

Why Church?

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[0 : 00] Father, it is such a joy for us to be able to say those words in the creed.

It is such a joy that we can say that we believe in God our Father, that we can believe in God the Son, that we can believe in God the Holy Spirit.

And it's because we believe in you, because we trust you, that we come so boldly now, and we ask that you would, by your Holy Spirit, be very active among us.

Will you open our minds? Will you open our hearts? Will you grant us to see you clearly? And will you grant us to know something of the joy that you want for us in loving each other?

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. You can go ahead and sit down. A few years ago, Amber and I, my wife and I, took a trip to Malawi.

[1 : 07] It's in kind of central southern Africa. And we were there representing St. John's and looking for ways that St. John's could be helpful to the church there and ways in which they could support us and be helpful to us here.

And, you know, it's a long flight to Africa. Like, it's just a really long flight. So the first couple days, we were just, you know, foggy. We didn't know really what was going on.

And the third day that we were there, we really didn't do anything the first two days. The third day that we were there, we knew that we were supposed to travel up several hours north to a little village called Malindi.

Now, we had never heard of Malindi. Didn't know where it was. But we weren't that concerned because for the first two days we were in Malawi, everywhere we went, somebody showed us the way.

Somebody was with us the entire time. So we woke up on the third morning and we figured it was just going to be the same. We were going to wake up. Somebody was going to come over, grab us, throw us in a car and head up north.

[2 : 20] But that didn't happen. And we woke up and nobody was around. And we went to a couple of the other houses in the area where, you know, there had been people who had shown us around that we knew and nobody was there.

And so we were kind of thinking, I wonder how we're going to get up there. I mean, well, we'll just wait. You know, somebody will come and surely somebody will come. And finally, somewhere around noon, we found somebody who from the diocese, from the church.

And the guy told us that he goes, he goes, you know, you really should have left a long time ago to get to that village.

We thought, oh, really? And it ended up that there wasn't anybody to show us the way. The guy threw us the keys to the four by four, the diocese four by four, and, you know, said good luck.

And so all of a sudden, you know, in about an hour's worth of time, Amber and I found ourselves driving a four by four. I'm driving on the wrong side of the road, you know, because they drive on the wrong side of the road there.

[3 : 25] First time I've ever done that. Amber's with a map trying to figure out where Melinda is. And we're driving through the African bush, which would have been a lot of fun, except that we didn't have a clue where we were going.

Have you ever seen the movie, or the movie, the show The Amazing Race? Have you ever seen that show? You know how in every episode, this happens every episode, you've got a couple that are getting along really well, and then they get lost.

You know what I'm talking about. It happens every time. They get lost. They get stressed. And then the wheels come off. I mean, it's just, you know. So, you know, I'm dodging goats and chickens and mostly dodging them.

Anyways, you know, going on little dirt roads, going over rickety bridges that I'm sure were going to collapse. Now, I look back at it now, and, you know, I would love to take an adventure in, you know, the African outback or bush or whatever.

But at the time, it was really, really stressful. And the reason it was stressful is because we were missing two bits of information. Very important two bits of information.

[4 : 35] We were missing, on the one hand, we didn't know where we were going. We didn't know our destination. On the other hand, we didn't even know in any respect how to get there, what the route should be to get there.

And so we were just making it up as we went. We eventually got there. It's kind of a fun story. I'll tell you some other time. Tonight, we are looking at Romans chapter 15, which is a funny way to start the book of Romans.

Generally, you start, you know, in the beginning. We're starting almost at the end, but there's a good reason why we're doing that. Romans chapter 15 gives us two very important pieces of information.

Romans chapter 15 tells us something about where God wants us to go as a church. Tells us something of the destination that God desires for us at St. John's.

And the second thing it tells us is something of the route that we need to take in order to get there. And tonight, as we start the fall and as we start the series of Romans, it's helpful for us to look at where we need to get to before we start the path.

[5 : 51] So that's what we're going to do. OK, we're going to look at two things. One, where does God want to take us to? How do we get there? First of all, where does God want to take us? Look at Romans chapter 15, verse 7.

Go right to the bottom. Last line. Paul writes, therefore, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God.

Now, I want you to look at that verse right there. Paul has an amazing ability to say a lot of deep things with a very few number of words. It's part of why he's sometimes confusing.

If we get this verse, welcome one another as God in Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God. If we get this, it would transform our church.

And our church would be a catalyst for the transformation of untold numbers here in Vancouver. Verse 7 is where God wants to take us.

[6 : 57] Now, let me give you a little bit of background. Paul's writing to the church in Rome. And the church, the Christians in Rome, they hadn't been getting along very well with each other.

There were two factions, so far as we can tell. There were the Gentile Christians, and then there were the Jewish Christians. And they were really irritating each other. The Jewish Christians were really offended by the Gentiles because the Jewish Christians were thinking that in order to be a good Christian, you needed to be a good Jew.

So you need to follow all the Jewish customs and things like that. The Gentile Christians found that just really irritating. You know, they didn't want to do that for all sorts of reasons, and they didn't feel like they had to.

They wanted to remain Gentile Christians, and they felt that in Christ there's no reason why they should follow the Jewish customs. Now, this tension, though, in the church between these two ethnic groups started increasingly separating them so that they stopped welcoming each other as Christ had welcomed them.

Instead of welcoming each other, they increasingly separated from each other. And so in this section of Romans, the main thing Paul is doing is he's looking at these two groups and he's saying, guys, you've got to cut it out.

[8 : 19] Just, you know, stop. And the reason you need to cut it out is that, listen, Jesus welcomed you when you were, you know, not very easy to be welcomed, right?

Jesus welcomed you when you were kind of a jerk. And if Jesus welcomed you, then you have to be able to welcome one another.

And here's the kicker. Paul's saying if you don't welcome one another, you are denying what Christ did on the cross.

If you do not welcome one another, if you do not bear with each other, if you do not learn how to love each other, even when you irritate each other, what you're doing is you're implicitly saying you're rejecting what Jesus did.

Now, this is just a huge deal for the Apostle Paul. I don't know if it sounds like a big deal to us, but it is a massive deal to the Apostle Paul, and it needs to be a big deal for us.

[9 : 30] If you look at the New Testament in general, kind of wide angle, one of the, it's very clear that one of the signs that the gospel works is when Christians welcome each other and love each other, even when there's good reasons for them not to.

According to the New Testament, you can see this in John, you can see this in 1 John, you can see this all through Paul. One of the best advertisements for the truth of the gospel, one of the best evidences that Jesus Christ really is on the throne of the universe is when his people start relating to each other the way he has related to them.

And so Paul looks at the church at Rome and he says, church in Rome, Christians in Rome, you're about ready to lose everything. If you do not learn how to love each other, you will lose everything. Now, God wants churches that love each other. That's what he wants for us. God likes churches that have learned to welcome each other and love each other in a deep and profound way.

And that's where the Lord wants to take this church. So what we need to do now is think a little bit about, think a little bit more deeply. What does it mean for us to really become a church that knows how to welcome one another?

[10 : 59] In this passage, it will mean there's three things that Paul mentions or at least implies. First of all, if we are to be a church that really welcomes one another, we will be proactive.

The second thing is we will be sacrificial. And the third thing is we'll be worshipful. Let me show you what I mean. First of all, proactive.

If we're going to be a church that really knows how to welcome each other, we're going to be proactive. Look at verse 2. Paul writes, Let each of us please his neighbor for his good to build him up.

Now, I want you to notice the direction of that verse. Do you notice it's not inward? It's not about me. The direction is outward. It's about somebody else.

It's about others. Now, it would have been easy in the church in Rome. For the Jewish faction and the Gentile faction to look at each other and say, Okay, okay, Paul.

[12 : 08] You know what we'll do? We'll compromise. We don't really like each other. But we'll tolerate each other. You know, we won't do anything really bad to each other.

We'll just kind of put up with each other. Paul says, No, man, that's not going to cut it. That's not going to cut it. You need to look out for ways to please the other person.

According to Paul, in this passage, it is not enough for a church to merely tolerate each other. See, when you tolerate somebody, there's a lot of situations where tolerance is exactly the right thing. But what we do when we tolerate somebody is we step back from them in order to avoid conflict. We create a certain social distance between ourselves and the person that we are tolerating in order to avoid conflict.

And what Paul is saying here is he's saying, No, it's got to be the opposite. If we welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us, it's not that we step back. It's that we need to proactively step closer to the other person.

[13 : 18] We need to step closer to the other person in order to build them up, in order to encourage them, in order to do things in such a way that they begin following Jesus with greater strength and courage than they ever have before.

That's what Paul wants us to do. One of the ways to think of it is that Paul wants us to be creative. Paul wants us to be proactive and creative with how we can help each other follow Jesus.

Now, one of the things that's, I mean, this is really obvious, but one of the things that that means is that we need to know each other. One of the things that has just been a joy for me as I've been here at St. John's has been to watch, just exactly what Lizzie was talking about, watch people from the evening service come into home groups.

And, you know, maybe they've been around the church for years, but they didn't really know anybody. And then they come into home groups, and there, as they proactively grow closer to other Christians, you see their stature in Christ just go through the roof.

They just grow immensely as they grow closer to one another. Now, if we are to be a church that welcomes one another, it's going to mean we take responsibility to proactively pursue relationships with each other.

[14 : 55] So it's proactive. Secondly, it's sacrificial. Look at verse 1. We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

And skip down to verse 3. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, the reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me. Now, think about the church at Rome again.

It would have been easy for the two factions, you know, they say, okay, okay, okay, fine, Paul. We won't just tolerate each other. We'll proactively get to know each other. But I tell you, the minute I get hurt, I'm out.

I mean, that would have been an easy thing for the Christians to do. And again, Paul says, no, that's not going to cut it. If we are to be a church that really welcomes each other, it's going to be we step forward proactively into relationship with each other to the point of sacrifice.

[16 : 11] I'm pretty sure I've told you the story of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna. Have I told you that story? I think I have. But anyways, I'll tell it again because I like it.

Polycarp, and it's a fun name to say, but Polycarp was the Bishop of Smyrna, which is in modern day Turkey. And he was in the generation just after the apostles.

So we're almost certain that he knew the apostle John and was discipled by the apostle John. And he headed up the church in Smyrna. And when he was 80 years old, there was a knock on his door. He opened the door and there were a bunch of Roman soldiers standing there and they were there to arrest him. And do you know what he did?

I find this extraordinary. He invited them in. He had them sit down at his kitchen table. He made sure that they were fed dinner.

[17 : 09] And when they were all fed and full and satisfied, they all got up, walked out, they arrested him. And a couple days later, they burned him alive.

Now, he knew that they were there to arrest him. And he knew that they would probably kill him.

But he also knew something else. He knew that Jesus Christ, his Lord and his Savior, had welcomed him, Polycarp, so many years before when his Lord died upon the cross for him.

And Polycarp had a crystal clear understanding that if Jesus had welcomed him with such sacrifice, that that meant he was under obligation, but a kind of joyful obligation.

He was under an obligation to extend that kind of welcome and hospitality even to his enemies.

Now, that's a pretty extreme example.

[18 : 15] I don't think welcoming one another is going to kill us. But I promise you, it will wound you. I promise you, it will wound you.

We need to be realistic about this, friends. You cannot truly welcome one another within the church without eventually being hurt. And I know there's a lot of people here who have been hurt by the church.

And I know there's a lot of people here who have been hurt by this church. And Jesus wants to heal those wounds. Jesus wants to restore you. And at the same time, and hear me say this gently, at the same time, Jesus is inviting you to follow him again, to take up your cross again, to continue to engage other people, to continue down the road of sacrificial love towards other people.

Yeah, you're going to get hurt. And Jesus is calling you to love people who will hurt you. And in a remarkable way, this is part of the way that we become like Jesus.

Do you know that? You know that you've never really learned to love like Jesus until you've learned to love people who hurt you. Because Jesus loves people that hurt him. Okay.

[19 : 44] Welcoming one another like Jesus welcomes us means that we're proactive. It means we're sacrificial. It also means we're worshipful. And this is amazing. This kind of blows my mind. Look at verse 5.

5 and 6. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another in accordance with Christ Jesus. And watch this word.

Verse 6. In order that, or for the purpose being, that together you would with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, do you see the word that in verse 6?

I'm not trying to be pedantic, but the word that, it's a really important word. It's a word that has to do with purpose. Do you see how in 5 and 6, the purpose of our life together is worship?

The purpose of welcoming one another, the thing we're really after when we learn to welcome one another, is to release us to be able to worship God in a way that brings them greater glory.

[20 : 54] Now, there's something mysterious here and I don't completely understand it, but somehow, as we, as Christians, learn to love one another in a more, in a deeper and more

significant and sacrificial and proactive way, our capacity to worship increases.

Our capacity to glorify God, to see His beauty and His wonder and His majesty and His power and His goodness, it just increases.

And as we see God more clearly, our capacity for joy increases. Do you want joy? Joy in the Christian life is all about worship.

Do you want to learn how to worship? Somehow, worship is tied up with loving one another. I mean, this is where just the joy of loving each other comes.

As we love one another, we see Jesus more clearly and that's what we're on about. That's what we want. Okay. This is where God wants to take us.

[22 : 01] God wants to take us to be a people who welcome one another just like Jesus has welcomed us. And that means we're proactive in our relationships, we're sacrificial in our relationships, but ultimately, we're on about worship.

Okay. That's where He wants to take us. How are we going to get there? Three questions. There are three things out of this verse, these verses. The path to getting to becoming a welcoming people.

There's three things. One, we're going to be focused on Jesus. Two, we're going to look at Jesus in the Word. And thirdly, we're going to ask God to change us through prayer. First of all, we focus on Jesus.

the dumbest thing to do to try and become a welcoming people, it's not a very articulate word, sentence there, but nevertheless, the dumbest thing you can do is just try hard.

Have you ever tried to love somebody that's not very lovely? I mean, you can kind of fake it, but you know it doesn't work. the only way to become a people who truly love others like Jesus wants us to is to focus on Jesus.

[23 : 22] Because you will never be able to welcome others until you yourself have been welcomed by Jesus. It's when you look at Jesus and you realize that it was precisely when you were weak and when you were ungodly, when you were rebellious, when you were his enemy, Jesus came to you and on the cross with open arms, he welcomed you, just like Polycarp welcomed that soldier.

You see, when you see how Jesus welcomed you so sacrificially, it changes something. Like, it rewires our hearts. It changes us so that all of a sudden there's love.

Love is deposited within our hearts in a way that it wasn't there before. And as we look at Jesus, our hearts are filled with love that doesn't belong to us and we're able to give that love away to people who don't deserve it.

So focus on Jesus. The second thing is you look at Jesus through the scriptures. Look at verse 4. For whatever was written in former days has been written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of scriptures we may have hope.

Now, what Paul's saying there is he's referring to the Old Testament and he's talking about how the Old Testament displays Jesus. And the purpose of scripture and the reason why scripture always has to be center, just absolutely at the center of our community, is that it's as we continually look at Jesus in the scriptures that we learn to endure and we're encouraged.

[25 : 04] finished. I don't know if you've ever gone a few days, I don't know if you've ever been really, really hungry. I'm sure you have.

One time, when I was 19, I did a really dumb thing. I spent four days in the wilderness without food. Don't ever do that.

I mean, that is just dumb. But I did it. It was kind of like a becoming a man thing or something. Anyways, it's very 19-ish. Anyways, so one of the things I realized is that the longer I went without food, the less physical endurance I had, but also emotionally, I just wiggled out.

I had, there was no comfort, okay? It wasn't just that I was hungry, it was psychologically and emotionally, I went haywire. And I was just, I mean, I was emotionally distraught the whole time.

I don't completely understand the physiology of it, but there's something similar happens to the Christian when you don't look at scripture a lot. Alternatively, when we feast upon Christ in his word, we're continually encouraged and our ability to, our endurance increases and we're filled with strength so that we can continually, authentically love other people.

[26 : 28] people. So the first thing is we look at scripture. Second thing is, we look at, or the first thing is we look at Jesus. We look at him in the scripture. And the third thing is we pray.

You look at verse five, Paul breaks into prayer there. And the reason he breaks into prayer is because he knows that there's no way that Rome, the church at Rome can become what God wants it to be without a miracle, without transformation, without God to give it as a gift.

And the same is true for us. And so that's why we are to be a people of prayer. Continually asking God to do in us what we cannot do for ourselves. Now, remember my trip to Malindi, the village, trying to avoid goats, chickens, and other wild creatures of Africa?

I needed to know two things. I needed to know where I was going. And secondly, I needed to know how to get there. I needed the route. This passage is all about those two things for us as a church. It shows us something about where God wants to take us. He wants to make us people who welcome one another like Jesus has welcomed us. And the way he wants to get us there is by focusing our attention upon Jesus in his word and bathing everything in prayer.

[27 : 54] Now, friends, that's the agenda for our church. That's what we're on about. And as we run, as we walk through these, you know, months and months of being in Romans, we're going to deal with a lot of doctrine, a lot of big thoughts.

But you know what? At the bottom line, this is where we're going. This is where God wants to take us. And we haven't learned Romans until we've learned this. And God is inviting us this year and this term, he's inviting us to deepen our relationships with one another.

I mean, this is the stuff that gets God excited. And it should get you excited too. God's inviting you closer to him, to himself, by inviting you closer to one another. And that's why we have home groups and all of those sorts of things.

And you need to join. But we're asking you to do that, not because we want to grow a big ministry or anything like that. It's because there is an exquisite blessing that God wants to pour out in your life. So let's ask him to do that. Let's pray. Father, we ask, because you are the God of endurance and encouragement, we ask that you would grant us to live in such harmony with each other, such such heavenly new creation type harmony with one another in accordance with Jesus Christ, that we would here at St.

[29 : 34] John's in the evening service with one voice glorify you because you are God, our father. Amen. Amen.