

Caring and Connected: Fellowship

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[0 : 00] it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. 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.

If they were all one part where would the body be? As it is there are many parts but one body. 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.

On the contrary those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour and the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty while our presentable parts need no special treatment.

But God has put the body together giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it so that there should be no division in the body but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

[1 : 11] If one part suffers every part suffers with it. If one part is honoured every part rejoices with it. Thank you Lynn.

If I could ask Emily if she's ready to come up. Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip his people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature.

Father, we pray for Emily as she speaks to us now that we would hear what you have for us and accept the challenge that you bring through her. Amen.

Amen. So we are the church. When Tim asked me if I would speak about, in a series about the values and characteristics of the church, I thought that is right up my street.

Before I retrained a couple of years ago, I used to work as a brand manager in marketing. I don't know if many of you will know what a brand manager is. You might think logos, slogans, maybe a colour palette.

[2 : 29] But branding, I always used to say, is really about the story you tell about your organisation. And actually telling a story about your organisation, which is what we're trying to do about the church of this series, tell a story about the church, is actually the easy part.

The hard part is controlling other people's perceptions. So you might be trying to communicate one thing, but someone could hear or see something quite different.

As you can see in this Starbucks van, what they want to communicate is not what people see. There were lots of church examples of branding gone wrong, and I didn't feel, actually having looked at them, I could share any of them.

So I wonder what you felt when you saw the topic for today, we are a caring and connected church. Maybe that is your experience of church life.

Maybe that's something you believe we are good at. Maybe not so much. Maybe that doesn't reflect your experience. So I think it's also important that we reflect on that question.

[3 : 37] Are we a caring and connected church? Is it true of us? So we're going to look at why it's important to be caring and connected.

And the focus today is on doing that within our church community. It's obviously very important to be caring and connected to people outside church community.

And Simon preached an excellent sermon on that a couple of weeks ago, which you can listen to online. But my focus today is on being caring and connected to other Christians within a church context.

And the word that we use to describe that is fellowship. We first see it used here in Acts 2. I didn't read this passage out again because we've been looking at it through this series, and I'm sure you're familiar with it.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. When I was looking at that word fellowship, I wondered if it was one of those kind of Christianese words, one of those words that we use in church, but nowhere else in general life.

[4 : 48] Actually, it was a common word. It means the same in the Greek as in the English. It's talking about people who share a common interest, people who have something in common.

And it was used widely in a secular context. It feels a bit old-fashioned now. It was originally used to describe people with a common interest, often a work interest, so maybe a guild or an association.

So I think that brings us to the question, what is it a fellowship of? This is what I thought when I hear the word fellowship.

So is it a fellowship of staffs or second breakfast? Do I need to grow a beard to belong to it? Or something else? What makes fellowship in a Christian community so distinctive?

I think we find the answer in that passage that Sam read to us earlier in 1 John 1. Because Paul uses, sorry, not Paul, John, uses the exact same word fellowship in this letter.

[5 : 58] But this time he's referring to the fellowship that we have, that is between us and God. Our fellowship is with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ.

Later, John writes that we are welcomed into fellowship with God because Christ's death enables us to walk in the light. If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.

The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. So fellowship is not a social club. We are not drawn together by a love of gardening or of filter coffee.

Our fellowship is made possible by the blood of Christ shed for all of us. Fellowship isn't about being good people who do good things. Fellowship is the result of what Christ has done for us.

And therefore, I'm going to make this my first point. Fellowship is inherited from God our Father. In Ephesians, Paul writes that we are adopted into a family, made brothers and sisters together because we are in Christ, because we are adopted by the Father through his Son.

[7 : 13] This family of God creates unity and inclusivity. I think this can feel confusing when we have a church with a membership structure and presumably membership criteria.

But that's not about becoming part of the fellowship. To be part of our fellowship, you should just have to accept Christ as your saviour. You choose walking in light over walking in darkness.

And so I think it's important that we first remember that we don't get to decide who is included. Only God decides that. I once heard Malcolm Duncan at Spring Harvest put it like this.

If God calls them sons and daughters, who am I not to call them my brothers and sisters? Leron, my friend Leron, couldn't make it today, but I asked him if I could have his permission to share with you how much I like it that he doesn't call me Emily.

He calls me sister or dear sister. And I particularly like it from Leron because outside the church community, no one would mistake us for brother and sister.

[8 : 23] We have different ethnicities. We speak different first languages. But Leron knows that we are brother and sister not because of anything we are or anything we have done, but because of what Christ has done for us.

So the idea of fellowship as inheritance, that we are adopted into a family, also I think tells us that fellowship is important. It is important because our adoption was costly to God.

We also know it's important because God is in fellowship with himself through the Trinity, as we sang a bit earlier. God created us to be in relationship with each other because that is what God is like, and we are made in his image.

It's a simple theological concept, but I'm really blown away by it. I think it means when we're in the church lounge later and you ask someone how their week was and you kindly and attentively listen to the answer, you are reflecting this relationship.

Yes, you are probably doing it imperfectly, but in a small way you are being Christ to that person. Wow. And I think it lifts fellowship from something that can feel mundane at times to something that is sacred.

[9 : 43] In Acts 2, we learn that the early believers broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. Church life took place around mealtimes.

I wonder if as church became more institutionalized and moved away from congregational gatherings in homes and workplaces to church buildings, the acts of fellowship became separated from church services.

So teaching, worship and prayer happen up here in the sanctuary and fellowship happens downstairs in the church hall. After COVID, I don't know if you remember, but we conducted a survey about what you missed about church life.

The good news is you missed many things. But mentioned most frequently were church lunch, tea and coffee, opportunities to chat, meet up socially.

One of the common things that you valued about this church was it felt like a family. Why didn't more people mention sermons in that survey?

[10 : 53] What do you think? Was it because we lost our spiritual discipline in COVID that we lost our capacity to sit still and listen? No, I don't think so.

I don't think that was what God was saying. I wonder if at a time when we were separated from our opportunity to be relational, separate from the chance to mirror the characteristics we inherit from our Heavenly Father, we learned to value church fellowship, not as an optional extra of church life, but for its own sake.

After all, in Acts 2, fellowship is given top billing. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, breaking of bread, and to prayer.

Four things, and fellowship is one of them. There are lots of things that don't make it into that list. So maybe it's time to heed that. Maybe it's time to call fellowship back from the church halls to where it has been exiled, and make it central to what we do when we meet together.

The idea of fellowship as a family is also important because it gives equal value to all of us as brothers and sisters. And Paul explores this in his brilliant use of the body metaphor in 1 Corinthians.

[12 : 14] I think it's important to emphasize equality because where there is need in a community, power imbalance can come in. We want to care for each other and be compassionate to each other.

But we always have to be aware that that doesn't create an imbalance between those who care and those who are cared for, those who give compassion and those who receive it.

This isn't the biblical model. The fellowship of believers was about mutuality. They gave to anyone as he had need. Receiving was as valuable act as giving.

When I first moved to London, which I think is about 15 years ago at least, I really enjoyed the competitive sport that was getting on a London Underground train in rush hour.

Absolutely loved it. I loved the freedom. I loved that it was each man for himself. Don't offer help and you don't accept it. Just barge everyone out of the way. And bear in mind that I'd come from a small town near the Yorkshire Dales where there was one but an hour and someone on it knew your mum.

[13 : 22] And then five years ago, as many of you know, I had a really big operation on my leg and this really slowed me down.

It changed my perception of travelling on public transport. I remember once I was going for a doctor's appointment in North London. I was standing on the tube station on my crutches and the tube came in and there was one of those really big mind to the gap gaps to get on the train.

And someone asked if they could help me and I had to say yes because I was really stuck. And I think Rob got me under one arm and this person got me under the other and they lifted me across the gap onto the train.

I learnt a lot about myself during that year. I learnt about my vulnerability but I also learnt about God's love for me and my need for other people.

We were created to be interdependent. We were created to be part of a community. As a result of that experience, I go slowly now. I miss trains frequently.

[14 : 30] I look around me and I offer to help. In Paul's description of the body of Christ, he takes pains to ensure we understand the equality of the parts but also to recognise that treating people equally doesn't always mean treating them the same.

He understands that although we might say that all parts have equal value, our actions may reveal that we feel otherwise. I feel Paul is saying, be aware of your bias, both unconscious and conscious and understand that you might treat people differently and make compensation for it.

In verse 23, he says, the parts that we think are less honourable, we treat with special honour. In contrast, people who are perceived as important need no special treatment.

All parts are equal, but that doesn't mean treating all parts the same. It means treating them in the way we must in order to achieve equality.

Fellowship is made possible by the Holy Spirit. It is not a coincidence that the first mention of fellowship in the Bible comes immediately after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost at the beginning of Acts 2.

[15 : 45] Because it is the Holy Spirit inspires the first believers to acts of generosity. Paul says the Holy Spirit brings unity. We are baptised by one spirit into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and we are all given one spirit to drink.

We need the Holy Spirit because we can only have unity if we are willing to live in fellowship with those we don't always get along with. I don't think we can do that without God's help.

Without the Holy Spirit, trying to love people you don't like is at best superficial. Worst, it can be patronising or hypocritical. Sorry, that was my joke for later.

And you didn't see it. Watchman Nee writes so well about this in his excellent book on Ephesians, Sit, Walk, Stand. I wish I could read it all to you.

He says, when we struggle at church with people we don't like, we make the mistake of praying for more love. So the focus is on something outside ourselves. This is what he writes.

[16 : 55] You are wrong in seeking love as something in itself, a kind of packaged commodity. And what God desires is to express through you the love of his Son.

God has given us Christ. There is nothing now for us to receive outside of him. The Holy Spirit has been sent to produce what is of Christ in us, not to produce anything that is apart from or outside of him.

So the Beatles were wrong. All you need isn't love. All you need is Christ. Christ is all you need. And then you will love in transformative ways.

Maybe love isn't a thing. It's not something we possess or seek or even fall into. Love is something we do. It is an outworking of the indwelling Spirit of God.

When we talk to the youth about this before, we've said, would you prefer to drink out of a stream or a pond? Holding on to love makes us stagnant.

[18 : 01] To allow love to flow through us gives us life. To love others in fellowship, then, we must allow the Spirit to transform us, to be more like Christ.

As usual, I think Paul says this the best in Ephesians 3, verse 16. I pray that out of his glorious riches, he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.

And the love that is produced from this change isn't commodity love, superficial, easily lost, and unsatisfying. The love that is produced from the work of the Spirit is deep-rooted, resilient, and enduring.

I think there's also something very kind here. We don't need to struggle. Let's start by accepting how much God loves us, for God loved us first.

Without that, we have no foundation for loving others. Once we are filled up, we can give out. My final point. Fellowship is evidenced by action.

[19 : 07] For the early church, fellowship was demonstrated by action. Is it just me who's frustrated how brief that little bit in Acts 2 is?

I think I would quite like a case study or a blueprint in how to grow a successful church, but we barely get 100 words. It's called the book of Acts for a reason.

There is lots of doing. Notice the verbs. Selling, giving, meeting, breaking bread. I was taught at school that a verb was an action word.

Anyone else taught that? My girls say that that's not the case anymore. That's wrong. But there are a lot of actions in this passage. Now, I'm not trying to say here that we should do kind actions for the sake of them.

It's not hashtag random acts of kindness that play well on TikTok, that are not a considered response to another person's need. The early church gave to anyone as he had need, and to do that, you need to understand what those needs are.

[20 : 14] You do that by listening, by empathising, by making space for another person to share. And sometimes this is the bit that I find really hard to do, holding back on your own story in order to give someone else's story priority.

I'm not going to tell you how to do that because I believe that so many of you do it so much better than I do. But I think the practical working out of fellowship is important because it bears witness to the in-working.

Do people practically help each other outside church communities? Yes, they do. So I'm going to stick my head out here and say I think people do it more within church communities.

And that's because we're moved by the Holy Spirit to act. Over the many years since I arrived at this church with a newborn baby and a toddler in tow, you have shown your love to me practically.

You have done it through meals, at church lunch and messy church, through tea and cake, at mum's Bible study and knit and natter. You have shared your homes, your tables and your possessions with me.

[21 : 27] And I greatly value those actions. A couple of years ago, after we joined this church, we were moving from our old flat in one part of Fern Hill to a house, a house in another.

It was an expensive quarter of a mile and we had emptied our bank accounts. And two days before moving, our Hoover broke and I couldn't afford to replace it.

I was thinking, I think I was probably moaning to my home group about this and they were kindly and patiently listening to me. And someone from my home group offered to come and help with the move.

And when she arrived, she'd bought me a brand new Hoover. It was evidence to me that she had heard me and cared about what I needed.

And she was willing to meet that need at a cost to herself. It was so much more than just a Hoover. Every time I Hoover my house, which I don't do as much as I should, I think of that act of kindness.

[22 : 32] But this isn't a story about buying things. We can't always afford to do that. It's about practical responses to the needs of others. A lift in a car, a cup of tea, a hug.

Actions provide evidence that we are doing this well. They provide evidence that we are filled with the spirit. So if we return to that question, are we a caring and connected church?

I hope that many of you will find evidence that we are. There's always more to do, but let's value fellowship, our precious inheritance from our father.

Just as the early church valued it, let's commit to doing it. And the good news is that doesn't mean we need to get better at small talk or remembering people's names.

We need to ask for more of God's spirit, that we might have more of his love. Thank you, Emily.

[23 : 40] Let's stand and sing this old hymn. Brother, sister. Thanks, man. Yes, you've got to add insight of the received amazing of God.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I've found you in the United States that has a great example with Wasis. You've chosen a great way of your intention to manage the Covid ■■■■■■■■ so that Swish or something can be brought in home and then take a while and turn it forward