationship with and care toward one another comes from the very depths of our being. It is a soul tie to Christ and to each other.

That's how the apostles lived out their lives together. They shared joys and sorrows. They wrestled and celebrated. They were never fake with one another. They called each other out if one of them got off track, but it always came from a place of genuine love, never out of arrogance or judgement. And they always forgave, just as God forgave them.

Simply feeling empathy for someone else is not enough. 1 John 3:18 says, "Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." What benefit is it to someone in our congregation who is going through a difficult time if we simply say, "I'll pray for you" and walk away? If we are not living out the bond we have with one another by participating in each other's

lives and journeying together...then what's the point? How are we, the ones whom Jesus has set apart and called His own, living any less selfishly than those in the world around us?

We must always keep before us the words in Romans 12:5, which read, "...in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."

What It Means to Be Like-Minded

Paul continues in Philippians in verse 2 by saying to his readers, "then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind."

Did you know that this term – like-minded – is only found here this one time in the entire New Testament? It's kind of surprising, considering all the times Jesus, John, Paul, Peter and others constantly tell us to love each other and get along.

Whereas these other verses encourage us to be united in our diversity, this term – *sympsychos* (sum-soo-haus) in the original Greek - goes beyond the practical into something profoundly spiritual. The image it evokes is our souls as instruments that each strike a unique chord, and Paul is calling us to all come together in such beautiful harmony that we are collectively transformed into the sweetest music God has ever heard. We are to strive to become completely harmonious. To be one in spirit and in mind. And you can't do that if you aren't regularly rehearsing it by doing life together.

So we've talked about embracing our God, who is loving, gracious and merciful, but will not yield His glory and expects total involvement and rulership over the lives of His children. And we've talked about embracing others, not because they're perfect but because we need each other in order to grow in love and stay on track spiritually.

But when it comes to learning how to live out our lives in a close-knit community of believers, a final question arises.

How do we, in the midst of such closeness and scrutiny from others, learn to embrace ourselves?

3. EMBRACING OURSELVES

Being Good vs. Being Surrendered

Three-time neck and head cancer survivor Michelle Cushatt recently wrote a book called *Relentless*, the title referring to God's radical love for us. In it she writes, "One of the most dangerous Christian practices (and expectations) is the compulsion to present a put-together, unflappable faith. On the whole, we haven't done a very good job of making space for a struggle that lasts longer than we think it should."

She is certainly not the first Christian author or speaker who has talked about the need for us to stop putting up a front. To stop pretending like life is perfect when it so isn't. But what about when the struggle we're facing isn't a situation outside of our control? What if WE are the problem?

Just before this observation in her book, she recalls a story in which the pastor of her church asked anyone in the congregation to raise their hand who had been brought up believing they had to be good in order for God to love to them. Almost the entire audience raised their hands.

Yet, when he was called good by a certain ruler, Jesus Himself responded in Luke 18:19 and said, "why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone."

The final part of the main passage we're digging into today is found in Philippians 2:3-4, which reads, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others."

When Paul says "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit..." we tend to think of such things as pursuing wealth, status or material possessions. But what if we boiled it down to something much more simple? What if striving to be good was in fact a blatant Christian form of selfish ambition or vain conceit?

If Jesus said that "no one is good except God alone," aren't our human efforts to be good in our own strength - rather than surrendered to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit - in fact dishonouring to God?

Galatians 5:22 tells us plainly that "goodness" is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Don't get me wrong, we are called to do good, but there are many people who we'd think of as doing good who aren't Christian.

No, good isn't the word that defines us as Christians. Surrendered is.

Spirit vs. Flesh

In Galatians 5:17 Paul reminds us that, "...the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other..."

Throughout our lives as followers of Jesus, we are in a constant internal battle between our tendency toward sin – what Paul refers to here as the flesh – and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. When we believe we are good by our own merit, we give ourselves permission to boast.

Remember when I said earlier that after months of praying about Small Groups the Lord finally laid on my heart that it wasn't a product to be sold? Well, by my human nature I'm a performance driven person, so up until the point that I actually stopped long enough to listen to God I kept coming up with idea after idea...none of which was bearing much fruit. My brain was telling me I had to produce instead of pastor, that I had to come up with a wow factor to get people to join a small group. But when I finally surrendered to the Holy Spirit, what God said (as I shared) was in fact quite different.

Imagine if I had succeeded in my own strength? It could have easily led to pride and arrogance. Imagine if you succeeded in being that good and perfect Christian in your own strength? It would be like giving yourself permission to feel superior to others who were struggling in their faith journey. People you might say all the right things to, but inwardly you'd feel just a tiny bit smug about it.

And God sees the heart.

Understanding Imperfection

It is okay for us to be our imperfect selves before God and one another. Because when we surrender to God in our weakness, we set aside our own fears and egos and move over so Christ can shine. Recognizing one's faults does not stop God from working through us. Moses was a murderer. David an adulterer. Gideon was afraid. Rahab was a prostitute. Paul was a persecutor. In fact, almost without exception, every person God used throughout the Bible had some pretty significant flaws. But they also had something else in common.

They didn't wallow in it. They didn't wallow in self-pity or self-condemnation because of their human inadequacies. Nor did they try to pretend they were perfect. Rather, they focused on God and got on with what He had called them to do.

In his book *Abba's Child*, author Brennan Manning wrote, "In a futile attempt to erase our past, we deprive the community of our healing gift. If we conceal our wounds out of fear and shame, our inner darkness can neither be illuminated nor become a light for others." Which means, even our flaws matter in the Lord's Kingdom.

Conclusion

As Paul says in the remainder of our primary passage this morning, "...in humility value others above yourselves,⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others."

Small groups was never meant to be about what we can get out of it. The biblical basis of community is what we have to give of ourselves for the sake of others, because that what's honoring to God.

There are so many people in this congregation that I am in awe of. Younger, older, male, female, of different ethnicities and personalities. Over the past thirteen years, this body of believers accepted me because of who I am in Christ. And they taught me to do the same with them. Sometimes it's been easy, sometimes not so much. And that's a good thing, because without you my development as a Christian would have been seriously stunted.

If we don't look out for each other, if we don't journey together as a family as we grow in our understanding of how to follow Jesus, then we have lost the heart of what it means to be a biblical community.

If you're coming to church on Sundays and doing a Bible Study here and there, you may be learning about God, but it's not the same as experiencing His presence alongside other believers in your day-to-day lives. So if you're not in a small group, I encourage you to step of your comfort zone and join one. It won't be perfect, but it will be worth it.