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**“We’re Better Together: Belonging”**

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, 12; Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 13:7 (NIV)

OK, before we begin, I want you to ‘close your books,’ and ‘clear your desks,’ because I have a ‘test’ for those of you who were in ‘class’ last Sunday. The title of last week’s sermon was... **“We’re Better Together...”** When we are... **“Reaching out.”** And the ‘subtitle’ was... (another word for ‘reaching out’)... **EVANGELISM.** You know, ‘evangelism’ ... ‘one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread to eat.’ Sooo... how did THAT work out for you? Judging from how many new ‘beggars’ we have in here, invited by our current ‘beggars,’ I’d say NOT TOO WELL. Well, that’s OK. I know that this quality of our church community to ‘reach out’ is a ‘work in progress’... one that truly puts your faith to the ‘TEST!’ Just remember though... you’re not being graded on a ‘curve’... but rather, on a **‘cross.’**

THIS Sunday, however, we move from an ‘outward’ focus to an ‘IN-ward’ one. That, perhaps as a way to ‘practice’ the way in which engage OTHERS... in ways that our **‘deeds** are as good as our **‘doctrine’**... is to start with EACH OTHER.

That before ‘reaching out’ *there* we must first ‘reach in’ here. We are better together when we foster a culture of **“Belonging”**...

As some of you may remember, there were a couple of passages that we focused on last week with regards to how our behavior should be to those outside of our community of faith. One was from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians: **“...others will praise God for ... the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ...”** (2 Cor. 9:13, NIV)

That, to put it simply, it’s not good enough to merely ‘confess’ one’s belief in God... we must ‘obey’ what God directs us to do. That we must not only SAY how important it is to ‘love our neighbor’... we must SHOW it.

The other Scripture was from Colossians: **“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. <sup>6</sup>Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.** (Colossians 4:5-6)

While this is certainly important, to ‘make the most of every opportunity’ with ‘outsiders’ to demonstrate ‘wisdom’ and ‘grace,’ I would like to modify that opening phrase for today’s discussion: **‘Be wise in the way you act toward insiders.’** That both of these passages remind us

not only of how we are to treat those 'outside' of our church family, but those INSIDE our 'family' as well... AND not only our family of faith, but our family of origin. Both those of **human** 'bloodlines', and those made one through the blood of **Christ**.

They say that the habits we exhibit begin at HOME. That the way we have been raised, the environment in which we grow, will determine just how we behave 'out in the world.' Well that applies to THIS 'home' as well. As we make this a better 'environment'... as we 'practice what we preach' right here... AND carry it on to our individual homes as well... we will 'behave' in a more Godly way 'out in the world' with those to whom we are not 'related.'

Both in our **community of faith**, and in our **families**, we can fail miserably to '**make the most of every opportunity.**' We can sometimes be so 'nice' to outsiders, even total strangers... sharing with them our 'wisdom' and 'grace'... and then turn around to say and do some very 'UN-wise', 'NOT-so-gracious' things to those closest to us. Yes... some downright DUMB, MEAN things to those we love! OR, to say nothing at ALL when words are most needed... which can sometimes be as bad as saying the *wrong* thing...

Today's Scriptures point us to how to 'make the most of every opportunity' that we have with one another. To be WISE in the ways that we both SPEAK and ACT toward those whom we love. Ways to DEMONSTRATE a love that ultimately comes from GOD.

So just what does such a LOVE that 'makes us better together' LOOK like? Certainly Paul's words about love are classic illustrations of what makes a relationship better. "**Love always PROTECTS... always TRUSTS... always HOPES... always PERSEVERES.**" (1 Corinthians 13:7) These are all admirable qualities that we should 'naturally' want to do for one another. Heck, who of us wouldn't want those for OURSELVES?! Who in their right mind wouldn't want to be 'protected'... 'trusted'... 'hoped' for... 'persevered' for? But what turns this from an abstract quality to a tangible action is the NEED. That person for whom LOVE changes from a **noun** into a **verb**. Where **E-MOTION** leads to **MOTION**.

Consider those words from *Ecclesiastes 4:10*: "**Pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.**" What leads us to that 'motion' of 'helping them up?' The emotion of pity. Of compassion. Of knowing that if it were us... and it has been, will be, or IS... that we would want someone to help pick US up.

As an example, I would remind you of one of our members, Mrs. Betty Lou McKellar. You know, that petite little lady who usually sits on the back row trying to keep George in line. Who

until recent health problems, was our faithful 'human bean counter' for Sunday worship attendance record-keeping. Well, this last Thursday, she need someone to 'pick her up'... figuratively speaking, that is. She needed to go to the doctor for a 9 AM appointment, and another one of our members agreed to do so. But, 'a funny thing happened on the way from the doctor's office.' She wound up needing to go to one hospital ER... and then to lunch... and then to ANOTHER E.R... And finally, about 3 AM, was admitted to Memorial Hospital with a serious case of cellulitis. And it was only when it was clear that she WAS going to be admitted that her 'chauffeur' left... about 8 PM.

Now, was it just 'pity' that motivated that kind companion of Betty Lou's? NO. I believe that it was a faithful response to the Biblical principle laid down by Paul: ***"In Christ, we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."*** (Romans 12:5) Or, in the NLT, ***"each member NEEDS all the others."*** Everyone needs to know that, in Ecclesiastes' words, if they fall down, ***"one can help the other up."*** Perhaps the importance of being there for our friends in need is best put by the words of that classic 70's song by Bill Withers: *'Lean on me, when you're not strong, and I'll be your friend. I'll help you carry on... We all need somebody to lean on.'*

But who does the one being 'leaned on,' in turn, 'lean on' for support? I thought it was very interesting to note that the author of Ecclesiastes makes a distinct **shift** in his proclamation. ***"Two are better than one... one can help the other up... two can defend themselves."*** And then, at the end of verse 12: ***"A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."*** (Ecclesiastes 4:12)

Soooo... just where did this 'third strand' come from? It just kind of 'pops up' out of nowhere. And then disappears in the next verse. A 'mystery ingredient' that is inexplicable, but helps to bind the two other parts together. God? The Holy Spirit? Perhaps it's like that experience of Paul when he sees a statue with no name on the Acropolis, and proceeds to tell the Athenians about their 'unknown God.' That there is a power unknown, unfathomable by us mere mortals, that drives us 'to help the other up.' A resilience that helps us to be strong for others. As spoken through the prophet Isaiah, God says to us ***"Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; I will help you. I will hold on to you with my righteous right hand."*** (Isaiah 41:10)

As we extend our hand to our brother or sister... fearful that we just won't have the strength to hold them up... we can know that there is that 'third strand,' as mysterious as it may be, which will bind us together. Our God is there to help and strengthen us... holding on to us with His

righteous right hand. We are an 'instrument of God's peace' to our sisters and brothers. A 'tool' in the hand of God to BE the 'hands and feet' of Christ.

And so, in closing, I'd like to tell you of a 'tool' that you will be given to enable you to be more effective as those 'hands and feet' of Jesus. A means to facilitate your being there when another 'part of the body' NEEDS you to help 'pick them up.' I am holding in my hand the long-awaited, soon-to-be-completed "F.P.C. Directory." To borrow from timely basketball terminology, the 'Semi-Final' Edition. If you have NOT submitted up-to-date contact information, you have until Thursday to get it in to the church office... in order to have them in your hand for next Sunday.

Now, I know that in-and-of-itself, this is just a bunch of numbers and words. BUT, if **utilized**, it can help us all to 'be better together' as that flawed, fickle body of believers known as the **church**. It doesn't contain any powerful Biblical references or keys to living the Christian life. BUT, it could help you to get in touch with someone you haven't seen in a while. It could help you to know where to send that get-well card, or send that congratulatory e-mail. It could guide you in knowing where to go to pick up that friend for lunch... or, for a doctor's appointment. 😊 No, it will not, make us 'the perfect church.' Not by a long shot. BUT, it can help us to move in the right direction. As to what 'defines' us as a body of believers, I'd leave you with this little saying that actually came to me while cutting my grass this weekend:

"The CHURCH is not to be SEEN as a PERFECT PLACE,  
but a PLACE where the only PERFECT One can be SEEN."

As we seek to grow in our sense of 'belonging,' one with another, let us even more so grow in our understanding of what it means to 'belong' to GOD! The God who gives us strength to lift up a brother or sister... the strand that binds us together. The only perfect One who can be seen in the eyes of one another...

#### CHARGE & BENEDICTION

**Church isn't the only place to meet God, but at her best,  
Church is where we learn how to meet God everywhere else." (Unknown)**