

Love: Stir Up

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Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0 : 0 0] Good morning, church, and happy Mother's Day. I heard somewhere that this is the 100th anniversary of Mother's Day.

Is that right? Has anyone else heard that? One person has. Oh, two have. Okay, great. Well, there you go. Happy anniversary, Mother's Day. The text on which our teaching is based this morning is Hebrews 10, 19 through 25.

We're going to focus especially on the last two verses of this paragraph. Hebrews 10, 19 through 25 is page 1007 in the Pew Bible if you want to turn there. Hebrews 10.

Let me read this passage for us. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places 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 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.

[1 : 1 4] Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.

And all the more as you see the day drawing near. In the year 2000, a Harvard political scientist named Robert Putnam wrote a book called Bowling Alone.

And the subtitle of that book was The Collapse and Revival of American Community. And one of the key observations of that book is that Americans are becoming less and less involved in civic organizations, that membership in voluntary associations and civic groups is steeply declining.

And as an example, he made this really interesting observation. He saw that even though the number of individual bowlers was on the rise across the U.S., that is, more and more people were out bowling, yes, like nine-pin bowling, the number of bowling leagues, on the other hand, was dropping.

And that became a prime example in his study that people are losing their connections and their commitments to one another, that more and more, it seems, we are just bowling alone. Now, since then, other sociologists have pointed out that there are some groups that are actually growing.

[2 : 4 6] But they're the ones that require actually very little from their members. After all, in a bowling league, right, your team is counting on you. If you don't show up, you get calls from Frank and Peggy complaining how you let down the phantom strikers in their time of need.

I've never been a part of a bowling league. I had to actually Google names of bowling teams. I thought phantom strikers was a pretty good name of a bowling team. But, you know, with organizations like, say, I don't know, the Sierra Club, on the other hand, well, you can have all the pride of knowing that you're helping to protect the earth without any of the hassle of Frank and Peggy calling you on Thursday night telling you you let the team down.

And as a bonus, you get a really nice newsletter every once in a while. Now, I don't have anything personally against the Sierra Club. I'm sure they do great work. When Beth and I used to live in Pennsylvania, we were members of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

And what did it mean for us to be members of the Philly Art Museum? Honestly, not much. We sent them a check, and they sent us colorful brochures and invitations to art receptions.

That was pretty much it. Membership basically required nothing of us. And as it turns out, the Philadelphia Museum of Art still sends us packages periodically, welcoming us back into membership, even though we live like 175 miles away.

[4 : 11] I'm sure they would love to get our check once again. And of course, all this has more to do with our lives than just bowling leagues and art museums. The bigger and more important point is that our involvement in and our understanding of community, of life together, has become incredibly problematic.

Because on the one hand, we long for community, for connection, for life together. Even Putnam's book was not just about the collapse of American community, but about proposals for its revival.

And yet, though we want community, and though we feel we rightly were made for such community, we're so often disappointed by it, aren't we?

It never quite gives us what we want. And of course, it's not hard to see how all of this affects our spiritual lives. On the one hand, the idea of commitment to a body of believers, to a local church, of membership, seems kind of like a nice extra.

Something that's good for some people, but not really a key ingredient of discipleship or an integral part of following Jesus. I mean, after all, right, I can read great Christian books, and I can listen to great sermons online, and I can even catch up with my Christian friends every once in a while, the ones who are like me and who know me, and get some good fellowship, and I can do all of that without tying myself down or committing to a local church, right?

[5 : 43] So on the one hand, and maybe we don't even realize it, we slip into a practical lone ranger-ism in our spiritual lives.

We're going at it alone without any real connection to fellow Christians. But now you see, it's more serious than just a bowling league, isn't it? Now it's our connection to the body of Christ that we're talking about.

But you know, I don't think that problem is as persistent as another problem that we have. I think that many of us today wouldn't want to be seen as lone rangers. We would want to acknowledge that community is really important, even essential to Christianity.

No one wants to come across as that individualistic, right? But at the same time, there's still a problem. Again, without realizing it, we can begin to approach Christian community in much the same way that Beth and I approached our membership in the Philly Museum of Art.

That I'm in it, basically, for what I can get out of it. That I come, basically, as a consumer, ready to consume a spiritual product. That I'm here for what's in it for me, and it's all about me.

[6 : 56] And when it's not convenient, or I don't need it, then I just don't give it the place or the priority in my life. And I think if we're honest, we all wrestle with this.

Myself included. None of us is immune. And yet, what the book of Hebrews is showing us this morning is that what Christ has done for us creates a whole new dynamic for our life together.

Over the past two weeks, we've been slowing down in our series in Hebrews and considering verses 19 through 25. Two weeks ago, we talked about drawing near.

Do you remember? And the focus there was on faith, on trusting in Christ. And we saw that there's a whole new kind of spirituality, of worship, of relation to God that's opened up for us through faith in Christ.

We can now draw near. And last week, we considered holding fast, and we considered what Christian hope is really all about. And there we saw that hope is the certain future of what we have in Christ, not because we're great or because we deserve it, but because He is faithful to His promises.

[8 : 13] So we've considered faith, hope, and now third and last, we come to love. And in verses 24 through 25, Hebrews is saying that the nature and the practices and the motivation for Christian community are all radically different because of the gospel, because of the good news of Jesus.

So in the time that we have together this morning, I want to just unpack each one of those as we see it here, the nature and the practices and the motivation of community that's centered in the gospel, centered in Christ.

And I hope that we'll come away from studying this passage with a fresh vision and a fresh desire to want to be this sort of community and want to love in this kind of way, not merely for our own sake, but for our neighbor's sake and ultimately for Christ's sake.

So first, let's look at the nature of Christian community. Verse 24 is a command. Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works. But did you notice how seamlessly this flows from verses 19 through 23?

Since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us consider one another. It's a given in the author's mind that a relationship with God in Christ necessarily means a relationship with those who share in Christ.

[9 : 37] In other words, in Christianity, believing is necessarily belonging. The call to believe in Christ is the call to belong to the people of Christ. And you know, you can't read the Bible and come away with any other idea.

Think about who God reveals himself to be in Scripture. One God who eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And if that's who God is, then relationship and love and community are eternal realities of God himself shared between the eternal persons of the Trinity.

And we're told that this God creates us, humans, in his image. And if we're created in the image of a triune God, then surely community and relationship and love is something that you and I were made for.

It's part of our design as humans. And Christ has come to redeem us and restore in us that image.

But look also at how the story of Scripture unfolds. From the very beginning of God's redemptive plan with Abraham, God is building, what? A family. A people. And that continues through Israel and into the New Testament, into the church, that God's work is not just about saving isolated individuals, but redeeming a whole people who in their life together enjoy and reflect his own glory.

[11 : 05] Believing is belonging. But there's even more than that. And this is where Hebrews 24 starts to speak a little more explicitly. Not just as believing belonging, but what he's saying here is that membership in this family, membership is ministry.

To belong to this people is to have a part to play. Membership in the family of God is less like Beth and I being a part of the Philly Art Museum and more like having a job description.

It's having a call. And that call, first and foremost, is what? To consider one another, he says. That's literally how the verse reads.

The object of consider is one another. Consider one another. Now, this isn't the first time that Hebrews has used that word consider. Do you remember way back?

You probably don't. Maybe you do. Remember way back in Hebrews 3, verse 1. Who are we told to consider there? Consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession who was faithful to him who appointed him.

[12 : 16] You see, friends, this is the dynamic of the church. That together we consider Jesus. That he's the object of our focus and our affection and our attention.

But the more that we consider him, the more and more it moves me to consider not just myself, in fact, not myself, but others.

As I gaze upon Christ and all that he is for me, my eyes come down not on my own needs, but on the needs of those around me. Christ, in other words, heals us from our selfish gaze.

After all, for the last ten and a half chapters of this book, what has Hebrews been telling us? He's been showing us how Jesus is our superior high priest who makes the superior sacrifice to establish the superior covenant that at last makes us clean before God.

I wonder if you've ever shown up to a party or an event and you're totally wearing the wrong clothes. Has this ever happened to you? You're invited to a wedding and you're like, great, it's a summer wedding.

[13 : 26] It's probably really casual, right? I'm just going to rock up with, you know, whatever. And you get there and you're like the only one not wearing a dress or not wearing a suit. What happens to you in that moment?

Who are you thinking about? You're thinking about yourself, right? You're thinking about, God, how I totally messed up and how other people must be looking at me and thinking, what an idiot, why is he wearing that?

But, if you show up with the right clothes on, it's totally different, isn't it? You're not thinking about yourself. You're thinking about the people sitting next to you.

You're thinking about the bride and groom. You're thinking about whoever. You see, friends, it's even more that way with Christ. That he's cleansed and clothed you with his perfect life and perfect sacrifice.

And you lack nothing in him. You have confidence, Hebrews has just said, to enter the holy places by his blood. The very presence of God.

[14 : 33] And you have the confidence to go in and not feel shame, but to feel favor and to feel welcome. And so, you see, considering Jesus, your gaze can be lifted from yourself and it can rest on others.

And here's where things really get interesting. Because now in Christ, I start to see others not as people who can meet my needs, but as people created in God's image, purchased by Christ's death and love, and for whom God has a glorious future.

You see, I start to see my role in their life not as a judge of their performance and not as a consumer of their services, but as a catalyst of their love and good works.

I see myself as one who's there to stir them up. And I'm open to receiving the same. I come to the Christian community with blood-bought confidence before God, ready to be stirred because I know that I need it.

My heart is sluggish. My dreams are limited. My self-perception is woefully myopic. I need to be stirred up. And that word stir up is a really strong one.

[15 : 59] It's almost the image of a cattle prod just provoking, inciting, spurring something on. It's like a loving coach who sees so much potential in his middle school basketball team that he'll do anything he can and any technique he can dream of to get them to play well and to do the beautiful thing that is running the flex offense or whatever, you know.

Hebrews is saying that we're meant to be a catalyst in each other's lives. That when we come into contact with one another, when we enter into this body, all of a sudden, something dramatic starts to take place.

There's a generative effect where we cause each other to burn a little hotter and to burn a little better and to speed each other up towards love and good works.

Which is to say that we're meant to stir up one another to reach the Christ-ordained goal of our lives. Again and again, we're told that Jesus saves us not by our good works, but for good works.

The passage we read earlier in John 15 made just that point. Think also about Ephesians 2.10. We are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

[17 : 29] Or again, Titus 2.14. Christ gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness, to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Or again, Jesus in Matthew 5. Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and do what? Give glory to your Father in heaven.

So when we stir up one another in this way, we're helping one another become who Jesus has saved us to become. We're helping one another live into our truly human selves.

And I need your stirring ultimately so that the world will see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. That's the design.

Jesus tears the curtain with his own flesh. We're flooded with joyful confidence and we begin doing good works and stirring one another up to do the same and God is glorified as the world sees the difference that Jesus makes in our hearts and lives.

[18 : 39] That's the nature of Christian community. Considering one another, devoting loving attention to one another, knowing and being deeply known because we want to stir up one another to become who God has made us to become.

In other words, the local church is meant to be a place of God-glorifying, catalytic love production for everyone involved. Did you catch that?

God-glorifying, catalytic love production and it's eschatologically oriented if we want to throw more words in there, right? This is what it means. This is why you're here. And all this has direct implications before we go on to our second point.

First, if you're a believer, maybe you're new to Christ, maybe you've been following Jesus for a while, look, if you're a believer, you need Christian community. You need the local church.

God designed it that way. Have you ever made chocolate milk? You pour milk into the glass, you squeeze the chocolate syrup into the glass, and at first, the chocolate just sort of sits there in the bottom of the glass.

[19 : 49] Until what? Until someone takes a spoon and starts stirring, right? Well, our life in Christ is sort of like that. We need to be stirred.

And the church is the place that God set up for it to happen. And to live without the church is to remain forever an unstirred glass of milk with just a bunch of syrup in the bottom. Never really released.

No one drinks a cup of milk with Hershey syrup in the bottom and says, that's a good cup of chocolate milk. No, this is gross. Someone stir this up. Don't be a gross glass of milk. But seriously, maybe this is why your walk with God seems a little stagnant.

Maybe that's why you don't feel like you're growing. Maybe that's why your friends don't really inquire about God in your life. Maybe you need loving Christian community to stir you up.

But second, if it's true that you need the church, it's also true that you have a part to play. That all of us have a part to play.

[20 : 59] There are no bench warmers in the kingdom, you see. God saves you because he wants you on the court and he's given you everything you need to be a player. He's given you his word and he's put his own spirit within you.

Yes, we all have different gifts but we all belong in the game. There's a critical place for you in the community. And that leads to our second point.

We've seen the nature of Christian community in verse 24 and now in verse 25 we start to see the practices. Doesn't all this naturally raise the question of how? How do I go about stirring up my brothers and sisters? It sounds really great.

I'd love to be a part of a catalytic community of love production but how do I do that? And here Hebrews points us to two essential practices and we could summarize them pretty simply like this.

Showing up and speaking up. Showing up. That's the first part of verse 25. Not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some.

[21 : 58] You see there's no substitute for showing up at the weekly assembly, at the weekly gathering of the church. Why? Well friends, at the center of our faith is the claim that God took on human flesh and walked among us face to face.

And if our love is going to be a Christ-shaped love then surely it's going to have the same impulse. It'll want to show up in the flesh face to face and be with those for whom Christ has loved and died and risen again.

If you're going to stir up Hebrews is saying you've got to show up. And you know your presence in and of itself is a means of stirring up your brothers and sisters.

They see you here. They see you've made the commitment to wake up and arrive. And that strengthens them because they know they're not alone. They see that Christ is worth it to you and that stirs them up to consider again that Christ is worth it for them as well.

Martin Luther once wrote at home in my own house there's no warmth or vigor in me but in the church when the multitude is gathered together a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through.

[23 : 28] You see friends showing up means being part of that multitude gathered together that is lighting a fire in the hearts of those who are called. And you thought you were just here to endure a long sermon.

No! Now look Hebrews admits that it's easy to fall into the habit of not meeting together. And there are all sorts of reasons how it can happen right? I've seen some of these in my own heart you maybe seen some of them in yours.

There's laziness we just don't make the effort and end up sleeping in instead. there's weariness we're burnt out from life and instead of drawing healthy boundaries we just kind of stop coming.

There's a sense of superiority while we just don't think we need it or that we really get anything out of it so we don't come. There's also fear I might be ridiculed or excluded by my friends or family or even in some parts of the world I might be persecuted for publicly identifying as a Christian by coming to the assembly.

You know I suppose more often than not it's a matter of indifference. I just slipped away. I got busy with other stuff.

[24 : 42] Everyday concerns just kind of pulled me away. You know maybe you're here this morning friend and you haven't been to church in a while and you know perhaps it's not an accident that this is the text that we're considering together on the church when you made it on the Sunday when you made it.

And as you look at your heart whether it's laziness or weariness or pride or fear or indifference realize this morning that Christ has redeemed you to be a player in the game and to make this gathering a priority because he made it a priority.

The eternal son of God emptied himself took on flesh dwelt among us died on a cross rose again so that he could form a people for his glory and now you and I have the privilege to be a part of that people and to come together each week not just to receive but to give and help others become more like Christ.

Now maybe you show up here at Trinity every Sunday but you know there are still ways that we can neglect to meet together even if technically we come every week.

Think about it. Do you slip in right before the service starts and slip out right before we end or are you making the effort actually to be present and present long enough that someone might actually get to know you and you might get to know them?

[26 : 27] Are you coming with the mindset of simply getting something out of it or are you thinking about being present for someone else's sake too? Are you aware that God might have you here to meet someone else's needs in addition to your own?

of course all this is incredibly countercultural isn't it? It runs right against our consumer mindset but honestly friend aren't you tired of being a consumer?

Isn't it boring? Every single advertisement you watch on TV just wants you to consume. Isn't that dull? Instead Christ is saying come be a player take your place in the great drama of redemption that's unfolding before you not as a mere spectator but as an agent as an actor with a part to play and the part that we play is done not just by showing up but also by speaking up.

Verse 25 continues we're told to be encouraging one another and the primary way that we do this is through words. God after all is a speaking God and isn't it amazing that he gives us the privilege of being speaking creatures and he calls us to use our words to stir up one another.

That's what we do when we gather on Sundays the singing and the preaching and the ordinances all of these are ways of speaking the gospel to one another and encouraging one another. Now the verb encourage here has a pretty broad meaning.

[28 : 07] I think often when we think about the word encouragement it means just sort of like showering empty praise on someone. Good job. Right? But no the biblical idea of encouragement is actually broad.

It encompasses encouragement and exhortation and even consolation. I don't know about you but I think speaking in a way to encourage or to exhort or to console doesn't actually come naturally.

We all kind of struggle at that don't we? And I think that's why the main command in these two verses is consider. Consider how. We should actually take some time to consider how to use our words well to stir up each other.

So consider how to speak words that encourage. Find someone who's doing something well and let them know. Thank them. Tell them to keep on doing it.

Most importantly show them the good that you see coming from it. Point out how you see Christ at work in them. For example you could tell the people who serve in hospitality downstairs after the service you know you guys do a great job every week.

[29 : 27] When I look at all the people who come to the fellowship hall after the service and get to connect with each other and do spiritual good to one another you guys are making that happen. Thank you for what you do.

Isn't it just like Christ in us who opened his arms for us that we too would take the time to set a table and open our arms for others to come. Consider how to encourage each other but also consider how to speak words that exhort each other.

And exhortation is that loving correction. And we all need it, right? Back in chapter 3 Hebrews said, exhort one another every day as long as it is called today that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Because sin is deceitful aren't we often the last ones to see it in our own lives. So we need fellow believers who will have the courage to exhort us.

To say something like, hey, I've noticed this pattern in your life. Am I seeing that rightly? Can I share with you some things that I've learned about this area that have helped me?

[30 : 49] Of course, this takes a prior relationship to go well, doesn't it? I don't think you should just walk up to someone and start saying, hey, you're messed up. Fix that. That's not how you do this, right?

That's not what loving exhortation means. And isn't that why showing up is the critical first step before speaking up?

But you know, I think for all that, most of us can look back in our lives and see a time when someone had the courage to exhort us and it made all the difference.

It didn't feel great at the time, but it stirred us up in massive ways. Maybe it even changed the direction of your life for Christ's sake.

So in addition to encouragement, we need to exhort. But in addition to exhortation, we should also consider how to speak words that console. And this is simply telling someone that I'm here for you.

[31 : 52] I'm not trying to fix your problems, but I'm here to help you bear your burdens in any way that I can. And you know, often this kind of speaking up, as we know, is really done best by simply showing up and being present.

And speaking of hope and the promises and the goodness of Christ. So these are the two practices of Christian community that Hebrews lays out for us. Showing up and speaking up.

And we've already started to see how they go hand in hand, right? If you don't show up, it doesn't give you much of a place to speak up. And if you don't speak up, you're often missing the richer opportunity that showing up actually gives you, that showing up actually affords.

And that brings us to our third point. You know, as we come to the end of this short text, it's perhaps obvious that this work doesn't come easy. But it's not easy, this work of considering one another.

It's not easy, this work of showing up. It's not easy, this work of speaking up. In fact, all of that is pretty hard work. And that's why verse 25 ends by pointing us to the motivation of Christian community.

[33 : 11] and that motivation, according to verse 25, is the day drawing near. And the day he's referring to is what the Old Testament calls the day of the Lord.

And according to Hebrews, this is the day when Jesus will reappear. And in so doing, God will complete his work of new creation among us. That that's the day when the glory of God covers the earth like the waters cover the sea.

When the kingdom at last comes fully on earth as it is in heaven. And life and liberty break out for all to enjoy.

Now how does that day motivate us to do what we've been talking about this morning? Well on the one hand we know that that day will be a day of reckoning. Earlier in Hebrews he said, you know, no one can hide from the gaze of God.

We're all exposed before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account. And if that's true, then as we see the day approaching, we want more than anything else for our brothers and sisters, those who gather with us, to be found in Christ on that day.

[34 : 30] So we show up and we speak up and we stir up with every chance that we get because we don't want to lose any opportunity to encourage someone to persevere in the faith.

And we want to put ourselves in positions where others can do the same for us. But you know, the day of the Lord is not just a day of reckoning, but ultimately it's a day of salvation for those who place their faith in Christ.

This is the day, the Apostle John says, when we'll be like him because at last we'll see him as he is. This is the day when Jesus will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, as Paul says in Ephesians.

This is the day when creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and attain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. And friends, if that day is drawing near, when the echoes that we see in our midst will come to full flowering, when the sparks and hints of Christ's presence among us finally come out in full form, friends, if that day is coming near, then none of the hard work of showing up and speaking up will be wasted.

It'll all be used to bring about God's good purposes, and if what is coming is the restoration of all things, and if that's my certain future in Christ, the enjoyment of the new heavens and the new earth, then surely I can stand to sacrifice my time and my resources now to help serve my fellow believers.

[36 : 10] The age to come in God's new creation will outstrip any of the sacrifices that we think we're making here and now. The tighter the grip that we have on the future in Christ, the more we can release our grip on the way in which we try to control our time and our resources and our things.

Do you see that? Don Carson tells this story. He says, in 1952, a young woman by the name of Florence Chadwick stepped off the beach at Catalina Island and into the water, determined to swim to the shore of mainland California.

She was already an experienced long-distance swimmer. She was the first woman to swim the English Channel both ways. The weather was foggy and chilly on the day she set out.

She could scarcely see the boats that would accompany her and for 15 hours she swam. She begged to be taken out but her trainer urged persistence, telling her again and again that she could make it, that the shore was not far away.

But physically and emotionally exhausted, she finally just stopped swimming and she was pulled out. The boats made for the shore and she discovered that it was a mere half mile away.

[37 : 30] The next day she gave a news conference. What she said in effect was this, I don't want to make excuses for myself, I'm the one who asked to be pulled out, but I think that if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it.

And two months later she proved her point. On a bright and clear day she plunged back into the sea and swam the distance. You see, friends, keep the day in your sights.

Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus who is our hope and who is coming to bring in that day. Because it's his glory after all that we'll share.

We're united to him by faith. And if we keep our eyes fixed on him, if we keep our eyes clearly focused on the day, on the shore that's there, then our life together will have the vision that it needs to persevere.

Then we'll be able to put one arm in front of the other and to do it with gladness as we see the day approaching. So in conclusion over these last few weeks, we've seen that the gospel of Jesus produces in us faith and hope and love.

[38 : 54] And we've seen how the gospel actually starts to redefine all three of these, haven't we? You know, faith. Faith is no longer just illogical belief, but personal trust in him who died for us.

And hope. Hope is no longer just wishful thinking, but confident expectation of the future that he has for us. love. And finally, love.

Love's no longer just kind of letting each other be. Love's no longer just merely affirming each other in however we happen to find ourselves.

No, love now is actively stirring each other up to become more and more who Christ redeemed us to be. on the basis of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

This is the shape of our Christian life together. A faith, of hope, of love, of drawing near, of holding fast, and of stirring up.

[40 : 00] Let's pray. Father, we pray that you would indeed stir up in us love and good works. And God, give us the heart and the compassion and the eyes to see how we might be stirring one another up to love and good works.

God, grant us the humility to be open to the stirring of our brothers and sisters. God, help us to see how we need it.

God, we pray that you would glorify your name in us. Glorify your name in this church and all the churches that are gathering here in New Haven. God, glorify your name in us as we go forth to serve and to love and grant us the perseverance to show up and the courage to speak up.

And all the more as we see your great day approaching. The day of our Lord Jesus Christ. In whose name and by whose spirit we pray. Amen. Amen.