

Title: The Call to Community

Text: 1 Corinthians 16.5-12

Theme: The honest truth about church

Series: 1 Corinthians #97

Prop Stmt Real relationships are necessary for real ministry.

Every congregation has a choice. It can be a bag of marbles or a bag of grapes. In a bag of marbles, the only contact you have is when others bounce off of you from time to time. They make no lasting impact, leave no mark, have no influence and leave you unchanged. In a bag of grapes, the longer you are together, the more you find your skin wears off, your lives are intertwined and pretty soon your stuff is part of the whole. It's safe, shallow, and unsatisfying to be marbles.

Read Text:

Real ministry is not carried out on stages with canned productions that elevate people into lives that are disconnected and hidden from view. Look at Christ. He walked on common roads with 12 men. His life was an open book. Want to know what he ate – he would eat with you. Want to know where he slept – he would show you. Want to know when and where he prayed – you had better be ready to get up early. Real ministry that lasts has a towel and a basin of water and doesn't go off when the cameras do.

Turn on your TV and look at some of the prominent ministries with their crusades, rallies, staged productions, glossy publications and elaborate fundraising schemes and then look at Jesus and look at Paul, because they don't live like and act like the slick, edited for TV and staged, air brushed Christianity that is often served today. Jesus and Paul both went to where the people were and met them in their lives and they both did it personally. When they traveled they usually did so, with a small group of men into whom they could invest their lives as well as benefit from their friendship and conversation. The call to follow Christ is the call to community. It is the call for you to be Jesus, to represent Jesus and to allow others to be Jesus to you. Jesus left this earth to go back to the Father and He left us here to carry out His ministry. You are here to be Jesus to this world and you cannot do that by yourself. To be part of God is to be part of God's community. The church is God's community on this earth. The church is ground zero for God's plan to make Himself known in this world. The church is a necessary tool in your sanctification. Over 50 years ago, the Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner said, "togetherness of Christians is ...not secondary or contingent: it is integral to their life just as is their abiding in Christ." Our gathering together is not an optional event in the life of the believer, it is critical. Our life together as a community of believers, our worship together, our growing together, our serving each other, and ministry to one another, is not if we get around to it this week, if our kids aren't in a sports league on Sunday, if we got to bed early enough on Saturday night, if there isn't some other b-day party, or other function taking place. If we don't gather together, we will shrivel up and slowly die. But, it is not just gathering. It is gathering to hear from God who speaks through the Word as it is preached. It is gathering to participate in the God-inspired drama that we communion that re-enacts the cross, and that anticipates the marriage supper of the Lamb.

There is a wonderful dynamic that comes from the Spirit of God, when the people of God gather to respond to God and to hear from God and desire to obey and follow God and are humbly (humbly, humbly) committed to helping each other. But that incredible dynamic, which has such incredible potential to change entire communities, is rarely unleashed because we become so blinded by our own pride that we fail to stay close to the cross and tender to the gospel of Christ that brought us into the family in the first place. So, the church has become a performance on a stage that functions as a very cheap substitute for real life. Church is not being the audience at a concert or an event. It is living as the people of God together, speaking the truth in love to each other, listening with humility, correcting problems, becoming like Christ, and drawing others to Christ. We struggle with this, just like the church in Corinth. But look at this text. I doubt that there are too many life verses, or favorite verses that come from this section. What do you see in these verses? You see people and you see the realities of seeking to live in harmony with each other. Real church is tough. Fake church is easy. Fake church that is content to simply entertain you and you tickle you from time to time is as easy as fast food. It's fast, easy, doesn't take up too much work or commitment but robs your soul of true nutrition. Real church is tough because real relationships bring out things in you and others that are a challenge to work through, but it is in the working out, and praying through, and long obedience that the Spirit uses to forge a unified army, where there are no superstars, no prima-donnas, no know-it-alls, but truth-craving, Spirit-driven, humble and tenacious followers of Christ. Real church brings about real change in our lives. Real change takes place in committed relationships. And I think that we are about the most uncommitted generation in the history of the world. Being a real church now, is at the same time, so challenging because we worship the idols of our independence and it is so exciting because a real church is so compelling, and so needed, and speaks so directly to our isolation and loneliness.

- The church is people.
 - o People who are related in Christ.

The true church is comprised only of people who believe in the true gospel of Jesus Christ. Only by coming to genuine personal faith in the person and the work of Christ, is anyone born into the family of God. When that takes place, your life changes forever. Your identity changes, your destiny changes, your desires start changing, your affections and goals start changing. You are saved from sin and saved unto God. You are rescued and redeemed from your transgressions and sins in which you used to live, and made alive with Christ. You are bought out of the slave market of sin and brought into a family. You are taken from your isolation from God and brought into a relationship with God and His children. Once you were not a people, now you are the people of God. Therefore, the church is people who are related to Christ and...

- o People whose lives affect each other.

Paul's ministry plans affected Corinth because he was probably going to need a place to stay (perhaps for an entire winter, when traveling in the ancient world was generally suspended) and because he would need some money and supplies to carry out his journey. We saw last that week that what was happening in Corinth was affecting the church in Ephesus and Macedonia and Jerusalem.

- People who depend on each other.

Paul needed Timothy to go to Corinth because Paul needed to stay a while longer in Ephesus. The church at Ephesus and Paul therefore, needed to let Timothy go and Corinth needed to accept and support Timothy when he arrived. Paul knew that he was needed in Ephesus, needed to visit the churches in Macedonia, needed to address problems in Corinth and desperately needed to deliver that offering to Jerusalem. His planning in verses 5-9 reflect a genuine love for the saints and a willingness for his life to be spent on building their relationships in Christ.

Apollos, who had already been to Corinth, was being asked to go back and was apparently willing to eventually return, but was either unable or did not want to at the present time.

Paul had been to Corinth and was planning on returning. Timothy was going to Corinth. Apollos was planning to go to Corinth and Aquila and Priscilla were still connected and concerned.

But Paul also benefited from the visit by Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus. "They supplied what was lacking from you."

Do you see how these believers truly needed each other? This text illustrates a mutuality that is lost on us today. For almost 200 years, the Western church has been the launching zone of many missions and missionaries to almost every region of the world. This is to be applauded, but, this has also brought with it some serious problems. When you are used to doing the sending, it is pretty difficult to do the receiving. When you do the sending, because you have the money, the people, the schools and the organization, it is very easy to develop a patronizing attitude that says that you have to do it our way. That needs to be repented of. We all want to be the strong church that helps out others. But, each church needs to learn interdependence, not just independence. These believers demonstrated and interdependence that was seen between the churches, even though it desperately needed to be practiced at the heart level within the church at Corinth.

- The church relies on faithful people.

These people stand as examples to the church. If the rest of the church followed the model of these people, the issues raised in this letter would be settled.

Verses 5-20 sound a bit irrelevant to us, since they have to do with travel plans, scheduling difficulties and final words of commendation, etc. Initially there does not

seem to be anything of real doctrinal substance. But, in light of the rest of this letter, in reality, these people are mentioned because each of them is a life that speaks very directly to the problems of this church. Paul, Timothy, Apollos, Stephanus, Fortunatus, Achaia, Acquila and Priscilla are each personal treasures, who have served the church at Corinth. This church was blessed by a variety of faithful people whose lives ought to make us stop and consider our own. Let's look at the three mentioned in these verses:

1. **Paul faced Open doors and Opposition.** (5-9)

Paul wrote the book of 1 Corinthians from Ephesus, which was located due east across the Aegean Sea. He spent two and a half years in Ephesus because the opportunity for the gospel was so compelling. Like most of the communities in that day, they enjoyed a daily siesta period from 11a – 4p. During that time, some of the people would gather in the local lecture halls to listen to debates and discussions on matters of public interest. The hall of Tryannus was open to Paul who spoke daily about the gospel. As a result, many came to faith and the gospel was being spread through entire region. Paul's ministry was not without conflict. Ephesus had a great amount of evil expressed in the magical arts and the occult. The believers were delivered out of this and they cleaned out their homes of occultic material. They gathered this together and burned it publicly, with the estimated value being equivalent to about 5 million dollars.

Behind all of this was the reality of people like Paul dealing with evil day after day. But, the gospel of Christ was powerful, although Paul was no doubt often drained and physically exhausted. It was so effective, that local merchants who sold shrines of the goddess Artemis, were experiencing an economic slowdown. So, the local of silversmith's guild started a riot and almost succeeded in a public lynching of Paul. By the time Paul left a strong church was established in that city with elders. He faced open doors, but with those open doors came intense opposition. Paul could not leave now. He needed to finish his job. But the situation in Corinth was serious and he knew that it had to be addressed. So, Paul tells them that he plans to come. He was not neglecting them, but would get there when he could in order to spend the winter with them.

2. **Timothy was Needed and Not Appreciated.** (10-11)

Timothy is carrying on the work of the Lord. The "if" (v.10) has more of the idea of "when". Timothy is coming, and Paul assumes that Timothy will make it, but everything is "if the Lord permits". Acts 18 tells us that Paul, Silas and Timothy were all present in the founding of the church at Corinth. Later on, Apollos arrived. But, when the people were lining themselves up behind personalities, (some follow Paul, some Apollos, some Cephas, etc), there was no mention of Timothy. It appears that Timothy was not for whatever reason a crowd favorite. However, Paul knew better. He knew how truly valuable Timothy was, while apparently some in the congregation tended to dismiss him.

But, Paul is not willing to play that game. He is a trusted brother. He is a careful shepherd. He cares for the gospel and for the church. He is valued, but he also appears to be a bit vulnerable especially since Paul is sending Timothy into a difficult situation

(cf. 4.17-21). I doubt that Timothy was all that excited about this trip. And yet, he is being sent by the Apostle Paul as an agent of the Lord, and Paul's admonition to the church is that they need to recognize that and respond accordingly. Don't treat him like a substitute teacher (know what I mean?). So, Paul tells them (10-11) three things: 1) See to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you. Timothy deeply cares for the church. Paul describes him in Philippians 2 as one "who takes a genuine interest in your welfare" who is not like most who look out for their own interests. It is easy to take advantage of people who are sensitive and run them over. Church history is full of stories of good and kind shepherds being chewed up and spit out by ungodly and arrogant church members. It is also full of stories of good and kind church members being skinned and abused by ungodly and arrogant leaders who were wolves instead of shepherds. Timothy was kind and his kindness made him vulnerable to being taken advantage of. So Paul says, 2) "No one, then should refuse to accept him." The idea is, do not disdain him. Do not sneer at him and presume to be his spiritual superior. And I think that this warning is directed at those who are saying that they wanted Apollos and their getting Timothy, which is exactly what they need. Apollos and Timothy were saying the same thing, Apollos was just saying it with a bit more eloquence which some of the people enjoyed. They basked in the reputation and gifts of Apollos and ignored the message.

I've had people say, "Well, I was a member of (?) church, or "I sat under ?" and I am used to competent preaching." And I wanted to say, "Well it obviously did not do any good." Not only is this a warning against that immature thinking, but Paul also tells them to 3) "Send him on his way in peace." This phrase "in peace" does not focus so much on some anticipated rift between Timothy and the church, but on the rifts that exist within the church. Get your act together, so that the church in peace can send Timothy on his way back to me.

3. Apollos was Adored and Ignored. (12)

"Now about our brother Apollos" is a phrase that Paul uses when addressing a topic that he has been asked about or that needs to be dealt with. Apollos had apparently developed a good reputation with some of the believers at Corinth and they wanted him to come back. But, that good reputation and effective ministry was taken too far by some of the people. In the opening section of 1 Corinthians, Paul mentions Apollos six times. Never, does Paul indicate that there was a problem between him and Apollos, because there wasn't. The problem was that people were lining up behind Paul or Apollos or other men. Now, Apollos was with Paul in Ephesus. It is clear from the opening phrase in v.12, that there was a request for Apollos to return. I am surmising that Apollos does not want to return because that would only aggravate the problem. He does not want to give these people what they want because they have made him the focus of their loyalties and affections instead of Christ. He is not playing that game. In fact, he does not even send his greetings as does Aquila and Priscilla. Paul makes it clear that he asked him to go back, so that no one can accuse Paul of being intimidated by Apollos. But, the fact that a vocal contingent of the church wanted Apollos, no one requested Timothy, Paul was sending Timothy to follow up a strong letter that was addressing some serious problems

all made for the likelihood of a ministry ambush on Timothy, something that apparently happened.

This church is no different than the early church. If our commitment to the gospel is truly embraced at the heart level, it will be seen in a mutual, humble, Spirit-powered unity that will become an awesome force in the hands of God. Church is a lot like marriage. The relationship has both the ability to satisfy you and deeply disappoint you because you allow yourself to be vulnerable to others. Every congregation has a choice. It can be a bag of marbles or a bag of grapes. In a bag of marbles, the only contact you have is when others bounce off of you from time to time. They make no lasting impact, leave no mark, have no influence and leave you unchanged. In a bag of grapes, the longer you are together, the more you find your skin wears off, your lives are intertwined and pretty soon your stuff is part of the whole. It's safe, shallow, and unsatisfying to be marbles. It's dangerous to be grapes. It's vulnerable to be grapes. It's the call to community, the call to follow Christ in communion, in harmony with the other followers, whom you need more than you realize.

Communion -