

“The Church – Connections”

Christ is risen... Grace, peace, and mercy are yours from our God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. If you've been following the sermon series for the past several weeks you will know that we've been dealing with the question, “What does God want us to do and to be here in this place at this time?” The topics I've covered actually answer that question by looking at what a healthy Church looks like. And, by extension, we can also say that they describe what a healthy Christian looks like since the Church, the Body of Christ, is nothing more and nothing less than PEOPLE – people who have been called to faith in Jesus Christ and who gather together to live out that new life in Christ with and for one another and others outside this place.

So, what does a healthy Church and a healthy Christian look like. It looks like a family because that's what God creates when He makes us His children by faith. And since God wants His family to grow, the members of that family give witness to His love and mercy, planting the seeds of faith that the Holy Spirit uses to produce new life in the darkness of sin-filled hearts. The last couple of weeks we focused on the fact that healthy Christians live lives of worship, gathering together to be recharged by the gifts of God's Word and Sacrament. But you also worship God each and every day by bearing in mind that you are God's possession and that He is present with you at all times, helping you fulfill His purposes in your family, at school or work, in fact anywhere you happen to be.

An interesting thing happened to me this week. I was in my office when a member stopped by and asked if I had a couple of minutes. When they came they said, “Pastor, I have a problem with the sermon you preached last Sunday.” And I said, “Okay, let's talk about it.” So, for the next 45 minutes or so we did. I got a couple of copies of my sermon and I tried to explain what I was trying to say in it and then, at the end of it all, I asked this person to take my sermon with them, read through it carefully, and come back with any questions or concerns they might have.

That was probably the best part of my whole day. First of all, it confirmed that someone

actually listening to the sermon. And, second, someone felt it was okay to come to me with their concerns. You see, that's what a family is all about. The members of a family talk about the things that bother them and work through their disagreements, treating one another with love and respect. And in so doing they get to know one another better and deepen their trust and love for one another. This is how members of family deepens their connections with each other.

That's exactly what we want to think about today in regard to being a healthy Christian and being a healthy Church. A healthy Christian and healthy Church have healthy connections with God and with other Christians.

When God created us He created us for relationship – both with Him and with one another. When Adam was created he was perfect, without sin and death, but, still, it *“was not good for man to be alone”* so God made woman, a perfectly suited companion for the man. Relationships, connections, are God's desire for us from the beginning to the end of His Word.

Relationships are important. The New Testament is filled with “one another” passages. We are to “love one another,” “encourage one another,” “exhort one another,” “forgive one another.” We are so interconnected that we are called “the Body of Christ.” As the Body of Christ, Jesus is our head and each of us is connected to Him and to one another. And every part is necessary in order for the body to function with grace and strength. And no one part can function properly alone. It must be connected to the rest of the body.

We know relationships are important. Today we honor one of the deepest relationships God created, that of a mother to a child. The bond between mother and child is possibly the strongest connection between human beings this side of heaven. God even used that relationship to try to express His love when He said through the prophet Isaiah: *“As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you.”* In fact, He says that even this comparison falls short. Again, from Isaiah: *“Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.”*

Good relationships within the family of God are critical to its health. William Barclay, a Scottish pastor and author, once wrote: "One of the highest of human duties is the duty of encouragement....It is easy to laugh at men's ideals; it is easy to pour cold water on their enthusiasm; it is easy to discourage others. The world is full of discouragers. We have a Christian duty to encourage one another. Many a time a word of praise or thanks or appreciation or cheer has kept a man on his feet. Blessed is the man who speaks such a word."

We all need encouragement and our connections to one another are God's gift to bring that encouragement to life. One pastor told of a time when things were very difficult in his congregation. At the very same time these difficulties were happening, he and his wife decided to build a new home and as that home was being built they moved into a small apartment.

About this same time the pastor's brother called to tell them he was passing through and asked to stay with them for a few days. When the pastor told his wife she said that just wouldn't work, they barely had enough room as it was for the two of them. But the pastor told her, "We'll find room for him. He's my brother." His wife later told him that, although she was worried, she was very glad she changed her mind.

That's because when his brother came he listened to their frustrations and hurts and pointed them to Christ time after time. When they had difficulty seeing God's hand at work, he saw it. When they couldn't find a way to trust God in the midst of their troubles, he affirmed God's presence and power for them. Then, before he left, he wrote them a beautiful letter to remind them that God had something wonderful in store for them, acknowledging at the same time that God's path is often a difficult road. At a crucial time in their lives, God used this pastor's brother to give them hope and peace. That's the kind of encouragement you can give, or be given, by your brother or sister in the faith. And receiving or giving it can transform life.

Now, that doesn't mean constantly looking at life through rose-colored glasses. That's not looking at life realistically. But as one who understands sin and grace you can be genuine, honest and sincere. Because of sin we were all alienated from God and from one another. But God

solved that alienation by dying for you in order to reconcile your relationship with Him and to reconcile your relationships with one others. And now He promises to stand by you in all things.

In Ephesians Paul describes the hatred and distrust that existed between the Jews and Gentiles. Then he writes: *“For [Christ] himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility...that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross.”*

God created you and me to live in relationship with Him and with one another as His family, the Church. Each of us is needed for the church to function properly. And our differences are key to the health of our family. But for our family to exist with any semblance of harmony we must acknowledge that it's God who rules over us and that we are to follow His direction and guiding.

But because we do have different ideas, gifts and opinions, sparks can fly. What then? It's been said you can choose your friends but you can't choose your family – and we are a family. We aren't just a bunch of folks who happen to gather together for some purpose. We've been brought together by God Himself. Yes, the sparks can fly. But just as iron sharpens iron so we sharpen one another to be better instruments for God's purposes.

You see, our church family isn't sterile and lifeless. It's dynamic, challenging, and sometimes even messy. But it's also rich and real as you develop deep and caring relationships over the time you spend with those who are walking through life with you. Loving people isn't always easy, but it does need to be strong and tenacious. That's how Jesus loves you and that's how He desires you to love one others – through thick and thin, good times and bad.

In fact, it's more than just His desire, it's His command. In one of His most familiar sermons Jesus asked: *“If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?”* Instead He says that you are to love your enemies and

pray for those who persecute you. It's sad and frightening that love can so easily evaporate even in the family of God over petty misunderstandings. Just imagine what might happen in the face of genuine persecution.

So Jesus outlined the motivation and the measure of our love for one another when He said, "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.*" Jesus loved His disciples completely, sacrificially, graciously and joyfully. They misunderstood Him again and again, and they abandoned Him in His time of greatest need. But His love for them never failed and His love for you will never fail.

Don't miss the point here. Your love for others can only flow out of His love for you as well as your love for Him. In Jesus Christ God has given you the vast riches of His grace to forgive you and to cleanse you. He knows every terrible sin in your life but He still forgives you. For connections to remain strong you must affirm both your desperate need for grace and God's incredible capacity to love and forgive you. You (and I) need this reminder (again and again and again) and, in the power of God's Spirit, you are called to extend that same grace, that same love and forgiveness to your brothers and sisters here at Grace.

Each person who comes through the doors of this place is looking for something. Some come hoping to belong. Others come with a sense of need. But whatever motivates people to come here, it's up to you and me to reach out and try to understand their need. It's both our burden and our privilege to reach out and embrace all who come, to work at creating and strengthening those connections that will help them experience Christ's love through us.

Does that mean you will have all the answers for people? Of course not. Does it mean that you will feel inadequate at times. Yes it does. But you don't have to have all the answers. Nobody expects that (at least, no reasonable person does). All people desire is for you to be genuine, honest and sincere. Yes, you will fall short. But that's okay. You are a work in progress. You have, we all have, a lot to learn about loving others the way Jesus does. But that's the goal we continue to strive for.

People all around you are lost and struggling. In fact, some of your brothers and sisters at Grace are struggling right now – maybe *you're* struggling right now. What a joy, what a relief, to know that you're not alone, and that you don't have to face it alone. You can choose to do so and no one can force you to open yourself up, to tell others about your needs, your hurts, your joys, your victories. But you deprive yourself and others when you try to go it alone.

Author Larry Crabb has said that the church should be the safest place on earth, a place where people trust each other to open their hearts and share their burdens, a place where God uses the hands, feet, eyes and mouths of His people to comfort and encourage others. Can we become more and more that kind of place? I believe so.

On that first Pentecost, when God's Spirit was unleashed on the world, those first believers turned the world upside down. The same thing can happen here at Grace. But it requires courage to experience and express the love of God in both the joyful and the dark times of our lives. But the reward is worth the risk as the Spirit of God draws you closer to Him, closer to those sitting around you, and closer to those who have yet to join us in this adventure we call Grace.