

Southport Presbyterian Church
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“Kingdom People”
I John 1:1-7; John 13:34-35

A little girl, who usually went to children’s church on Sunday mornings, went with her parents to the regular adult service one day. When communion was served, she turned to her mother and whispered loudly, “The snack in children’s church is much better. And we get a lot more juice.”

While we find her words amusing, we know that communion is the greatest feast in which we ever are privileged to participate. Not only are we eating and drinking with a large number of people gathered in one place at one time, but we are joining with people from around the world following a tradition which has been observed by millions through the centuries.

To go a step further, this holy meal brings us into fellowship with the God who allowed Jesus to have His body broken and blood shed on a cross and the Holy Spirit who knits us together as one family around His table. This table and this meal demonstrates for us the kind of fellowship we should experience all the time when we are a part of the Family of Faith.

To gather around this table is not some sweet little ritual that we do out of habit. Dear friends, this meal is a living drama that calls us to remember the fellowship we have with the One who died for us and the fellowship we have with one another.

Today, in this next to the last message in the *Experiencing God* series, we are going to explore briefly what it means to be “Kingdom People” who experience what it means to be in fellowship with one another and with God.

It’s important to know that the Greek word for “fellowship” is *koinonia*. *Koinonia* has the idea of an intimate relationship of mutual sharing and participation. It means to share things in common. From this word for fellowship come the words, “communion” and “community,” having a “common union” and a “common unity.”

Enough of the word-smithing, let’s turn to a wonderful passage in Scripture that speaks of this two-dimensional fellowship with one another and with God: I John 1:1-7. When we experience these dimensions of fellowship our joy is complete.

First Dimension- the horizontal: fellowship with one another.

In this letter, John is writing to a church which is plagued with the heresy of Gnosticism. The Gnostics did not believe that Jesus could have been an actual physical human being since the body was evil. He was more of a spirit or a hallucination and not flesh and blood. To the Gnostics only through a special knowledge was truth to be found.

Notice how John makes very certain to point out that they actually heard, saw, and touched Jesus. He was a physical man bringing us eternal life, John says. Because of the reality of His physical being, we can have fellowship with one another. Just as He shared life with His disciples for those three years and experienced communion and community, so can all those who follow Him realize that same dimension of togetherness.

In many cases, fellowship with one another is how we first are drawn into a relationship with God. Conversely, if there isn't a deep sense of partnership and a genuine sharing in the family of faith, then Jesus only appears to be a figment of our imaginations and not an actual man who forever changed the lives of His followers. Genuine fellowship is a key ingredient in God's plan for us as believers. Christianity is never meant to be lived in isolation.

Hear these poignant words from Eugene Peterson in his book, *Reversed Thunder*:

“Love cannot exist in isolation: away from others, love bloats into pride. Grace cannot be received privately: cut off from others, it is perverted into greed. Hope cannot develop in solitude: separated from the community, it goes to seed in the form of fantasies. No gift, no virtue can develop and remain healthy apart from the community of faith. ‘Outside of the church there is no salvation’ is not ecclesiastical arrogance but spiritual common sense, confirmed in everyday experience.”

While the authentic fellowship of the family of faith is meant to be one of the primary ways that people are drawn into the faith community, I'm afraid it often becomes one of the greatest deterrents. Maybe Ben Patterson was on target when he wrote: “People in the church are like porcupines in a snowstorm. We need each other to keep warm, but we prick each other if we get too close.”

Chuck Swindoll tells of an old Marine buddy of his who came to know Christ. It was surprising because “he cursed loudly, fought hard, chased women, drank heavily, loved war and weapons and hated chapel services.”

In a conversation with Swindoll, the old marine said that the only thing he missed from his old life was “the fellowship I used to have with the guys down at the tavern. I remember how we used to sit around and let our hair down. I can't find anything like that for Christians. I no longer have a place to admit my faults and talk about my battles—where somebody won't preach at me and frown and quote me a verse.”

Swindoll goes on to say that a short time later he came across this astounding paragraph: “The neighborhood bar is possibly the best counterfeit that there is to the fellowship Christ wants to give his church. It's an imitation, dispensing liquor instead of grace, escape rather than reality—but it is a permissive, accepting and inclusive fellowship. It is unshockable. It is democratic. You can tell people secrets, and they usually don't tell others or even want to. The bar flourishes not because most people are alcoholics, but because God has put into the human heart the desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, and so many seek a counterfeit at the price of a few beers. With all my heart, I believe that Christ wants his church to be unshockable, a fellowship where people can come in and say, ‘I'm sunk. I'm beat. I've had it.’ Alcoholics Anonymous has this quality—our churches often miss it.”

I believe that in a church like ours this kind of genuine fellowship and community most often takes place in small groups. The weekend after next we are going to begin a series of messages on the need for small groups entitled, “Nobody stands alone.”

In her book, *The Unauthorized Guide to Choosing a Church*, Carmen Renee Berry says that she was “inspired by her odyssey from the deeply conservative church of her childhood into the world of seekers and cynics, and back again. In this journey she eventually found that the very reason she withdrew from the church—her disappointment in church members who often failed to act as Christians—was what drew her back. Listen to her words:

“I had overlooked one essential factor—that I am as finite and flawed as everyone else.... When a friend committed suicide, I realized I could become too cynical, too lost, and too alone. I needed a church, a community of believers. I needed to live in my faith and visit my doubts. Something happens there that simply doesn’t when you are alone in prayer or on the Internet. As much as I hate to admit it, my faith is enhanced and enlarged when in relationship to other less-than-perfect human beings.”

Hear these words from Jesus from John 13:34-35 - “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Second Dimension - the vertical: fellowship with God.

After we have been caught in the web of fellowship with one another, we are drawn into a fellowship with God. It’s the cross with its horizontal piece, symbolizing our fellowship with others, and the vertical piece symbolizing our relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. While certainly there are some whom God draws to Himself before drawing them to the Family of Faith, most often it starts with fellowship with one another.

Fellowship with God when it is authentic means that we are walking in the light, following the example of the life of Jesus, the Light of the world. Walking in the light means that we are growing in our love for the God who first loved us, even when we were far from Him. Walking in the light means that we are allowing the Holy Spirit to fill us and produce His fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Walking in the light means that we are extending God’s loving arms of fellowship to others around us.

Do you have a close intimate relationship with God that is growing deeper as the years go by? If fellowship is genuine and dynamic there must be time spent together. Are you spending time with God on a daily basis through Bible study, prayer, worship, and serving others? There aren’t short-cuts for time spent together.

Listen again to the helpful words of Eugene Peterson from his book *Earth and Altar*:

“Two commands direct us from the small-minded world of self-help to the large world of God’s help. First, ‘Come; behold the works of the Lord.’ Take a long look at what God is doing. This requires patient attentiveness and energetic concentration. Everybody else is noisier than God. The headlines and neon lights and amplifying systems of the world announce human works. But what of God’s works? They are unadvertised but also inescapable, if we simply look. They are everywhere. They are marvelous. But God has no public relations agency. He mounts no publicity campaign to get our attention. He simply invites us to look...

The second command is ‘Be still, and know that I am God.’ Be still. Quit rushing through streets long enough to become aware that there is more to life than your little self-help enterprises. When we are noisy and when we are hurried, we are incapable of intimacy—deep complex, personal relationships. If God is the living center of redemption, it is essential that we are in touch with and responsive to that personal will. If God has a will for this world and we want to be in on it, we must be still long enough to find out where it is (for we are certainly not going to learn by watching the evening news). Baron von

Hugel, who had a wise word on most subjects, always held out that ‘nothing was ever accomplished in a stampede.’”

Application

As we approach this table as would be “Kingdom People,” let us always remember that it was first hosted by God the son, Jesus Christ. Around this Communion table we experience a wonderful sense of fellowship with one another much like a family when they gather around a festive holiday meal. Likewise, we experience fellowship with God, the One who created us and desires a relationship of love.

As we join to together in eating the bread and drinking the juice, let us remember that it was God who initiates and continues to host this table. It was God who first loved us and not something that we dreamed up to make us feel better in our often hectic and sometimes horrific world.

Let me close with this beautiful story from Alister McGrath from his book *Doubting*:

“An aunt of mine died some time ago, having lived to be 80 or so. She had never married. During the course of clearing out her possessions, we came across a battered old photograph of a young man. My aunt had, it turned out, fallen hopelessly in love as a young girl. It had ended tragically. She never loved anyone else and kept a photograph of the man she had loved for the remainder of her life.

Why? Partly to remind herself that she had once been loved by someone. As she had grown old, she knew that she would have difficulty believing that, at one point in her life, she had really meant something to someone—that someone had once cared for her and regarded her as everything. It could all have seemed a dream, an illusion, something she had invented in her old age to console her in her declining years—except that the photograph gave the lie to that.

It reminded her that it had not been invented; she really loved someone once and was loved in return. The photograph was her sole link to a world in which she had been valued.

The communion bread and wine are like that photograph. They reassure us that something that seems too good to be true—something that we might even be suspected of having invented—really did happen.”

Dear friends, we were created to be in fellowship with each other and in fellowship with God. This table serves as a vivid reminder to the extent to which God was willing to go to prove His love for us.