Fellowship I

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[0:00] I don't know if you've noticed, but this summer the sermons have been focused on a single! theme about the nature and purpose of the local church based on one verse in the Bible.

and that verse is Acts chapter 2 verse 42. And it reads like this, By the end of the summer, you will have memorized this verse because you will have heard it so many times. And it's a verse chosen by Bishop Bena. Now he's not here today, but the theme for the Sunday messages will continue as he picked them, even in his absence. Bishop Dave will be back with us next week, but this morning he's in New Jersey and he's visiting one of our Cana East parishes there on one of his official bishop's visits. In fact, he's going to be preaching on the exact same thing that we will talk about here today. Last Sunday when we were at Green Lakes State Park for our worship service and our picnic, he spoke on the first of the four clauses that came out of that scripture, Acts 2 42. And he taught us about how they, quote, devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. If you miss the sermon, or for that matter, if you miss any of Bishop Dave's sermons on the summer theme, you can listen to them on the website or you can download them off our website.
But today we'll move on to the second part of that Acts 2 42, and we'll talk about how they devoted themselves to the fellowship. Now that topic is the centerpiece of today's epistle reading. So if you've got your Bible, you might open it to today's epistle. It's Hebrews chapter 10 verses 19 through 31, which I've got here.
Now right in the middle of that chapter, there's a paragraph before it and a paragraph after it. Keep in mind in the Greek, there's no paragraphs. It's all one thing. But right in the middle of that, there are the following words that they devote.
That's verses 24 and 25 in that epistle reading.
[2:49] And so today, this excerpt from the epistle relates to the summer theme of Acts 2 42. We're talking about the fellowship, and out of Hebrews it says, not neglecting to meet to one another with one another, as is the habit of some.

So I'm going to have three questions that I'm going to ask about this scripture. How do we meet together for this fellowship? And I'm going to talk about the epistle reading almost exclusively. Quite simply, and it's kind of obvious to everybody, we meet here on Sunday mornings in church. We come together for Sunday morning worship. The Sunday morning worship is really critical for us. It's not supposed to be one of our many weekly activities, which we have.
God is not interested in our treating him and meeting with him on Sunday mornings in his name, just like other things that we sort of schedule into our lives. We as Christians meet in a lot of other ways, too. We've got small groups, or we call one another over the phone during the week, or we bump into one another at church events, if we go to the ball game or something like that, or at the mall. But the principal way we meet with one another is here on Sunday mornings in this place.
Now, if you're like me, you probably have, I got a lot of hobbies, as most of us do. I've got my work in the office that takes a lot of my time. I've got my involvement with Syracuse Astronomical Society, my photography, I ski in the winter, I kayak in the summer, and a lot of other stuff that I do.
Your list is different than mine, but it doesn't matter. The point is, we all have many activities which keep us incredibly busy, sometimes overly busy. But to meet together is not just another of our activities to be squeezed in with these things. This meeting on Sunday morning needs to be far more than one of our many activities. It needs to be more than a priority of our activities.
It must be the priority. It must be the core of our lives, since it is an important part of our relationship with God. Keep in mind that scripture that Benna picked for us, they were devoted, devoted to the fellowship. Not that they participated in it or did it here and there, they were devoted to it. If your relationship with Jesus is not at the core of your life, but just another one of your many interests and involvements, that's a serious problem.
[5:43] In the Old Testament, God describes himself as a jealous God. That does not mean that he had human jealousy like we have, like being jealous of the guy next door who has a nicer car

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than yours.

That's human jealousy. That's sin, but I'm not going to talk about that today. The jealous God of the Old Testament is the idea in scripture that this God is saying that he must be at the center of our affections, not just another hobby or activity or something else that we happen to do on Sunday morning to be fitted in with others, even a high priority. He is the supreme priority.
Ask yourself this, is my casual attitude toward attending church a sign of my casual attitude toward God?
It could be. This is not to suggest that if you make it a point to be in church each and every Sunday, that you're a solid Christian. And by doing that, you've done the right thing by God.
You may be, or you may not be. Going to church in and of itself, even if you attend every Sunday of your life, does not make you a Christian. Just because something is parked in your garage, doesn't make it a car. But one who is faithful to Christ makes his fellowship to include in the constant manner of, quote, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, as it says in our epistle.
[7:28] The writer of Hebrews in verse 25 knew that some people would be in the habit of blowing off their duty to meet together, and he warned against it.

So question number two, why do we meet together? The beginning of this passage in verse 24, if you look at it, says that the reason is to, quote, stir up one another to love and good works.
And then in verse 25, right after that warning thing that he gives, he says it's for encouraging one another. In other words, there is, or at least should be, something in our time here on Sunday morning, which is interactive.
We don't show up just to kind of do a one-on-one with God and then bug out. It involves more than one person. We need it because God uses this time for him to work things in me through you, and in you through me.
If you don't meet, it's pretty tough to encourage somebody. You can do it over the phone, or you can do it on a Facebook post, but even the most techie person in the world needs the one-on-one face, eye-to-eye contact in order to meet with other Christians.
[8:51] There's just no substitute for this meeting that we do here on Sunday mornings. Last night, my Uncle Vinny and I, who many of you know, he was at the picnic last week, delightful guy, went out to the Holiday Inn out at Electronics Parkway, where the street rods, all the street rod guys, that's the primary meeting place for them outside of the state fair.

So if you don't want to pay eight or ten bucks or whatever it is for admission like me, you go to the Holiday Inn and you see them there in the parking lot. There must have been 300 cars with all the people there standing around and talking about it.
And they're fantastically painted and equipped, and they're in town this weekend for their street rod show. Once a year it happens. And as we walked around the hotel parking lot, looking at all the cars and taking pictures of them, I spent a little bit of time looking at some of the people and talking to them.
They sat in their chairs and they were sharing with one another all the things about their car hobby. I spoke to one guy who had a 1937 Plymouth.
I took some nice shots of his, which I put on my Facebook page, which is a pretty souped-up car. And had I given him the chance, I bet he would have kept burning my ear for a half an hour telling me of all the stuff about his car and how he restored it and where he found it and the features that he added to the stock model.
[10:22] He was really, really psyched on that thing. We have got to be that engaged in talking to one another about our faith in Jesus, which we have.

Think of the enthusiasm of the car junkies polishing the finish on their street rods for the umpteenth time to make sure that those of us looking at those cars see them in the absolutely perfect best light.
That's precisely how we need to present our faith to one another. Getting together here in this building is not a ritual or a custom which we do before the rest of the day when we do a bunch of other stuff on Sunday because we don't have to work on Sunday.
It's time to share and celebrate the very distinctive reason why we are here. We should be devoted, as it says in Acts, to this fellowship.
Verses 19 to 24 in Hebrews 10 gives us a good example of what we do when we meet here for this fellowship. It's not just to hang out and have coffee afterwards.

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[11:32] It's for specifically focused things. Hebrews gives us a list. Verse 19 and 20 says, This is a reference to the Jewish Christians in the temple.

This was written right around the time when the temple was destroyed. We don't know quite if it was just before or just after, but it was probably within a year or two when the temple was destroyed by the Romans. And we do the same thing that these early Christians did except we do this through entering our church with the blood of Jesus.
And we celebrate with one another how Jesus gave us salvation. Our salvation through commitment to Jesus is a thing which you and I do as individuals.
You've got to do that. You've got to make that commitment one-on-one with Him. And yet, for some reason, the epistle writer says, we celebrate that together, not just one-on-one.
The reason our prayer book, by the way, I don't know how many folks know this, is called the Book of Common Prayer, is because we do this in common with others. It's kind of an old English expression.
[12:52] But that's why it's called the Book of Common Prayer, because it's a corporate thing. The scripture reminds us that we do not do what we do as solo worshipers, but in common with one another to encourage one another.

I want you to look at verses 19 through 23. And I'm going to read a little piece of this. I'm going to emphasize one word every so often.
Just follow with me. Verse 19, Hebrews 10. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.
Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. Now, I emphasize the pronouns.
Nine times, there's not a single I or me. It's we, us, our. I come to faith in Jesus Christ.
[14:30] You come to faith in Jesus Christ. But we do not work out our faith alone. I don't do it. You don't do it. We do it together.

Question number three. What's the consequence of pulling away from and not engaging in the fellowship of believers?
This is a hard part for me to say. It's very curious that the writer of Hebrews says something a little scary immediately after verse 25 when he warns about not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some.
I'm going to read you 26 through 31. You might follow it. For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.
Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be delivered by one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified and has outraged the Spirit of grace?
[16:03] For we know him who said, Vengeance is mine, I will repay. And again, the Lord will judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Now, this is not a warning for non-Christians. It is a warning for those of us who are believers, for those of us who are Christians. Is it too strong to say that this incredibly tough warning is for those Christians who pull away from the fellowship and decide they can do it on their own?
The epistle writer places these incredibly hard words in the Scripture immediately after the words that we not be neglecting to meet one another together, as is the habit of some.
Why did he do that? If you meet in fellowship here, but you skip some Sunday, are you losing your salvation? Well, clearly not.
The answer is no. But there's certainly a very, very strong admonition for us to meet in the fellowship of believers because we need it to build one another up.
[17:24] Some Christians will neglect to meet or be rather casual about their habit to do that. They will meet if they don't have something better to do.

Don't be part of that. Make your meeting for this fellowship your top priority in your week. There's a terrible warning about falling away.

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This stuff is in this book and I got to assume it wasn't kind of stuffed together by random. It was done by God's Holy Spirit. I didn't dream this stuff up.
It's there. Our job is to follow it and to do it with one another. We really want it to be said of those of us here at Holy Trinity that to use Bishop Benna's verse and they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the fellowship and the breaking of the bread and prayers.
One last thing. Before you leave today you'll probably hang out at the coffee hour. I love the coffee hour. And you're going to schmooze with one another.
[18:43] Do one thing different today if you've not previously done it. I'm shooting at myself as much as anybody here by the way. I want to tell you that.

Encourage somebody else in their faith or ask them about their walk with Jesus, how it's going. Or share your faith with somebody else.
Do it with the same fire and interest that that guy who was yakking with me about his 1937 Plymouth was so excited about his street ride.
If we do that, we're not just going to church, but rather we are, as Acts 2.42 says, we are devoted to the fellowship.
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