

**“One in Spirit and Purpose”**

*If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ...then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose (Philippians 2:1-2).*

The last time a major construction project took place on this corner of our campus was in 1966. At that time, Brandt Hall was added and the people of that day went through many of the same challenges we've experienced over the last six months. When the Brandt addition was finally dedicated, Pastor Schoedel and the leaders of Emmanuel marked the occasion with a memorial plaque, commemorating the project. The striking, wooden plaque captures the mid-century architectural feel of building designed by Kenny Cole, and it lists those for whom Brandt Hall is named, but one of the most significant details on the historical marker, was a verse from the Bible intentionally chosen to capture the spirit and purpose of the ambitious addition. Today, before you go into Bible class, or on your way back from the restroom, stop by the Brandt Hall Meeting Room and take a look at the massive memorial and, in the center, you will find the first verse of Psalm 133 which reads, “How rare it is, how lovely, this fellowship of those who meet together” (Moffat's Translation).

This is an important verse for us to hear because today, in our Epistle reading from Philippians, Paul picks up on a similar theme as he writes to the Church at Philippi: “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:1-4).

“How rare it is, how lovely, this fellowship of those who meet together”. From the Sunday school rhyme that connects church and steeple and people, to the words of the great hymns that speak of the, “tie that binds our hearts in Christian love,” the theology of fellowship plays an essential role in our life of faith. Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized the importance of Christian fellowship when wrote that, “the physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.” And, we see this same sentiment reflected throughout Scripture. When Paul was imprisoned he called for Timothy to come to him in the last days of his life so he could physically see him again. Remembering the congregation in Thessalonica, Paul prayed, “night and day...that (he) might see” their faces (I Thessalonians 3:10). The apostle John knew that his joy would not be complete until he could come and speak to the people of his congregation face to face (II John 12).<sup>1</sup> And the writer of the book of Hebrews told his readers, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25).

At Emmanuel, the mission statement that guides our ministry also highlights this relational aspect of our life together as it announces that we are, “a caring family sharing God's love and forgiveness.” We often talk about fellowship and Christian love as pillars of our common experience in the church, and yet, if we're honest, it is an aspect of our life as Christians that can be very difficult to put into practice. We steer away from people we don't know. We find ourselves drawn to those who look and sound and think like we do. We allow sin to come between us and remain unreconciled.

And the truth is that at more than any other time in history, we live an isolated existence. The wonders of technology have created a culture where we can get on Facebook and see what people are eating for breakfast and yet go for weeks or months without a meaningful conversation. We can shop without talking to a clerk, we can find our way to any destination on the planet without asking for directions; we can even listen to a sermon without passing through the doors of the church. We live at a time when we can truly be independent and self-reliant and yet the spiritual impact of these false freedoms can be very dangerous.

In fact, God's Word vividly describes the isolating implications of sin. In Isaiah, we are told that, “your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you” (Isaiah 59:2). In Luke, when Jesus encountered a man possessed with an evil spirit, we are told that many times this demon had driven the man in to “solitary places” (Luke 8:29). And even the devil himself is described by Peter as, “a roaring lion” looking to devour those who have been separated from the flock (I Peter 5:8).

<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. New York: Harper and Row. 1954. Pg. 19.

The point is clear: Christianity is a community activity! It is a team sport and throughout the Bible we find a picture of the church that is highly relational. Listen to Luke's description of the church in the book of Acts: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need...They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:41-47).

Luke tells us that, "They devoted themselves to...fellowship." The original Greek word translated here as "fellowship" is the word "koinonia." It is an intimate word of connection that means participation or communion, and it's even used by Paul in First Corinthians to describe the relationship we have with Christ through the Lord's Supper. It's important for us to understand this word, because what's at stake in our fellowship is the Gospel itself. In the Smalcald Articles Luther wrote that, "the Gospel...offers council and help against sin in more than one way...First, through the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin is preached to the whole world; second, through Baptism; third, through the Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys; and finally, through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren."<sup>2</sup>

The "mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren" is Luther's way of describing the importance and power of our relationships within the body of Christ. And, what Luther is saying here, is that in our fellowship; in our participation in the body of Christ; in our relationships with each other; in our *koinonia* we have the opportunity to love and to be loved, to help and to be helped, to comfort and to be comforted, to confront and be confronted, to forgive and to be forgiven. That is the power of the Gospel! And through "the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren," God's love and forgiveness are delivered!

In his book "Life Together" Bonhoeffer writes that, "God has put (His) Word into the mouth of men in order that it may be communicated to other men. When one person is struck by the Word, he speaks it to others. God has willed that we should seek and find His living Word in the witness of a brother (or sister), in the mouth of a man. Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother (or sister) as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother (or sister) solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother (or sister); his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure."<sup>3</sup>

*By the power of the Gospel*, we have been forgiven. *By the power of the Gospel*, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting is our future. And, *by the power of the Gospel*, God has brought us into the communion of saints, made us members of His body the Church, and called us into a living, breathing, physical community, and He has promised that, "where two or three are gathered in His name" there He is also. Don't ever underestimate the spiritual impact of speaking a caring word or extending a hand of welcome in the name of Christ, for in the fellowship of the Church, Christ is present.

Over the last few years, we've spent a lot of time and a lot of energy on this latest building addition and, in a project like this, it's easy to lose perspective; to see only the bricks and mortar. But make no mistake, the building that we are in the process of completing is tool for ministry. It is a physical place where "the mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers and sisters" can occur. It is about the fellowship of believers. It is about the forgiveness of sins. It is about the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

C.F.W. Walther once wrote, "it is marvelous beyond comparison...that even in His Kingdom of Grace, God performs the planting, administering, extending, and preserving of His kingdom...through men (and women) who are altogether unfit for this task."<sup>4</sup> The theme for today's worship is, "Meet One Greet One" and in this theme, we are reminded of the important role we all have in sharing Christ's love and forgiveness. May God bless each of us with the courage to meet and the grace to greet and power to forgive in the name of Christ, because that is what we are about. "How rare it is, how lovely, this fellowship of those who meet together." Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold

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<sup>2</sup>Tappert, T. G. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Smalcald Articles: 3, VII). Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1959.

<sup>3</sup>Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. New York: Harper and Row. 1954. Pg. 22-23.

<sup>4</sup>Walther, C.F.W. *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*. St. Louis: CPH. 1986. Pg. 36.