

Mike's preamble

Good morning everyone, we were unable to find a pulpit supply for today so you're stuck with me up here. I have been up here numerous times, whether it be for prayers of the people or Sunday School announcements but never really in this capacity. I was down there a couple weeks ago talking with some of you and during that talk I remembered having my kids baptized here at that font. I have found myself thinking about that baptismal font and thinking about all the children that have been baptized here. Or here, me holding my hands at the sides of the pulpit, how many people have placed their hands here. Last week when Toyosi was coming up here to preach he stumbled a little, how many others have done the same, or even how many people have just walked up the stairs (or kids run up them). These few examples give us a look at how we are all connected in a way. Could you imagine seeing a time lapse for the last 30 years of all the people moving in and out of just this little area of our church? We are connected to this place in many ways, the paths we have all crossed, the things we have mutually touched, the things we have heard here. But the most important connection is that we are all here because of our love for Jesus Christ and God the Father. So, it is with that line of thought that I picked out a sermon to read today. I am going to share with you a sermon from our former Pastor Tom Bomhof. Still seems a little fresh to say former pastor but that is where we are. The scripture for today is 1 Corinthians 12: 7-27

Sermon on 1 Corinthians 12:7-27

Rev. Tom Bomhof

The Spiritual Discipline of Fellowship

Dear Friends of God,

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Maybe you've talked to someone who told you, "I'm spiritual but not religious".

In our increasingly secular culture, a large percentage of people describe themselves this way. People don't like participating in churches, yet they crave a spiritual connection to something bigger than themselves. So they say things like

“I don’t attend religious services. I can be spiritual all by myself. I feel connected to the divine through beauty or nature, but do not worship with any community.”

I have sympathy for people who live this worldview. It shows that we are all created to long for God and I see this longing in them. I like their desire for a personal connection with God—our faith is not an external thing, but a heart thing. And sometimes this is a reaction to a painful experience with the church and this is their attempt to stay connected to God.

Yet there is a large part of me that agrees with American pastor Lillian Daniel who says in her typically feisty way,

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Here’s what I want to tell them: Thank you for sharing, spiritual-but-not-religious person. You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered [North] American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating.

Rev. Lillian Daniel, When Spiritual But Not Religious is Not Enough

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All too often spiritual-but-not-religious can become what Jesuit priest James Martin calls self-centered complacency divorced from the wisdom of a community.

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It leaves the person with a God created in their own image, who tells them to do what they are already doing, and who says yes to everything they hope to do.

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Christians live by another way. We have a different spiritual practice. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:13,

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For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews of Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

When you became a Christian, you became a living part of the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit is moving you, no matter who you are, to be part of that body, fully engaged as an equal part of Christ. Each one of us has been given a gift from the Holy Spirit to use for the common good of that body.

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Being part of the body of Christ means practicing the spiritual discipline of fellowship. Fellowship is the practice of engaging with other disciples in the common activities of worship, study, prayer, celebration, and service, which sustain our life together and enlarge our capacity to experience more of God.

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In the years before COVID we started to see less engagement in fellowship, we started seeing people slowly drop away from churches all around. But COVID accelerated the degradation of the spiritual discipline of fellowship.

For the past number of years practicing the spiritual discipline of fellowship has been difficult. The COVID pandemic became, as one of our elders described it,

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a community killer

We had to physically distance ourselves from each other. We had our little bubbles of people, we had to wear masks, we couldn't attend large gatherings like sports or movies—or church. We had tensions within churches about how far we should comply with restrictions, and whether we should even get vaccinated.

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And when things settled down after vaccinations were delivered and we learned how to better live with COVID, we thought that people would flock back to church. Hurray, it's over. Let's get back to fellowshiping with each other again.

Yet people are reluctant to come back together. Volunteerism is down across the board, not just in churches. People are slow to gather again. Maybe they are using this as a way to exit church completely, or maybe they don't want to return to some patterns of busyness that weren't life-giving. It's a complex situation.

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Today I want to remind you that fellowship is a spiritual discipline. A spiritual discipline calls for continual * *practice*. Nobody just drifts into a discipline, and we so easily fall out of it. As a discipline it involves a decision, practice, habit, and sometimes sheer determination. Especially when we see some of our respected friends falling into the "Spiritual but not religious" worldview, and when the church isn't always an easy place to be, the discipline part of fellowship is all the more important. Fellowship is an important way to train ourselves for godliness, as the Bible coaches us to do. I want to encourage you to keep at it.

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I love the picture of fellowship that our passage gives us. The church is the gathering of Christ followers who each have been given something by the Holy Spirit and they bring that gift with them for the good of the rest of the church. Everyone has something to contribute. The gifts of the Spirit are not meant for selfish advantage—as some in the Corinthian church were guilty of doing—but for the building up of the body of Christ. We bring with us gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous power, prophecy, discernment, tongues and interpretation of tongues. The same Spirit distributes these gifts among us so that we all benefit.

There is something really encouraging about this picture of fellowship.

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And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

You are part of this fellowship because God wants you to be here. You matter. You might wonder if you matter. Yet our passage says God has placed all these parts in his body. You have something from the Holy Spirit and it’s meant to be present in this congregation of Christ followers. You need to own that with confidence. It’s the task of the congregation to receive it with thanks from God.

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Our passage also alerts us to the pinching points of fellowship.

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The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”

Paul was writing to a church that had some serious divisions in it. These divisions threatened the fellowship of the church. The divisions pitted people against each other: rich against the poor, Jew against the Greek, free against the slave, the followers of one leader against the followers of another leader.

We have to confess that we sometimes say or are tempted to say, “I don’t need you.” We tend to those same errors as the Corinthians, who had inner circles and

factions that were somewhat hostile to each other. When you say, “I don’t need you,” you are building barriers among people who rightly belong to the body. The sheer variety of the church is sometimes a barrier to fellowship.

Again, I’m inspired by what Lillian Daniel has to say about this:

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Any idiot can find God alone in the sunset. It takes a certain maturity to find God in the person sitting next to you who not only voted for the wrong political party but has a baby who is crying while you’re trying to listen to the sermon. Community is where the religious rubber meets the road. People challenge us, ask hard questions, disagree, need things from us, require our forgiveness. It’s where we get to practice all the things we preach.

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I think a lot of those who can’t tolerate organized religion are really just frustrated by other people. They think, “if they could just kick all of the flawed human beings out of the church, we could really do this Jesus thing. Better to do my spiritual life solo, where I don’t have to be disturbed by the amateurs.” But that’s arrogant. Churches are just groups of people, schools for sinners, not a club of saints. We must acknowledge that we need each other.

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Fellowship can be messy. It can be awkward and challenging. Sometimes we feel like the guy on the couch on the right: cringing. Who *are* these people? It sometimes requires a lot of grace. Yet it challenges us to grow. You don't get to choose who is in the pew with you. And that's a good, even great, thing.

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Today we *create* communities. We have Facebook friends and social networks that we control. You can add friends if you wish, you can delete them if you wish. You are in control of the important people to whom you relate. We don’t belong to communities, we create communities. So often they just become echo chambers of the things we choose to think about. Someone recently de-friended me! But that person can do what he wants as he creates his own social network community.

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The spiritual discipline of fellowship reminds us that we are not self-created. We did not create this community. God created this community and calls us to it.

In your average church there is so much variety. There are people in church who you wouldn't invite into your social network, and they wouldn't invite you into theirs. You have nothing in common except being in the same pews and a member of the same church. There are drivers of Mercedes and drivers of Chevys, cradle Christians and recent converts, introverts and extroverts, lovers of Taize chants and lovers of Hillsongs, people who vote Green and people who vote Conservative, HSR accepters and HSR critics, people who wear shorts and people who wear suits, refugees and long-time residents. There are people who, when you speak with them, make you wonder whether you are living on the same planet.

And what a gift that is. People you did not choose, nor would you have chosen are in your church together with you. And God has placed you there. Each of you has something to contribute and can be confident that you belong here because of that. Together you will decide how you will pay for the new furnace and how you will organize a kid's camp this summer. You'll have to bite your tongue when you notice the outlandish tattoo they have, or the rather paternalistic attitude they reveal. You'll have to show grace to the person who is weak. You have to speak truth to those whose behavior crosses lines.

As David Mills puts it,

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That's one of the great things about the Church, and especially the local branch. It's a community you didn't choose. You can't control it. It forces your horizons wider. You have to learn to love these people, or at least to act lovingly, when you don't want to. The Church's life teaches you charity in a way you couldn't learn from your social network. David Mills, "Go to Church, Meet Annoying People"

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The spiritual discipline of fellowship begins when you come to recognize that you need each other. You come to the place where you say, I need these people in my life. I don't always like them. I don't always agree with them. I wouldn't hang out with some of them. Some of them have rough edges. But God has put me here for a reason.

For what reason has God placed you in the fellowship of the church? Have you ever wondered about that? Why this church? These people?

I believe it's connected to the mission of the church. Fellowship isn't just about being relational with the messy group of people who assemble as the church. Fellowship is about being relational with the messy group of people who are God's mission to this world.

Fellowship helps us be the body of Christ on a mission.

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David Mathis compares the fellowship of the church to Tolkien's Lord of the Rings. Tolkien called his nine travelers the "Fellowship of the Ring." It wasn't a chummy hobnob with appies and drinks and a game on the tube. It is an all-in, life-or-death collective mission to destroy the one ring in the face of great evil and overwhelming opposition.

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The world is at stake and they've got to get the ring to Mount Doom. This is what's involved in a fellowship.

In the church, true fellowship is less like friends gathered to watch the Super Bowl or have a wine night watching the Bachelor and more like people who have each other's back and help each other live as the body of Christ wherever they are, calling a fallen world back into a relationship with God through Christ.

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The church is a group of people unified under Christ, who represent and reflect Him to the world. The fellowship which the first Christians shared wasn't so they could learn church jargon or learn to be more judgmental. Their fellowship was their common love of Christ and their common life-or-death mission together in his summons to take the faith worldwide in the face of impending persecution.

We need each other. Especially in a culture that seems to be changing right in front of us. This spiritual discipline of fellowship calls us to gather together not only for worship, but for the church potluck and the congregational meeting and the small group. You have something that the Holy Spirit has given you to contribute to the church. Sometimes it's simply your presence that brings something that someone else needs in ways you have no idea. The times people have spoken into my life in meaningful ways has been those ordinary times of just

being together as the church. The stories of faith that are precious to me are the ones that are told in the relaxed atmosphere of fellowship. The times that challenge me to grow are the times when someone makes me mad and I have to either say sorry or give forgiveness.

Keep meeting with other Christians, keep engaging with each other in your faith life, your worship and prayer life, and strengthening one another in Christ. You are the body of Christ in this world, and each of you is part of it.

AMEN