

“Come Together: What to Be Famous For”

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John 13:31-35

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Today is our final week in this series “Come Together.” Before we go into our passage today, wanted to share a little of what to expect as we get into the Season of Lent.

Last summer, you may remember that Pastor Mark spent some time away on sabbatical. Well, since coming back, we’ve been looking for how we might apply some of the insights he gleaned from that time to our shared life as a church. A sabbatical, after all, isn’t a prolonged vacation. It’s a time of rest meant for the renewal of pastor and congregation alike. So this Lenten season, beginning next week with our Winter Speaker (which is technically the Sunday *before* Lent starts), we will be spending time exploring how God calls us into a beautiful discipline, a practice that can restore and focus and invigorate our lives in harmony with the Lord’s rhythms, and that is sabbath. We’ll start that journey next week.

Today, as we wrap up this “Come Together” series, you may remember that we began this series with some words from Jesus at the Last Supper, a prayer, offered to God right there in front of his disciples, praying for their unity. Well as we finish up, we go back to that same exchange, that same supper and discourse from Jesus, as he gives his disciples a new commandment. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

When he was gone, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.

“My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”
John 13:31-35

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

“A new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Such were Christ’s words to his disciples, but did he realize what he was asking?

“Sometimes it’s easier to love the idea of people rather than the people themselves.” That’s how a column published recently opens up. Do you think that’s true? Is it easier to love the idea of people than loving the people themselves? Just from the question you can kind of guess the points you can draw. Loving people is a wonderful idea; loving a person is downright messy. You know why? Once you get up close, you can really see the breaks and ugly parts.

We talked a few weeks ago about the dangers and temptations of isolation and how there’s a well-documented leaning engrained within us to seek out community, as a matter of survival, as a matter of thriving. That urge draws us toward each other, so gathering in community, gathering in care for another person, is nothing new for the human experience.

But just as well-documented and just as predictable is the all-too-natural urge, as we gather in community and as we become more acquainted with the breaks and ugly parts of other people, to seek out those more similar to ourselves. That’s not groundbreaking. You see it all the time. Left to our own devices, human beings will gravitate toward community, yes, but also, given the chance, we will gravitate toward the circle of greatest commonalities. There’s a fancy name for that: homogeneity, but you may have heard it put another way: birds of a feather...flock together.

That’s nothing you don’t already know, nothing we don’t already notice every day. Maybe we notice it within ourselves. We gravitate toward community with those most like ourselves. Why? Well, the same reasons we gravitate toward community in the first place. It’s easier. It feels safer. Goes back to those old survival instincts that drew human beings into groups way back when.

Two Methodist clergy named Michael Beck and Tyler Kleeberger sought out to find wisdom and renewal from lessons we could glean from the so-called “rural church.” That word “rural” can be kind of loaded, and mean different things to different people. For some, “rural” means simple, backwards, the sticks, unsophisticated, outdated, behind the times. For others, it could mean idyllic, pastoral, pure, natural. But for lack of an official definition, when they’re talking about the “rural church,” Beck and Kleeberger are referring to congregations gathering not out of large population centers.

You may have seen examples of what they’re talking about. Drive some old county roads, and you pass by a small white church with peeling paint, just a simple chapel with a small sign out front, without much else around except maybe a couple of houses, a small cemetery, and a lot of cows. That’s what they mean by “rural church.” Some of you may know churches like that. Some of you may have been a part of churches like that. Suffice it to say, there’s something different about it. It has its own kind of struggles, for sure, but also its own kind of blessings, blessings that perhaps churches like this one—because I don’t think we can claim to be a “rural church”—may not realize.

One aspect in particular that Beck and Kleeberger recognize is that in a rural church, there's a lot less self-selection going on, and according to them, it can boil down to sample size. It's estimated that human beings have a threshold for relationships, meaningful relationships, that max out somewhere in the 150 to 200 range. That's everybody: family, friends, colleagues, churches. If a new friendship is formed, inevitably a person will subconsciously let another one, perhaps a friendship from a different, previous stage in life go neglected. And this is normal. You see this in your own life. Relationships and friendships can have their ebbs and flows. You're not always intimately close to every single person who may have meant a lot to you at any point in your life.

But in a rural setting, you're less able to pick them so selectively. If you've got your 200 relationships, but you have a sample size of a million people to choose from, guess what we're most likely to do: form relationships with those most like ourselves. Why? Well because we can. Because it's easier. When that 200 relationship threshold covers most of the people in a 10-mile radius, we're not quite so selective in who we seek out in friendship. You've got to make it work with the people that are around you.

That is, perhaps, part of the lesson we can learn from the rural church, when it comes to fellowship, say those two Methodist clergy. It's a lesson the church learned early on, but as it grew, as it became more ubiquitous, it's perhaps gotten too easy to flock together according to lines other than Christ.

"A rural church therefore," they write, "is less likely to have a community who all think the same. The neighbors with a dozen broken cars in their front lawn and the wealthy farmer with a pristine lawn and gated driveway both must be neighbors. And in rural communities, they are both just as essential to the health of the place...."

"Rural churches can't afford to ask, 'What is your political perspective?' as some sort of metal detector for letting people in or turning them away. We don't get to choose who belongs to our communities."

When we consider Christ's commandment to his disciples, that call to "love one another, just as I have loved you," maybe another way to think about that is: "We don't get to choose who we're called to love in the church."

It's telling that in this part of Christ's discourse with his disciples at the Last Supper, it's not some idyllic setting where nothing has gone wrong. Christ has just gotten done dropping a bombshell, telling them that one of them would betray him. He then dismisses Judas Iscariot to go do what he was going to do. And it's precisely when Judas had left that Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him." That's kind of an odd thing

to say: that the Son of Man, himself, has been glorified now. Now that what has happened? His betrayer has just left to go and betray him. What's glorifying in that? We could talk about that for a long time, but it does at least give some powerful framework for what Jesus says to his disciples next: this new commandment to love one another.

Turns out it wasn't an empty command, or one contingent on how pleasing or agreeable one was to another. How do we know? Because he said, "Just as I loved you," and how does he love them? He breaks bread, washes the feet, and prays for those who would not long after betray him, abandon him, and deny him. We don't get to choose who we're called to love in the church.

But there's another wrinkle in what Jesus says here. It's not just a call to love one another so that they'll be closer to each other, or that they would enjoy greater community. There's mission, there's witness here. Did you hear the last verse? V. 25. Jesus says, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." That first phrase puts a whole new spin on this. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples." It means that loving one another isn't just an internal thing or about forging a stronger institution with stronger relationships or a stronger sense of community. It means that a primary way that the church, Christ's followers, are called to bear witness to who they follow is how? By loving one another.

Have you ever thought of it that way? When we gather in fellowship, for coffee, for donuts, for dinner, have you ever thought of it that way? When we show care for each other in times of crisis or grief, have you ever thought of it that way? When we lift up each other in prayer and support, have you ever thought of it that way? That it's not just about how we love each other, but that the very manner in which we love each other should point not to ourselves but to the one we follow. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The real challenge, then, comes when you ask yourself, "What is it about the church that sets it apart from, well, every other example of human beings gathering together?" It's wonderful to show care for one another, but guess what? Lots of people do that. It's not an exclusively Christian notion to show care and support to other people, especially to those within your own close circles. That's a very human thing to do, common even.

But Christ is calling us to more than common decency. It's a love for one another, just as he loved us, forged out of sacrifice, in spite of betrayal, abandonment, and denial, in such a way that goes beyond common expressions of support.

Think about it: what if we were known for being more than friendly? Not such a bad thing to be known as friendly or welcoming, but lots of people of friendly and welcoming. What if we in the church loved one another so much that other people thought it was a little strange instead,

showing each other an uncommon level of grace and acceptance, beyond the point of what social norms might look like? That's what Jesus is talking about. It's beyond notions of common decency or natural instinct. It's beyond notions of self-selection and caring only for those like yourselves. It's beyond anything else the world knows, loving one another in such a way that the only explanation, the other differentiating factor, the only conclusion people could reach is that those in the church love one another not because they're such swell people who care for each other, but because of the one they follow.

What if that's what we were known for?

Many years ago, a Christian from North Africa named Tertullian, known to some as one of the so-called "early church fathers," wrote a long defense of the Christian faith against accusations and misconceptions from Roman authorities. In one part of it, he outlined the all-too-limited degree to which people showed common decency in general society, and then in contrast, when the Romans would consider this Christian sect emerging within a city, they saw something different. "It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble," he wrote, "that lead many to put a brand upon us. See, they say, how they love another." See how they love one another. If ever we're tempted to forge a brand or a niche, may that be it: "See how they love one another."

Many years after that, not that long ago, a doctor bearing witness to the same Jesus set up an emergency field hospital in the city of Mosul in western Iraq as a medical mission. It was during that time that the city was attacked by ISIS, but the doctor and the other medical professionals there on mission didn't leave. Because of restrictions on proselytizing, they were under strict limitations not to share their Christian faith or otherwise evangelize in any way. But as people injured in the fighting came into the hospital, there were other ways to talk.

One young man was brought to the hospital and sadly had to have his leg amputated, so he stayed in the hospital for a time, the whole time the staff was caring for him and interacting with each other, but otherwise not speaking a word to him about God, about Jesus, about their faith, nothing.

But then just before he was discharged from this field hospital, this young man came to the medical team and said, "I want to experience the same God that you have." He hadn't known anything like it.

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." What will you be famous for?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.