

Life Together

Acts 2:37-47

Good Morning again Church Family, both the family in this room and those watching on the livestream. I'm glad to be with you all this morning.

This morning's sermon is the third instalment of our sermon series on the essentials of church. The first essential is the foundation of Jesus Christ, the second essential is worshipping together, turning our attention together towards God and the spiritual realities in our world, and for this morning we're going to be talking about life together. This is the kind of sermon topic that gets me really excited. Life together is practical, boots on the ground, something that feels connected to the stuff of daily life. A couple of weeks ago, when my dear friend Cindy was in the hospital, awaiting her appendectomy, my mind immediately jumped to the practical needs of the situation. I said to Taylor, "Is there a chicken in the freezer?" "Yes." "Pull the chicken out to thaw! We are mobilising!"

When I talk about life together, I'm referring to the very practical things and care that the church provides to those within a church community. Sharing meals together. Caring for one another when people are sick. Prayers. Words of encouragement. Affirmation. Bearing one another's burdens. Providing for one another's needs. These parts of church, while maybe not very flashy or often feel "like church" are truly the fabric of a

faith community, the things that build up the body of believers into his best self, it's most Christ-like. We see this vision at work in the earliest formation of the church, in the text that Doyle read for us this morning. I'll hone in on verses, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

I preached on this same passage last week, but I'm going to tease out some different details this week. They devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread (this could refer to communion or just sharing a meal together, usually those two activities happened together at the same time). All the believers were together and held everything in common. They wanted to be together, to say to one another, your home is my home-every day they met together, the passage said! There's a second reference to eating together (this time it specifically mentions their homes). There was a gladness and sincerity amongst this family of believers. To sum up this passage, this early church was a family, who spent time together, sharing deeply in all ways together, offering their life together as a gift to God and One Another. Perhaps like me, this passage makes you a little squirmy inside. Together all the time? Sharing everything? Most people would not sign up for that. What was happening in these very early days of church was

unique and didn't last forever. When we read through the epistles, the letters written to specific churches, we see that each church had its own challenges. None of those churches are described like this one in Acts, so we can let ourselves off the hook a bit. Don't start showing up at my house every night for dinner.

What this passage does reveal is that doing life together as a family of believers is how these people responded to the message of Jesus. It does give us a glimpse, or a dress rehearsal if you will, of welcome and loving care that will be a part of the new Kingdom. And it gives us something to aim for, a way to measure how we're doing, how healthy we are a church body.

We'll talk shortly about how scripture directs us to care for one another, but first we must ask, "Why together? Why isn't following Jesus a solo venture?" In John chapter 21, a resurrected Jesus appears to some of his disciples who are out fishing. He calls them to shore to join him for a breakfast of fish and bread. Picking up here in verse 15. "After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," Peter replied, "you know I love you." "Then feed my lambs," Jesus told him. Jesus repeated the question: "Simon son of John, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord," Peter said, "you know I love you." "Then take care of my sheep," Jesus said. A third time he asked him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." Jesus said, "Then feed my sheep."

Jesus makes it clear to Peter, and to us, that to love and serve Him *IS* to love and serve his people. One cannot exist without the other. A former pastor of mine said it this way, “Following Jesus is a group event, like baseball, or like singing in a choir. It starts with one person who wants to play baseball or sing in a choir, but the real thing does not happen until there is a group. Following Jesus is not a group event because we need each other's love and help in order to follow Jesus, but because loving and helping each other is itself how we follow Jesus.”

It's easy to love someone from a safe distance, but to love someone or a (group of someones) up close, can be quite difficult. A friend once said to me, a bit tongue in cheek, “Emily, marriage is the single greatest sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.” His wife was not pleased with his remark. But his point was true, one of the reasons that marriage can be hard is because you are living life close up with someone, and all their differences, failures, needs and BREATHING are right there with you. Perhaps even more true is that in marriage you now close up with your own failures, and needs. This is the same reason that church can be hard, this life lived up close, and yet that is where Jesus meets us, in our mess, in our vulnerability, in our weakness. The church is a group of imperfect people, striving to walk in the steps of their perfect saviour, who says, “I love you. Welcome. You are part of this family.” And if that's what we here at LMF are aiming for, then there is no doubt that God is faithful and will help us in that.

So, how do we do life together? What guidance does the Bible offer? On an instinctual level, I think many people sense what this would be like. If we imagine the church as a

family of which Jesus Christ is the head of that family, how would we live? What would the culture of our church family be like from week to week? How do we live that out on a daily basis? Asking those guiding questions will inevitably point us in a good direction, but of course, scripture offers some more specific wisdom on this topic.

First, we can pray with and for one another. One of the things that I love about our church is the “open mic” style of sharing and prayer time. I know that not everything that we need or want prayer for is shared in this space, but I’m continually humbled by the honest sharing that happens here on Sunday mornings. James 5:13-18 offers this stirring encouragement to prayer, “ Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.” This week, I was on the phone with the Alumni Coordinator for the college I attended. At the end of our conversation, she said, “May I pray for you? What can I pray about?” I shared a few things, and she proceeded to pray for me. Just hearing someone pray aloud for me was such an encouragement. Similarly, I feel so honoured when people here approach me and ask me to pray about something. This is a gift to

and for all believers in the community, whether you're the one asking for prayer or the one praying, both build up the body in a good way.

Secondly, we can take care of one another when life gets hard. Paul, in his letter to the church at Galatia, instructs them in this way. "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. That's verse 2 of chapter six, now I'm jumping down to verses 9 and 10... And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." This is something I think our church does very well with. I hear the stories of meals delivered, of driving others to medical appointments, help with projects or tasks. It's just beautiful. My word of encouragement would be to keep doing that; keep listening and keep paying attention to one another's needs.

Finally, when it comes to life together, everything matters. Every word, action, prayer, meal, no matter how insignificant it may seem matters to the building up of the body. "So 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, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect

the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

We, God’s people, are being equipped for service so that the body of Christ may be built up, that we may be made more mature, more like Christ. So that our church may be built up in love. Each part, each person in this room and those who are absent matters to this church, because each one of us is a gift to this church, a gift to another. It’s not about what you bring, what skills you have. This passage says that we were given to one another for another. You are the gift. The question is not, what are my skills? What gifts do I have? The question we must ask ourselves, how can I love the church? What does it look like to love the church, this body of believers to the best of my ability? If we remember that each one of us is a gift to one another, then everything matters. No word of kindness, no hug, no “I’m praying for you” is too small. And I think this especially true during covid, when the big things are off the table, the little things will continue to grow us more and more into the love of Christ.

I’ll close with one brief story, the first holiday of the pandemic was Easter 2020. I remember feeling quite anxious and disappointed that it wouldn’t be marked with any of our beloved traditions, the family gatherings, the Easter Egg hunt, not even church was in-person. My first Easter as pastor was on Youtube. Yet, when the day came, people loved us in so many small ways. Doreen brought us our first paska loaf. Church

members call or texted. Friends, who we weren't even especially close to, showed up on doorstep with easter gifts for our kids. This day that I feared would be filled with loneliness, with our kids noticing the lack, was instead filled with so many small acts of great love. Taylor and I have both remarked that we'll look back on Easter 2020 with a special fondness, treasuring these things in our hearts.

Dearest LMF family, loving one another in word and deed in our daily life is an essential of the church- if this is the only thing LMF is ever known for, then thanks be God, for he is good.

Let's pray.