

Life Together: For the World

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This morning we conclude our series of messages entitled “Life Together.” This series of messages focuses on the spiritual growth area: “connecting in caring relationships.” My dream is that every member of our church would be connected with other growing Christians in a small group. We encourage you to sign up for a spiritual growth group, join a Sunday school class, participate in our LIFE groups or join a ministry team. As we approach a challenging year, we all need support, encouragement and prayer. We do not have to face the uncertainty of this year alone. There is strength when we face things together. Many people have no family living in the vicinity. My only sibling (a sister) lives in Florida. Our children live in Dallas, San Antonio, Vail, Colorado, and New York. Our support and care comes from our church family. Margaret and I are participating in one of the LIFE groups on Sunday evening. We want everyone to experience the support and encouragement of a small group. Our scripture reading this morning reveals that this is one of the things for which Jesus prayed for us.

John 17:20-26

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

²⁴ "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

²⁵ "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. ²⁶I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

What do you think is the number one factor when people choose a church home? According to a nationwide survey, the number one factor in a person's decision to join a church is not the music—that is number three. It is not the preaching—that is number two—humbling for us preachers!! The number one

factor that determines which church someone will join is that the church is a place where they feel loved and cared for. People are looking for a place where they can connect in caring relationships.

Jesus prayed for his followers in all generations that “all of them may be one.” He prayed for us to experience unity and community. As we care for each other we experience unity. Unity does not mean uniformity. God is the originator of originality. No two persons have the same finger prints. No two snow flakes are identical. Even identical twins are different. God did not make us to be alike. He is way too creative for that!! Unfortunately some churches try to force everyone into the same mold. They prefer cookie cutter Christians. When I was in college, I visited a small Pentecostal church that was near the campus. I noticed that the lady who played the piano and led the singing had a bee hive hairdo—like Marge Simpson. Then I looked around and every lady in the congregation had the same hairdo. If you were a woman in that sanctuary and did not have a bee hive hairdo, it was clear you were a visitor. Some churches have certain expectations that everyone will dress similarly and act similarly. They are very clear about what their members should do and not do.

Jesus prayed that we would be one, but not uniform. At LakeRidge we encourage you to express your individuality and discover the unique pathway that God has for your spiritual growth. We offer a variety of groups and ministries because we know that we are not all the same. It would be simpler if we only offered one type of group or one ministry and told everyone to participate in that one thing. But that violates God's created order of diversity. We are different, yet we can all be one.

In Ephesians 4:3 Paul says to “maintain the unity of the Spirit.” Notice he does not say to “attain” the unity of the Spirit. Unity is not something that we generate or achieve. It is a gift of the Spirit. God gives us the gift of unity, but as Paul warns us, we can mess it up. We cannot attain it, but we can destroy it.

The way we maintain the unity of the Spirit is by respecting and affirming our differences. God has made us different, but he has made us so that we fit together. When the Temple was being constructed in Jerusalem, God gave instructions that every stone was to be shaped at the quarry and then brought to the Temple site and lifted in place. There were to be no sounds of chisels or hammers as the Temple was built. Why? This was one of the ways of maintaining the sacredness or holiness of the Temple site. You can imagine the precision required by the craftsmen who cut the huge stones for the Temple. They had to shape the stones before they arrived at the Temple site to insure they fit together. If one did not fit, it was taken back to the quarry and adjusted there. No adjustments involving hammers were allowed at the Temple site.

This is a wonderful picture of how God builds the church. He shapes each of us by the work of his Holy Spirit and then places us together with other believers so that we fit in the place he has chosen for us. We do make someone else fit in. God has already made us to fit in. If we try to conform someone to our expectations, we do violence to the work of God. We are violating the sacredness and holiness of the church that God is creating. Our job is to fit together as God has designed us. We maintain the unity God has given.

Jesus prayed that his followers would be one as he and the Father are one. The unity of the Trinity is the basis and the model for our relationships. God

is one in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Trinity shares the same purpose. All three persons of the Godhead are working toward the same end: to redeem all of creation and bring it back into relationship with God and each other. To accomplish this goal, each person of the Trinity assumes a different role. The Father sends. The Son goes. The Spirit fills. Jesus said to his disciples: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And he breathed upon them filling them with the Holy Spirit. Each one complements and completes what the other is doing to accomplish the redemption of the world.

The unity God has given us flows from the Trinity. We have the same purpose: to join with God in his work of redeeming the world—restoring those who are separated from God back into relationship with him. We each have a different role to play and yet we all fit together in carrying out that role.

Our role is determined by our spiritual gift. God has shaped us—our personality, our gifts and our talents. He brings us to the church and places us in the spot he has chosen for us. Our gift determines our spot. The apostle Paul compares the church to a physical body. Our physical body has many different parts that all work together to accomplish something we want to do. Likewise, the body of Christ has many parts that all work together to accomplish God’s purpose. In the body of Christ every part is important just as every part of our physical bodies is important. You may not think you use your pinkie finger very much until it is injured or broken and you can’t use it. Then you realize how important it is. Every part of the body of Christ is important. Each part is placed by God to complement and complete the other parts.

The Holy Spirit determines our gift. “The Spirit gives them to each one just as he determines.” (I Corinthians 12:11) To one he gives the gift of teaching; to another the gift of administration; to another the gift of healing; to another the gift of encouraging. As we each use our gifts, then the work of Christ gets done. No one of us can do all the work of Christ. But when each of us does our part, the whole work of Christ gets done. God accomplishes his work of redemption through us.

In Ephesians 2:17 we find a curious passage of scripture: “Jesus came and preached peace to you who were far away.” Paul says that Jesus preached peace to the Ephesians. Now what is curious about that? Ephesus is in Turkey. Jesus never left Palestine. There is no record of Jesus ever going to Ephesus. Why would Paul say that? For Paul, if a group of believers went to Ephesus, it was as if Jesus himself had gone. The church is the body of Christ—we represent Christ in the world. Wherever we go, Christ goes. Wherever Christ goes, we go.

How do we discover our gift in the body of Christ? One way to discover your gift is to get in touch with the things that you feel strongly about. When God gives us a gift, he also gives us a passion to use that gift. Have you ever said: “Someone ought to do something about this or that problem.”? When you identify something that “someone ought to do something about” then perhaps God has identified you and gifted you to be that someone!!

Is there some situation in the world that you frequently feel burdened about? Perhaps it is abused children or drug addiction or elderly who live alone. God is the one who places those burdens on our hearts to open our eyes to the

needs of others. When you hear of a need for a Sunday school teacher in our children's department, does something inside you say "I would like to try that. I think I might enjoy that."? Using our spiritual gifts is something we will enjoy. It will bring us great fulfillment. It is not something you dread or find difficult.

One of the best ways to discover your gift is to experiment. Try something that you feel drawn to or interested in. Maybe you think you might have an interest in teaching. Ask to help out a teacher. Teach a part of a lesson. You might want to try it with three-year-olds. If you bomb out, they won't tell anybody. You may discover teaching young children is not your gift. Try another age group. If you discover that teaching is not your gift then try something else like help out with a crisis care team and take a meal. Or help to organize a ministry that will impact a need in the community. Some of you have gifts for working with people and others of you have gifts of doing tasks and organizing things. Feel free to experiment until you find your gift.

As each of us uses our gift, the work of Christ to redeem the world gets done. One of my dreams is that each group in our church will identify a way they will join with God in redeeming the world. I want to encourage each Sunday school class, reunion group, LIFE group, prayer group to identify a need that God is calling you to meet. How will you identify that need? Let each person in the group share a need or problem they are concerned about. See if a consensus develops. Then ask what gifts has God placed in your group to meet that need? Someone will be the organizer. Someone will be the promoter and recruiter. Someone will gather the information and research the problem. Someone will have the people skills needed to connect the group with the recipients of ministry.

Another dream I have is that each of the ministry teams in our church would function as a small support group for each other. I would like to see our ushers and golf cart drivers and Sunday school teachers gather 10 minutes before their usual start time to share prayer requests and pray for one another. The leader of the ministry team could remind everyone that what we do today is joining with God in his work of redeeming the world. Doing our part in the body of Christ is making a difference in the world. And by coming together to pray for one another, we are being the body of Christ for each other.

When the Methodist movement began, John Wesley saw the value of small groups as a way of connecting in caring relationships. He required every Methodist to participate weekly in a small group called a class meeting. In these groups they prayed for each other, encouraged each other, cared for each other. Some objected to being required to participate in the groups. They said that religion was a private matter. It was enough for them to come to worship on Sunday. Wesley replied, "The Bible says:

- To confess your sins to one another
- To encourage one another
- To stir each other up to love and good works
- To bear one another's burdens
- To rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep

If you do not meet regularly with one another, when and how will you get those things done?"

Individually we cannot be the body of Christ. Together we are the body of Christ—the hope of the world. What are you doing to connect with others and find your place in the body of Christ?