

God's gift...community. A sermon preached on October 21, 2018 at St. Giles Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons; PSALM 133

EPHESIANS 4:1-6

JOHN 17:6-22

It is a remarkable picture on this morning's bulletin cover – is it not?

So many people smiling, and obviously happy to be part of the picture.

Remarkable because like every photograph – digital or old school – the picture captures a moment in time and tells a story – St. Giles' Carnival Day – June 24, 2018

Remarkable because it is a picture of us – this community of faith called St. Giles Presbyterian in Prince George.

It is not the whole community because some were away

Remarkable picture because every face is different – there are the tall and not so tall,
Corrective lenses and not corrective lenses
Standing, sitting or in wheelchairs
Differently styled and coloured hair or no hair
Some older than others.

A remarkable picture because the most significant fact is not anywhere announced or shown outright.

The most significant fact is that we are all brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

For whether we like it or not,

The moment we confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour,

We are at the same time a member of the Christian church...even if we do not permit our name to be placed on a membership roll,

Even if we refuse to identify ourselves with a particular congregation and share responsibilities with that congregation.

Membership in the church is a basic fact for those who confess Christ as Lord.

It is not an option!

Yes, I have heard and no doubt so have you, people who declare: I'm done with the church

I do not really need to go to church...my relationship with God is personal

I've had it with organized religion!

The church is a man-made invention – not God's idea

The church is just a bunch of good time Charlies and Charlene's – playing at life and not living in the real world

Bunch of hypocrites who just want to spoil your fun and enjoyment of life!

Sadly,

Communities of faith who exercise rules to the exclusion of grace,

Judgement to the exclusion of mercy have caused many throughout the centuries to turn away or to be turned off involvement in a faith community.

Yet when the church, the community of the faithful – this or any other – follows the lead of its head – Jesus Christ;
 Follows the teachings of the apostle Paul about how to live with other believers
 And seeks to live out the gospel imperative – *love God, love other people* – we see and we know
 BEYOND any reasonable doubt that we as God’s people are participants and involved in God’s third greatest gift – the community of faith
 The first gift being his Son Jesus Christ
 The second the God’s Holy Spirit.

I look at this bulletin cover picture and I see in my mind not only the faces here in the picture, but the faces in the congregations I have served, The faces of the congregation that was formative in my early life]and I hear not only the scripture passages we will consider in a moment]but the resonating words of German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was executed by the Nazis near the end of the Second World War
 And who wrote what is still the defining book on life in a faith community.
 The book is called Life Together. A discussion of Christian Fellowship.

It is still in print and readily available on paper and as an eBook – and rightly so.

This is good stuff to encourage and hearten the faithful and to give new perspective for the jaded and apathetic about the church.

Bonhoeffer writes in the first chapter:

It is not simply to be taken for granted that the Christian has the privilege of living among other Christians (p. 17)

The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer. Longingly, the imprisoned apostle Paul calls his ‘dearly beloved son in the faith, Timothy to come to him in prison in the last days of his life; he would see him again and have him near. (p. 19)

It is true of course that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden under foot by those who have the gift every day. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of the Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us...therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common

Christian life with other Christians praise God’s gift of grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace that we are allowed

to live in community with Christian brethren
(p. 20)

So being an urban contemplative, the question with which each us must daily wrestle is NOT “Am I going to be part of a community of faith?

The question IS *–How am I going to live in this community of faith?*

Realize and never forget that living in a faith community – this or any other – is perhaps the hardest and most ongoing challenge each of us face as Christians.
Why?

First verse of Psalm 133 reminds us

**How good and pleasant it is
When kindred live together in unity!**

And it is good and pleasant – no question.

The Psalmist reminds us though that we are not a random collection of strangers

We are KINDRED

We are family.

The person on your left, on your right, in front and behind you is your sister and brother in Christ.

The Lord died on a Cross for those people who are around you, as much as he died for you.

Family in faith – I have yet to meet a family however one defines it that is always happy, well-balanced and content

I grew up as an only child, but my friends showed me very early about the reality of 'sibling rivalry' and in case I had forgotten, Ruth and Jane reminded me that 'sibling rivalry' exists.

Living in community requires patience, self-discipline and grace – lots and lots of grace!

C.S. Lewis in his masterful little book – *The Screwtape Letters* – letters purportedly written by a senior tempter to his junior tempter and nephew – named Wormwood – describes so accurately the scenario of how easily our minds can flit from this is my brother or sister in Christ – I am here in this place worshipping and praising God to something much less heavenly.

Let me quote a piece from *Screwtape's* second letter to his nephew Wormwood.

Now, the language is dated and the book was written initially for a British reader, but I think the point he makes is frighteningly clear

"One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy.

But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees is the half-finished, sham Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of

his neighbours whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbours. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like 'the body of Christ' and the actual faces in the next pew. It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains. You may know one of them to be a great warrior on the Enemy's side. No matter. Your patient, thanks to Our Father Below, is a fool. Provided that any of those neighbours sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous."

How easy our thoughts can flit to things about the community of faith, about individuals in the community of faith that are anything but holy and glorifying to God.

Realize and never forget. *None of us stop being sinners the moment we begin believing in Jesus as Lord and Saviour.*

Sometimes we are not nice people
 We do not suddenly transform into brilliant conversationalists,
 Exciting companions and glowing inspirations.
 Some of us remain cranky,
 Some of us remain dull and others of us can be a real drag.

That fallen aspect of our personality can rear up and emerge so quickly when we do not get our way,
 Or we believe ours to be the only way through a matter, issue or action in the community.

Gossip, end runs, personality clashes still suddenly bubble up or surface when we think everything – including our tongues-- is under control!

Realize and never forget that living in a faith community means we recognize diversity but we do provide a united front – recognition of the way God means for us to live in community and show ourselves to a needy of the Lord Jesus world.

²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,^[a] so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,(John 17:21, 22)

And this diversity within unity is so very fragile
Over the years I have served as a parish minister, I have seen faith communities united only by spite against each other,
Dislike of their present minister. In that case, this particular faith community about which I am thinking did not much like their previous minister either!

This “kindred living together in unity” is so fragile

Constant monitoring is a must.

Realize and never forget to sustain community, to build community cannot and is not done solely by human hands.

Certainly there are things for which we are responsible to God.

The physical plant, like any structure needs updating and repairs – for our own safety and comfort

But also to provide an attractive and inviting welcome to the wider world.

Welcoming people at the door, helping them by explaining why the service order is the way it is
And then if there are refreshments following the service – not abandoning them to talk to our friends.

Telling others about the activities at the church – that is important too.

As is providing worship that glorifies God.

When we bought our first newish car, the dealer said to us – if you have a problem, tell us first,

If you like what you see – tell others.

I think that is sound advice in any organizational structure.

If there are things about which you have issues or a problem here – tell us first

If you like what you see – tell others!!!

In the end though – all is traceable to the grace of God.

Community is a gift from God.

Through Jesus Christ, God promises to build his church.

Leave out or forget God – the community will flounder – and flounder badly – no matter how many worldly resources – investments, membership, spectacular programs and exceptional staff it has.

In one case where the community forgot about God and was doing everything for their own glory – God decided to withdraw his hand from the community.

It was frightening to see how quickly things unraveled.

The congregational leaders decided do more things – rather than praying more earnestly.

The community of faith still exists, but it is a shell of what it once was and could have been if God had remained the centre.

Realize and never forget that the Church – the community of faith – remains an amazing marvel of God's incredible grace.

That God would use ordinary, broken human beings as vessels of his grace;
And delight in it is *awe-inspiring*.

The idea that God could use you and me is pretty amazing.

God could have spoken to the world directly!
But instead he chose to use broken people to showcase his grace to a world in need of redemption.

Yes, community is messy!

People sin
Leaders are sinful.

Most of the New Testament is not a story of an idealized church where everything worked perfectly all the time.

(If you are ever frustrated about what is or is not happening here, just read Paul's letters to the Corinthians!)

The fact that Christ uses flawed people to accomplish his work on earth is actually a sign of his grace.

The Church really does give to the world a front row seat to the grace of God!

And so yes,

Sometimes the community gets twisted and messy,
Sometimes personality conflicts seem to dominate
Sometimes its brothers and sisters in the Lord give us twitches and make us want to scream or worse walk away.

Or wish that a particular brother or sister in the Lord would walk away!

Nevertheless,

The church still witnesses some remarkable actions and events does it not?

Over the years and it is still the case, I have seen the community of faith encourage and upbuild its members and even strangers.

I have seen the community gather when one of its own are critically ill or in distress – offering everything from prayer to financial support

I have seen the community reach out to a family in distress or trouble

I have seen the community eager to celebrate and rejoice in happy and joyous family occasions, like weddings, baptisms, graduations and the like

How amazing it remains – the community of faith – *an earthly example of God's grace – to share, to show, God's mercy, forgiveness, joy and hope*

Psalmist so spot on:

**How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!**

**² It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.**

**³ It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the LORD ordained his blessing,
life for evermore.**