Weekly sermon An Amazing Gift –Christian Community September 25

**Introduction:**

I read a story a while back that took place in an Alaskan village where a team of sled dogs were being trained. During the day the dogs were harnessed together as a powerful team that could pull their sled trainer for the Iditarod competition. But at night, they were each chained to a short post in the ground in an arc around the trainer’s house. The chains were far enough apart so they couldn’t fight or hurt other dogs on their team. But it turns out this was a mistake. One night a wolf approached the house. He saw the dogs and they began to bark furiously at this intruder. However, because of their chains, they couldn’t reach the wolf or act as a pack to fight him. As a result, the wolf walked between them and somehow managed to get in the house and maul the sled owner and his elderly mother.

Life is hard and there are many sources of evil and suffering all around us. We can’t fend evil off sufficiently if we don’t live in community and work as a team to resist the forces coming against us.

God knows that, and from the very earliest days of faith in the risen Christ, the Holy Spirit gave birth to the church. As a Christian, we become part of the global Body of Christ of all believers who have experienced new life through faith in Christ. God knew we needed that community to live out our Christian life victoriously. The relationships we have with each other are an amazing gift from the Lord. So here’s a comprehensive definition of Church. Christian community is a group of diverse people who share a common connection with Jesus Christ called by God to be the Church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and commanded to love each other and impact the world. That’s our theme today. **Let us pray**.

**The Gift of Community**

The Alaskan story showed the negative effects when the dogs could not act as a team to handle evil. But one of the most precious gifts God has given believers is to call us into His family as mothers and father and brothers and sisters tied together by love. It was actually one of the ways I was assured from I John that I had become a Christian. I had a new love and deep connection with Christians I had never known before. This continues to remain a significant reality and source of deep delight, and has been a confirming sign of God’s hand in bringing us together at Ogden Dunes. I am so grateful for the mutual care and love we share.

Paul obviously experienced that in his ministry too. He tells the Thessalonians “Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, 8so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. 11For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, 12encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

And tells the Philippians 3 “I thank my God every time I remember you. 4In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy 5because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, 6being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. 7It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me. 8God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Paul also surrounded himself with a team in his ministry as an ambassador for Christ. They were a community on mission together. There are several significant lessons we can learn from studying them as a unit.

Here are their names: 7Tychicus, Onesimus, 10Aristarchus, Mark, 11Jesus (the one we call Justus)**,** 12Epaphras, 14Luke, Demas, 15 our brothers and sisters[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Col.4%3A+7-15&version=NLT#fen-NLT-29518a)] at Laodicea**,** and to Nympha.

Ten very different people – each with their own story - Pastors, fervent pray-ers, a doctor, Jews and Gentiles, three failures, 2 future gospel writers (Mark and Luke), and a woman house church leader. Let me introduce them a bit more thoroughly.

**Tychicus** was a fellow pastor, whom Paul called “a dear brother, a faithful minister and a fellow servant in the Lord.” Like in Bunyans’s *Pilgrims Progress*, he was like Faithful, a companion to Christian in his spiritual journey. How I have valued the Tychicuses God has given to accompany me over the years. They have been men and women from many different nationalities.

**Onesimus** was the slave who ran away to Rome, became a Christian and then sought out Paul in prison. It is thought he did that initially in hopes that Paul would advocate for him to his slave owner Philemon. But as a new Christian he ministered to Paul in prison and that blessed Paul. Paul must have mentored him, for ultimately he became a Bishop in the early church.

**Epaphras** was a pastor and ardent prayer warrior for the health of his church in Colossae. Paul said he was “always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and full assured. I vouch for him,” Paul says, “that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis.” (Col.4:12-13). What a blessing to have such a prayer warrior in one’s church community! The graphic shows his role as a lighthouse to warn ships of the rocks and shoals in that area. A fervent prayer warrior is always praying protection and wisdom and guidance for those under his or her watchful eye.

**Justus and Mark** are the only Jewish converts named. We will get back to Mark.

**Luke** wasthe doctor who traveled with Paul to attend to Paul’s impaired eyesight and other physical issues –And there was **Nympha**, one of the women on Paul’s team, like Lydia in Philippi and Prisca in Corinth. Each of these women had Christian gatherings in their homes. They are among the original house church founders!

There were the **brothers and sisters in Christ at Laodecia. And Aristarchus** who was a faithful companion of Paul who braved the riotous uproar with Paul in Ephesus. He also traveled with Paul to Jerusalem to defend Paul’s outreach to the Gentiles, and also went with Paul to Rome. It is likely he shared with Paul in his captivity.

Paul’s community is like a composite of a local church- those in and out –those fully committed to God and those living as nominal Christians- different genders, different religious backgrounds, different ages. All in all they represent an amazing team who were gifts to Paul and gifts to those around them. They learned how to honor and support each other, and kept the Lord Jesus their central focus and priority.

****Church history over the centuries is dotted with other notables like these men and women – as the list in Hebrews 11 indicates. They look for ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works, as they meet together to encourage one another. Charles Spurgeon has said,

“ God uses imperfect people to accomplish His will because there are not any other kind around.” Even imperfect people who have failed.

No surprise, then, that Church history is also strewn with stories of those who have created dissension, disunity, party spirit, even slander and paralysis in the church. In the early church Paul describes them to Timothy in his second epistle to Timothy 3:5 “They act religious but reject the power that could make them godly.”

In today’s world they are part of a community that is bound in legalism or is blending in with the culture. A community focused on doctrine and rules and human effort, that leaves out the Holy Spirit. A group of people whom Satan uses to split churches and denominations, bring missionaries home from the mission field, and create havoc wherever they are. In these churches “people don’t see manifestations of God’s power in answer to fervent prayer. Instead, they hear arguments about theological issues that few people care about.”

They do “diet church!” Tony Evans explains it this way: “A man walked into a donut shop and with a smile, asked for 5 donuts and a Diet Coke. Now, that Diet Coke was not going to cancel out the negative effects of five nonnutritional, sugar-soaked fat-filled donuts. [Yet,] some Christians think that “diet church” on Sunday morning will cancel out sinful living Monday through Saturday. It doesn’t work that way” (Tony Evans, Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations, Moody publishers 2009, p.61),

Yes, the church is made up of imperfect people, who sin throughout the week in thought, word and deed. Some slander and gossip and say things that break relationships, break up churches and break up families. But “God uses broken people like you and me to rescue broken people like you and me.” Indeed.

So how can any of us keep from breaking up a church or a family or tubing our own walk with God? How can God redeem our brokenness and enable the church to thrive?

On Paul’s team were three team members who failed God, their community and one another. I want to look more closely at their stories as we think of the role of the church as a healing community. Perhaps we can learn more about how we can to be a healing community of love and mercy and forgiveness and hope,

The 3 notable failures among Paul’s coworkers, mentioned in Col.4, are Mark, Onesimus, and Demas.

**Mark** failed both Paul and Barnabas when he deserted them on the first missionary outreach sent out by the home church in Antioch. The three of them had gone to Cypress and had been opposed by a false prophet named Bar-Jesus. He was a sorcerer who “tried to turn the Procounsel Paul was witnessing to from the faith” (Acts 13:6-8,) Paul confronted Bar-Jesus directly, called him a son of the devil and caused him to go blind. But it was too much for Mark, and he returned to Jerusalem at the next stop.

Mark had been raised in the church – it was at his mother’s house in Jerusalem that the early church had gathered and was praying for Peters deliverance from prison. But Mark’s faith, apparently, had not been sufficiently tested to withstand overt evil and he was spooked by Paul’s words and actions as he rebuked Bar-Jesus. He still needed to mature. And how did that happen? Paul refused to give Mark another chance and turned him down for their second missionary journey. But Barnabas disagreed with the result that Paul and Barnabas split – Paul took Silas on his second missionary journey and Barnabas took Mark with him home to Cypress (Acts 15). A split in the early church leadership caused by the failure of one young Christian to stand in the face of opposition. However, Barnabas obviously mentored Mark and later we read of Mark’s return to ministry and even to being a help to Paul in prison. As a testimony to God’s redemptive acts, Mark also became the apostle Peter’s scribe and wrote his gospel based on Peter’s recounting of Jesus’ ministry. He represents God’s redemption. Mark failed, was mentored by Barnabas, was forgiven apparently by the Christian leadership, and restored to vital ministry in the early church.

**Onesimus** was the slave who deserted his master Philemon and ran away to Rome. There he became a new follower of Jesus and tracked down Paul in prison, hoping Paul could advocate for him with Paul’s friend Philemon. Paul apparently mentored Onesimus because he was chosen by Paul to accompany Tychicus in delivering Paul’s letter to both the Colossians and to Philemon directly. And his is another story of redemption. History records that later, Onesimus continued in his service to the church and ultimately became a Bishop. Restored to serve.

**Demas** is the only sad story among the three failures. Paul has no words of commendation for him and we learn why at the end of Paul’s life when he says “Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. “ (2 Tim. 4:10) A heartbreak in the Christian community.

David Garland, the commentator for the NIV *Life Application Commentary* series says, “Failure happens but failure need not be fatal.” (Garland, p. 291). God redeems. And He helps the church community to be part of that healing, restoring process. It doesn’t work for everyone, but, we would be wise not to judge and condemn these men for their failures too quickly. If you point a finger at someone with a closed fist, the other fingers can all be pointing back at you!

Think about it, beloved. I can just about guarantee that every one of us in this church has also failed. Maybe we failed God by our deliberate choices of sin; maybe we failed our community by not carrying the responsibilities and burdens of ministering to others and breaking our promises of faithful partnership; maybe we failed ourselves and live in self-blame and self-hate because we never have internalized God’s forgiveness, mercy and love; maybe we failed in our negative response to the hurt caused by others as we have nursed our woundedness and the injustice of others’ attacks. Those negative thoughts and attitudes actually can end up poisoning the life of the church we say we love. We have all failed. The issue is how do we move through this and restore people and our community which is hurting?

Let me tell you **my story**. I certainly am among the “all have failed “ group. At the point when the Spirit finally got through my rationalizations and justifications for my sinful behavior, I broke down and cried in repentance. Like the prodigal son or daughter.

God keeps track of all our tears and laments and has bottles of our tears lined up in heaven. As David said in Ps. 56 “Record my lament; list my tears on your scroll – are they not in your record? (Ps.55:8). An alternative translation for scroll is “put my tears in your wineskins” (NIV Application verse footnote ps.55:8) A bit closer to the bottles talked about😊

The classic hymn that came to me as I was writing this part of the sermon is *For Those Tears I Died*. (Our failures not only bring us tears and cause tears in others, but they also make God weep.).

“You said You’d come and share all my sorrows. You said You’d be there for all my tomorrows; I came so close to turning You away, but just like You promised, You came there to stay – I just had to pray. Refrain: And Jesus said, “Come to the waters, stand by my side. I know you are weary; you won’t be denied. I felt every teardrop when in darkness you cried and I strove to remind you that for those tears I died.” (words and music: Marsha Stevens).



Jesus our Lord and Savior not only feels every tear drop and brokenness we express, but He then redeems and restores us from our failures and gives His people the ability to do the same. And that has happened to me. I now have a new, heart-deep gratitude for God’s mercy and for His people who saw my suffering and gathered around me to pray and help me get back on track. It was after those deep waters that God gave me the pastoral ministry of a Tychicus and the prayer ministry of an Epaphras as I have wrestled for many years against the power of darkness for those whom I love and am discipling.

And this is what He will do for you, and then you can bring His comfort and restoration and hope to others who struggle with failure and shame. God will use your pain to bring hope and healing to others. It’s the gospel’s redemptive cycle that we get to live out in the church.

The mark of this kind of church is a church that has the mark of heaven on it. We just need to be patient with one another – God is not finished with any of us yet!!!



Christian Community is an amazing gift. It’s a privilege to become part of the vast company of mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ. And a privilege to have our names added to the “great cloud of witnesses” that have surrounded and supported God’s kingdom agenda and God’s people over the centuries,

May **we** be known as a healing community that is learning to love and accept and heal one another through the blood of Jesus our Lord. Amen. Let us pray.

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Song of Going Forth: They’ll Know we are Christians by our love