

## ***“Core Values: Relationships”***

*Ephesians 4:1-16 • Acts 2:42-47*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • February 12, 2017

I may be a little biased but I think we have perhaps the most beautiful church in town. Just look at these amazing stained glass windows. You just can't build churches like this any more. Last week we talked about our core value of generosity. You and I are the beneficiaries of the generosity of members of this church in years past. But let me ask you something. What if something happened to this building? What if this building we call First Presbyterian Church didn't exist any more? Would we still have a church?

I would hope you would answer YES! The church is not a building. In fact, you don't have to go very far from here to find vacant, abandoned church buildings. They still look like a church but you wouldn't call it a church. So the question really is, “what does it mean to be a church? What does it mean to be THIS church? What makes us US?” That's why we are working through our core values. We put down in writing what makes us who we are as a church. And this building isn't one of our core values.

We have said that we value relationships. That's because the Bible is clear that God made us for relationships. At the very beginning of the Bible, God said, “It's not good for man to be alone.” We were made in the image of God, who is in perfect relationship – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. John Ortberg writes, “Our need for community with people and the God who made us is to the human spirit what food and water are to the human body.” It turns out that community is the place where God meets us.

The gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus giving us the great commission and then he makes a *promise*. He says, “I will be with you always.” Jesus actually fulfills one of the central themes of the Bible. God promises over and over that he will not leave us alone. He will be with us. When he calls Abraham to leave his country and go to another place, God says, “I will be with you.” He promises to be with

Moses when he confronts Pharaoh and with Joshua as they are about to cross into the Promised Land. He makes the same promise to Gideon and to Isaiah and to you. Jesus says, “You will be with me forever.”

The promise, though, is not a private promise between you and God. The promise is that he will be with us *in community*. Being a follower of Jesus means being in relationships with other believers. There are no Lone Ranger Christians. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. We belong to one another.” This is what Paul is saying in our passage from Ephesians 4 and other places where he compares the Church to a body. He says in verse 16 that “each part working together makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

The Greek word the Bible uses for this kind of Christian community is *koinonia*. We usually translate it as “fellowship.” Acts 2:42, says, “they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the *fellowship*.” We often make the mistake in churches of thinking of fellowship as punch and cookies. We call the room where we consume punch and cookies the “fellowship hall.” And that completely misses the point. That's NOT biblical fellowship. Philippians 1 uses the same word, *koinonia*, but it's translated as partnership. “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your *partnership* in the gospel from the first day until now.”

The word *koinonia*, fellowship, is also used to describe marriage. “We believe that being a follower of Jesus means being in a mutual, loving, praying community centered on Christ with a common mission of knowing Christ and making Christ known.” Christian fellowship is about deep, personal relationships where we encounter Jesus, and it's in that fellowship, that community of believers, that we become part of

a mission, the mission of God in the world. As we go together, baptizing and teaching, Jesus is with us. That's the *promise*. And that's the purpose of the Church. Paul says in Ephesians 4:12 that the church exists "to equip the saints for the work of ministry. What is that ministry for which *you* are supposed to be equipped?" "For building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God." We are to speak the truth in love.

Thankfully Paul tells us how to do that successfully. We build each other up by walking "in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Does that describe you? You should write those words down and look at them every day this week. Build up. Humility. Gentleness. Patience. Bearing. Love. Eager. Unity.

So how do we apply this core value of relationships to our lives? Most of you are probably thinking, "I already have lots of relationships here so I'm good." And that's half true. You should have strong relationships with other people. Many people today don't. In fact, as a society we are becoming more and more isolated from other people. Mother Teresa once said, "Loneliness is the leprosy of modern society."

But let's say you're not lonely. You have lots of relationships with other people, even people here at church, and you are satisfied with those friendships and aren't really looking for more. That's where you're missing the point about relationships and about Christian community. It's not about you. One of the important biblical concepts reclaimed during the Reformation was the idea of the priesthood of all believers. In one sense this is the teaching – right out of the Bible – that salvation comes with direct access to God, which is true. But a priest's role is to represent the people to God and represent God to the people. The idea of the priesthood of all believers is that *you* serve as priest for another

person. That can only happen within relationships and if you're not developing new relationships you can't be the presence of Jesus in those people's lives.

So what do we do? Here's a *proposal*. Anybody ever get married by accident? I'm not asking if you think it was a mistake, just whether it was an accident. Nobody accidentally gets married. There's too much you have to do. You have to go to the courthouse and fill out paperwork. You have to take oaths and have some official testify that you really did get married. In the marriage ceremony, one of the requirements of the state is that you have to publicly state that you intend to get married. To get married it's not enough to be relational, you have to be intentional. I think the same thing applies to Christian community. For us to be a genuine community we each have to be intentionally relational. We have to do it on purpose. What do we have to be intentional about? Time. Ortberg says, "the requirement for true intimacy is chunks of unhurried time." I propose that one of the best way to spend that kind of time with someone is over a meal. Not fast food but a real meal. You can't microwave friendship.

Over and over in Jesus' ministry he was eating with people – tax collectors and sinners and Pharisees. "His mission strategy was a long meal stretching into the evening." That strategy will work for us, too. Fully-devoted followers of Jesus are intentional about building deep, meaningful relationships with people and eating together is a great way to build friendships. The reason is that typically a meal will last longer than the surface conversation. Your choice is to either sit silently or to begin to have deeper conversations.

This was certainly the case with the early church. In our reading from Acts 2, eating together is mentioned three times. Nothing else is repeated in that passage. Meals were clearly a significant part of their life together and it should be a significant part of ours. So let me challenge you. When you leave here today, be intentional about having a meal with someone

you don't know very well. Every Sunday when you come to worship, intentionally look for those people you don't know. Some of them will be visitors. Some may be people who have been coming here for years. Either way, make a point to get to know that person and make a point to share a meal together. If you want to go to the next level, find a few people that you DO know and start eating together once a week or so with the purpose of inviting other people

to join you. Because, as Tim Chester writes, "when you combine a passion for Jesus with shared meals, you create potent gospel opportunities." Do you know what will happen if you try it? You will have "glad and generous hearts." You will praise God and have favor with all the people. And the Lord will add those who are being saved.

*Amen.*