

## EMBRACING IN FELLOWSHIP

A pastor was officiating at a funeral. When he was done, he was asked to lead the funeral procession as it made its way to the cemetery. So he got into his car, and he started driving at the head of the funeral procession. He flipped on his radio and became preoccupied, lost in thought; he forgot where he was going. About that time, he passed a Walmart and thought about something he needed to pick up. So he turned into the parking lot. As he was looking for a parking space, he just happened to glance into the rear-view mirror -- and saw a string of cars following, all with their lights on! It is easy to get distracted in life and lose sight of our mission.

We are continuing today with our series getting back to the basics. Last week we talked about our first priority as a church which is worship. Today we want to talk about our second priority.

Matt 22: 35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'" 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

If loving God is our greatest purpose then our second priority is loving people. Jesus says here that these two commandments are connected. When He says the second command is LIKE the first that means similar to it or connected to it. Part of loving God involves loving His family.

Imagine if someone came up to me and said "I really like you Pastor Steve, but I can't stand your wife!" Do you think I would want to be friends with that person? Part of liking me is also liking my wife. We are a package deal! The Apostle John said it in this way:

1 John 4:20 If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

When John says we are to love our brothers he is speaking here to those who are in the church, part of the community of faith. Our second pillar as a church is learning to love God's family. We will be with our spiritual family forever. God wants us to learn to love one another. The word for loving God's family is the word FELLOWSHIP. This word is often misunderstood. Many feel that fellowship means casual conversation or eating out together or hanging around after church to talk about sports or the weather. Fellowship simply means loving God's family.

So how do you learn to love God's family? What does fellowship really mean? There are four different levels of fellowship:

### 1. MEMBERSHIP - choosing to belong

The first and most basic level of Fellowship is Membership. This means making the choice to belong. That means you find a church family and you choose to get connected to it.

Eph 2:19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

The Christian life is not just a matter of believing. It is matter of belonging, and belonging is a choice that you make. Fellowship begins with belonging, with making a choice to be in fellowship. God wants you to identify, to make the choice to be a part of His family.

I have heard people say, "I'm a Christian, but I don't want to belong to any church." That just does not make any sense to me. The church is the place where you live out what it means to be a Christian. That is like saying you are a football player but do not want to be a part of any team. It doesn't work. It is like saying you are a tuba player but do not want to be a part of an orchestra. A bee but don't want to be a part of a hive. A soldier without a platoon. A Christian without a church family is an orphan. God wants us all to be part of and connected to a family.

Rom 12:5 so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

Each body part has a purpose. The word MEMBERSHIP comes from the Bible, but today has a different meaning. Today it means being part of some club or organization by signing up for this or joining that. But membership isn't about being a part of some silly club, wearing silly hats and having silly signs. Being a member means that you are joined tightly as a part of a larger body. It is about belonging to each other, making the choice to belong to a family.

There are many floating believers in the world today. These are people who go from church to church. One week they like the speaker at that church so they go there. The next week something different. If you want to grow you have got to join a body. I am not saying you can never go and visit a different church. I am saying you have to choose a home church – a place you are committed to.

Can you imagine a member of your body jumping from place to place. If your liver decided one day it just wanted to detach and jump into another body. It would shrivel up and die. And the same thing happens to us as believers. We need to attach ourselves to a group of believers, where we say, "I want to be a part of what's going on there."

So how do you become a member? One way is through baptism. Baptism is a public way of saying that you are part of a group of believers and you are excited to belong. Romans 6:3 says that baptism is a picture. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. So baptism is a public way of saying that we have died to self and now live for Christ.

If you have already been baptized then becoming a member simply means making the commitment to choose this as your home church. That means it is the place you are connected to and tithe to. Maybe you have been coming here for years but have never made that commitment. Why not just do it?

## 2. FRIENDSHIP – learning to share

The second level of fellowship is a little deeper. As you spend time and share with other people friendships develop. You were created in God's image so you were made for relationships. The Bible says, "It is not good for man to be alone." That means more than just marriage. We were made for relationships with one another. Life is not a solo act. We all need friends.

Acts 2:44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet

together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts

Friendship requires 2 essentials seen in verse 44. The first is that they were TOGETHER. The second is that they had EVERYTHING IN COMMON. In order to form deep friendships you have to spend time together and you have to share with one another.

Naomi and I have had many adventures since we were married – lots of moving around. One of the problems is that it is hard on relationships. For many here in this church, relationships are more stable. Some of you have spent many years together. Friendship is a choice you make. Do you know why most people are lonely? They don't make time for friendships. They are too busy working or doing other things. They are not willing to put the time into it. You have to meet together. Until you start saying this is going to be a priority in my life, you're not going to develop any deep friends. They don't just happen. They happen because you choose to make the time for them. It is a choice.

As parents we know that one of the fundamental lessons children have to learn is learning to share. Every child has to learn to share. In the family of God we need to learn to share with other believers. What do we share? Let me mention a couple of things:

- a. We can share our experiences. The Bible says people learn from one other “just as iron sharpens iron.” It is wise to learn from the experiences of other people, because you don't have time to make all the mistakes yourself. If you learn everything in life by trial and error, you're going to go through a lot of problems unnecessarily. God says you can short-circuit and learn a lot quicker if you learn from the experiences of others. Nobody knows everything. We are all ignorant, just on different subjects. You know things I don't and vice versa. We can learn from anybody if we just learn to ask the right questions. Think of all the wealth of knowledge sitting here right now in this church family in this service, and how much we could learn from each other if we just spend the time to get together.
- b. We can share our homes. It says in I Peter 4:9 that we are to open our homes to each other – to practice hospitality. And it doesn't say just the really nice ones. It just says open all of them up. You can only fellowship in a small group or one on one. The Sunday service is not the place for fellowship. We can worship together. We can celebrate together. We can learn together. But fellowship only takes place in the smaller group. That's why we are going to be talking a lot about small groups in the coming year. The early church met in the temple courts and from house to house.
- c. We share our problems. We are not meant to face our problems alone. You know when you share a joy, it is doubled; and when you share a problem, it is cut in half? The Bible says, “Weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice.” Sometimes in fellowship you die of laughter and sometimes you're all shedding a tear. Why? It depends on what is going on in the lives of the people around you.

### 3. PARTNERSHIP – doing my part

The third level of fellowship is partnership. Partnership means doing your part. It is realizing that you have a contribution to make and that the family of God needs you. God did not bring you to this church to sit back and soak in everything like some spiritual spa. That's not why you're here. He brought you here to serve. He wants to make a difference through your life.

In every family there are family responsibilities. You divide up the chores. Everyone has a part. This church is part of God's family. Every one of us has a part. But in order to be a part, you've got to find your niche, you have got to find out where you fit in.

Eph 4:16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as *each part* does its work.

As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole Body is healthy and growing together. Circle the words EACH PART because that means you. When we work together we get things done. You have a part to play. When we cooperate, we get more done together than we could ever get done by ourselves.

What happens if each part doesn't do their part. Then the work does not get done. I lived for 2 years on a ship called the Doulos. There were 300 of us onboard and everyone had a job to do. If one person did not do their work then the entire ship suffered. That is a good picture of the church. Every person is essential. That means you.

The great thing about partnership is that it increases your ministry. The product of two people is not equal to their efforts added together. Partnership causes multiplication. This is SYNERGY – the sum of the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. E.g. Fishing with nets as opposed to hooks.

In the Arabic world there is a word "Enshala". That means "if God wills it". Often it is used to mean – if it happens, it happens... There are a huge number of road fatalities in Kuwait. The people drive very fast and very few Kuwaitis wear seat belts. I once asked a Kuwaiti why this was and he said "Enshala, if god wants me to die I will die whether I wear a seat belt or not".

In the church we can sometimes have the same attitude. You feel lead to do something but instead of moving forward you sit back and think "Well, if God wants this to happen, it will happen. He will raise up someone to get it done." Unfortunately that is not a true statement. The Bible is full of cases where God wanted to see something happen but the exact opposite occurred.

Ezek 22:30 "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.

The truth is that there are things that God wants to do that will not happen until we do it. If you do not do your part it will not get done. Remember the story of Elisha and the widow – the amount of oil was decided by the widow, not by God. God is sovereign, but He works through us.

There is a story told about a faithful old deacon whose oft repeated prayer expression was, "O Lord, touch the unsaved with Thy finger." One prayer meeting night he was leading in prayer when as he prayed as he so often did, he abruptly stopped praying. Supposing he had been taken suddenly ill, someone went to him and asked if there was anything wrong, if he were ill. "No," he replied, "I'm not ill. But something seemed to say to me, 'Thou art the finger'."

#### 4. KINSHIP – being a family

The deepest level of fellowship in the family of God is called KINSHIP. This is an old term and isn't used much anymore. Kinship literally means your closest relationships - your closest family.

When somebody has an accident they notify the next-of-kin. That means you find the person closest to them. That is the kind of attitude we should have for one another.

Kinship means treating and loving other believers like they're family. You're completely committed to them. The Greek word for fellowship is the word KOINONIA which comes from KOINOS which means COMMON or CONNECTED TO. This is what we are in Jesus Christ. We are family.

Most of us know John 3:16, "God so loved the world ..." but don't know 1 John 3:16:

1 John 3:16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

John 15:13 Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

The Bible talks about the fellowship of suffering. Often we Christians don't really know about this level of fellowship. Millions of Christians die every year, mostly in communist or Muslim nations. Suffering together draws people closer in a way like nothing else.

I mentioned that I lived on a ship called the Doulos. It was a great experience but not an easy one. People who have never lived on that ship really do not understand how difficult it can be. A few years ago I met someone who had lived on the ship with us while I was visiting Dubai. I had not seen him in 15 years but there was an immediate joining of hearts because the two of us had gone through a difficult experience together and were closer because of it.

You can have fellowship in studying, sharing and serving, but the deepest is the fellowship of suffering. It only happens by standing with other believers when they are going through a crisis. It means walking together through the tough times. This not only draws people together but is also a powerful testimony to the world.

I heard of a small group of ladies who had a member who had stopped coming. She was embarrassed because she had cancer and, because of her chemotherapy all her hair had fallen out and she did not want people to see her that way. One day her small group showed up at the hospital. Each one of them had shaved their own hair off so that their friend would not stick out.

John 13:35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another .

The Bible says that our love for each other will prove to the world that we are Christ's disciples. It wasn't too long after Jesus said this that the Roman Empire was throwing Christians to the lions in coliseums. For several hundred years they were putting them up on stakes and burning them and they were crucifying them and throwing them to lions and all other kinds of things. And in that period of time, one of the most famous secular historians, not a Christian, wrote this about Christians: "Behold, how they love each other."

Have you ever been at someone's side as they were taking their last breath. They don't ask for their diplomas or their trophies or the gold watch they got at retirement or their palm pilots. It is in those final moments when they talk about what matters most, and they ask for their family and friends. How do you know if you're in God's family? How do you know personally?

1 John 4:20 Those who do not love their brothers and sisters, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have never seen.

1 John 3:14 But if we love our Christian brothers and sisters, it proves that we have passed from death to eternal life (NLT).

Which of these levels of fellowship are you at? How about membership? Have you made the choice to belong? If you are still jumping from fellowship to fellowship we would love for you to join us here. Maybe that means considering baptism. We have a number of people who are doing this next week as well as many others coming into membership.

Maybe you need to commit to friendship. Maybe you need to learn to share. We have a number of different ways that you can do that in this church. One way is to join a small group. Small groups are not optional for the believer. They are a part of Christian maturity. We have different kinds of groups. Some are general and some are more specific.

One of the specific fellowship groups we have is the singles ministry. They are currently doing a study called A Life Worth Living – the second part to the Alpha Course. If you have recently gone through a traumatic experience in life like the death of a spouse or cancer we have support groups for you. You can find out about this and all our other groups on our church website and especially on our new church website which we hope to have online soon.

Maybe you already have a good group of friends but you need to move to the next level of Partnership. That means doing your part. Find your niche. Find your place to give back, to make a contribution. We need your input.

Maybe there any other believers that need to know you are devoted to them. Perhaps you need to allow others to enter into your areas of need and to stand with them in their places of suffering.

Lastly, in order to find your place in the family of God you need to be part of the family of God. That means that you must have a personal relationship with Christ. If you have never done that before, now is a great day to take that first step. As we pray let me help you to make that decision.