

## New Hope Sermon – 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5: Nurturing Community

Heather Zempel has written an interesting book about community. She is the Discipleship Pastor at National Community Church in Washington D.C. a church, she describes, as “an eclectic collection of Capitol Hill staffers, artists, students, entrepreneurs, moms and dads, Republicans, Democrats, singles, homeless and wealthy people” (Heather Zempel, *Community is Messy*, IVP, 2012, p. 19). Her book title, based on this church, is “Community Is Messy.” You think, with this eclectic group? She opens her book with this insight: “Sometimes people talk about community like it’s a lovey-dovey, touchy-feely part of Christ-centered living. Perhaps it’s just me, but I think community is hard. Maybe I’m just a hard person to have community *with*, but my experience points to the difficult truth that community is messy and discipleship is hard. If we want to experience them, we pay a significant price (p. 11)” The lead pastor of her church, Mark Batterson, agrees. He says, “Community is messy. It’s also tragic, and hilarious, and inspiring, and frustrating. [But] It’s part of what God has made us for, and part of God’s plan for rooting and establishing us in love and bringing us to fullness in Christ (p. 10).

The New Testament’s description of community is based in Christians being part of the body of Christ, “living in committed community that passionately loves Jesus above all else (Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, p. 46). In order to be that kind of healthy community, we can’t focus on the problems in the community; we need to focus on the solutions for each problem and the blessing and strengths of each member of the community.

Principles for living as a Christ-centered community are what Paul is emphasizing in 1 Thess. Chapter 5. He provides a recipe for a healthy community. Let’s read his recipe from the New English Translation together:

*“5:12 Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who labor among you and preside over you in the Lord and admonish you, 5:13 and to esteem them most highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 5:14 And we urge you, brothers and sisters, admonish the undisciplined, comfort the discouraged, help the weak, be patient toward all. 5:15 See that no one pays back evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good for one another and for all.”*

v. 14 in other languages.

First, Paul highlights the leadership issue in a church. Leaders themselves are called to humility and service in a God-directed ministry among their people. But to the Thessalonians, Paul is emphasizing the community’s response to their leaders. He uses the words “*respect*” and “*honor*” – “*in love.*” In fact, as he gives eight different admonitions to the Thessalonians, they are wrapped in the triad of love, peace, and kindness. In verse 13 he says “*Live in peace with each other.*” Remembering Heather’s description of community as messy, we can understand why we need, “*as much as it depends on you, to live at peace with each other*” (Rom.12:18). Peace within a church community is often hard-won through forgiveness, reconciliation, listening, and not arguing with those with different perspectives. In fact, in Romans 14 Paul acknowledges that members had differing understandings of what is right – like which day should be a holy day, whether one can eat food offered to idols, etc., but he tells them “*to make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification.*” (Rom.14:19). Peace is keeping us pro-active. This is the kind of peace that Christ can give and that the world does not usually understand.

Living with each other in peace and love is critical for the next admonition (v. 14). The leaders are charged with “*admonishing the undisciplined, comforting the discouraged, helping the weak, and being patient with everyone.*” Admonishing the undisciplined, what do you think that means? The word originally referred to the soldier who is out of step or out of rank or in the army moving in disarray (L. Morris, *The New International commentary on the N.T. I + 2 Thessalonians*, Eerdmans, 1959, p. 168). Certainly, this could include Christians who have God on the margins of their time, their priorities, their money,

and their values. It would include those who make no intentional effort to nourish their soul, but have a great disconnect between their faith and how they live out their life. Allegiance to Jesus Christ requires great discipline. It is all about our choices, our intentional choices, of what we do and what we don't do. Of what we input into our minds and what we refuse to let our minds focus on. Paul tells Timothy that God can give a "*spirit of power of love and of self-discipline*" (2 Timothy 1:7). In fact, one of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control (Galatians 5:22). So, in love the leaders were to admonish the undisciplined.

Then, the leaders were to comfort the discouraged, and help the weak. If community is healthy under Christ with his love and peace, then there is not judgement for the discouraged or the depressed. There is not condescension to the weak. I found a wonderful example of how one nation deals with their weak and discouraged is Zimbabwe. They have friendship benches scattered throughout the country at major medical centers.

"A Friendship Bench is quite literally a park bench—with a higher calling. In Zimbabwe, friendship benches are located on the grounds of medical clinics around major cities. They're a safe place where trained community members counsel folks struggling with what they, in the local Shona language, call *kufungisisa* ("thinking too much") or what Americans call depression.

Dr. Dixon Chibanda, a psychiatrist at the University of Zimbabwe, came up with the name Friendship Bench back in 2006. In Zimbabwe, as in most places, there's a lot of stigma around mental illness. Chibanda figured out that while people were hesitant to head to a mental clinic and speak with a medical professional about their mental health, they were generally willing to sit on a park bench and share their worries with someone within their own community. At these benches, community counselors and patients meet weekly to discuss intimate issues—and develop a plan to overcome difficulties. The strategy seems to be working. According to a study that tracked 573 patients with anxiety or depression for a six-month period, only 13 percent of those who participated in the Friendship Bench program still had symptoms of depression. Maanvi Singh, "[The Friendship Bench Can Help Chase the Blues Away.](#)" NPR (1-10-17) This is a practical example of Paul's admonitions for the church. We comfort as we sit with....

This is the privilege of bearing one another's burdens in empathy (Galatians 6:2). An example is in the movie *Glory*:

The movie *Glory* chronicles the true story of the first noncommissioned black regiment to fight for the North during the Civil War. The formation of the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts is not taken seriously from the beginning. Most doubt that enough soldiers will volunteer. Others suspect that even if enough enlist, the regiment will whittle away deserter by deserter. But the white abolitionist officer from Boston, Robert Shaw, played by Matthew Broderick, idealistically agrees to command the 54th, believing that blacks should be given the right to fight for their freedom.

From the beginning, Shaw tries to treat his men like soldiers, not like the slaves they once were. Even though the Union doesn't consider the 54th equal in status with other white regiments, Shaw wants his soldiers equipped as every other soldier is in the North: with firmly soled shoes, Union uniforms, and sturdy weaponry. Lobbying on behalf of his regiment, however, he increasingly understands how little his men are valued, even by those Northerners who maintain that blacks should be emancipated.

Throughout the film Shaw faces the dilemma of standing up for his men or staying quiet amongst his superiors to save face. His empathy is strikingly portrayed when Shaw must inform his soldiers that the Union recently determined that black soldiers would receive a smaller salary than white soldiers. Standing on a high, commanding platform, Shaw hesitantly announces to his troops, "You men enlisted in this regiment with the understanding that you would be paid the regular army wage of 13 dollars a month. This morning I have been notified that since you are a colored regiment you will be paid 10 dollars a month."

His regiment grumbles at the injustice, but they fall out by company to receive their pay. Some pay, no matter how little, is better than no pay at all. But there is one dissenter, a runaway slave named Trip, played by Denzel Washington, who stridently protests the pay cut. "Where you goin', boy?" Trip asks one soldier. "To get paid. Ten dollar, lot of money," his comrade replies.

Trying to garner some support, Trip asks his elderly bunk mate, Rawlins, played by Morgan Freeman, "Hey pop, are you gonna lay down for this too?" When Rawlins ignores him, Trip files up and down the forming lines struggling to get someone to join his protest. He hollers, "A colored soldier will stop a bullet just as good as a white one and for less money too. Yeah, yeah, Ol' Unc Abe has got himself a real bargain here." Soon other soldiers join the protest. One yells, "That's right, slaves. Step right up. Make your mark. Get your slave wage." Another says, "All you good colored boys, go ahead and sign up." One by one, soldiers join the outcry, and Trip incites the regiment to tear up their paychecks. "Tear it up. Tear it up. Tear it up," he shouts. The regiment repeats the same words: "Tear it up. Tear it up. Tear it up."

"Pow!" A shot instantly silences the clamor. The soldiers turn their attention to their commanding officer, Shaw, expecting to be disciplined. "If you men will take no pay," Shaw sternly announces, "then none of us will." He proceeds to tear up his check as well. Recovering from their shock, the soldiers uproariously celebrate, tossing their tattered paychecks in the air like confetti.

When we carry each other's burdens, we weep when they weep, we stand in solidarity with them in their oppression. This makes for a healthy, safe community.

Finally, Paul tells the Thessalonians to avoid retribution: "*See that no one pays back evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good for one another and for all.*" No one pays back evil with evil. I think this can only happen when Christ deals with our tendency to remember the things people have done against us, and hold it against them. The Spirit will flag this in us, for that is sin. Once we understand this sin and ask for forgiveness, we will be able to help others mediate mercy, and not retaliation. By the power of Christ, we will "*try and do what is good for the other.*"

But the NIV has a very different translation of that thought at the end of v. 15, and I want to emphasize this today. It says "*always try to be kind to each other, and to everyone else.*" Such a simple prescription for healthy living, and yet so often one we miss in our frenetic busyness and self-serving or self-defense, or self-interest. "*Always try to be kind.*" Kindness has so many faces. Let me share 2 living examples:

Pastor Scott Sauls tells a story about an unnamed nursery worker who bumped into a first time visitor named Janet who had dropped her two boys off in the nursery. Sauls writes:

After the service, while Janet was waiting in the nursery line to retrieve her boys, one of the nursery workers quietly approached her and said that there had been some issues. Both of her boys had picked fights with other children. Also, one of her boys had broken several of the toys that belonged to the church. In front of a room filled with other children and their parents, Janet scolded her boys and then screamed in a bellowing voice, "S—!" Deeply ashamed and feeling like a failure, Janet got her boys and skulked out of the building. No doubt, we were never going to see her again.

But that unnamed nursery volunteer called the church office that Monday and asked if I could check the visitor notebook to see if Janet had left her contact information. She had. I gave the nursery worker Janet's address, and unbeknownst to me, she sent Janet a note. The note read something like this:

Dear Janet, I'm so glad that you and your boys visited our church. Oh, and about that little exchange when you picked them up from the nursery? Let's just say that I found it so refreshing—that you would feel freedom to speak with an honest vocabulary like that in church. I am really drawn to honesty, and you are clearly an honest person. I hope we can become friends. Love, Unnamed Nursery Worker.

The nursery worker and Janet did in fact become friends. Janet came back the next Sunday. And the Sunday after that. And the Sunday after that. And eventually, Janet became the nursery director for the church. Later on I would discover that when Janet started coming to our church she was a recovering heroin addict. *Adapted from Scott Sauls, Befriend (Tyndale, 2016) pages 29-30*

Kindness works for alcoholics too. Gordon MacDonald shares the following story about visiting a small group of men and women affiliated with Alcoholics Anonymous. MacDonald said that he visited the group because he has friends who are recovering alcoholics and he wanted to see for himself what they were talking about. Here's what he found:

One morning Kathy—I guessed her age at 35—joined us for the first time. One look at her face caused me to conclude that she must have been Hollywood-beautiful at 21. Now her face was swollen, her eyes red, her teeth rotting. Her hair looked unwashed, uncombed for who knows how long.

"I've been in five states in the past month," she said. "I've slept under bridges on several nights. Been arrested. Raped. Robbed (now weeping). I don't know what to do. I ... don't ... want ... to ... be ... homeless ... any more. But (sob) I can't stop drinking (sob). I can't stop (sob). I can't ... "

Next to Kathy was a rather large woman, Marilyn, sober for more than a dozen years. She reached with both arms toward Kathy and pulled her close, so close that Kathy's face was pressed to Marilyn's ample breast. I was close enough to hear Marilyn speak quietly into Kathy's ear, "Honey, you're going to be OK. You're with us now. We can deal with this together. All you have to do is keep coming. Hear me? Keep on coming." And then Marilyn kissed the top of Kathy's head.

I was awestruck. The simple words, the affection, the tenderness. How Jesus-like. I couldn't avoid a troubling question that morning. Could this have happened in the places where I have worshiped? Would there have been a space in the program for Kathy to tell her story? Would there have been a Marilyn to respond in this way? *Gordon MacDonald, "My Small Group, Anonymous," Leadership Journal (Winter 2014)*

Kindness is a healing force from God – in marriages as well. “Kindness makes each partner feel cared for, understood, and validated—feel loved. There's a great deal of [evidence](#) showing the more someone receives or witnesses kindness, the more they will be kind themselves, which leads to upward spirals of love and generosity in a relationship.” *Emily Esfahani Smith, "Masters of Love," The Atlantic (6-12-14)*

I believe that we have such a special opportunity at New Hope to live out this recipe for a healthy community. We do know each one who's here, and in the midst of our differences, and culture, and age, and personality, we are learning how to honor one another, to comfort one another, to help one another, to be kind to one another. Each person here is a member of our family – we belong to each other. We belong to God first, but through God's love we belong to each other.

Paul was telling the Thessalonians how to honor God, in their witness in the world, by how they treat each other. Community will be messy; we all make mistakes. Some of our messes will come because we demean, or hurt, or slight others intentionally. Some messes will be unintentional, when we are unaware of differing cultural values, or the standards people hold from their upbringing, or issues of personality that mold their responses and thoughts. We're learning to grow out of our ethno-centrism and we show love and work for peace. The apostle James says that we are to “confess our sins to one another and pray for one another” (James 5:16). That's the kind of accountability we choose at this church where the whole Body ministers to the whole Body. We choose here, not to have a hierarchal fellowship. Certainly there are leaders in our midst, but as each of us in that leadership role is walking humbly with the Lord, hopefully there is no lording it over one another, and the community becomes a safe place to confess our sins, each of us, to one another, and to serve one another. Each of us has the calling to hold one another in love, to live in peace with each other, and to always be kind to one another.

A healthy community is marked by mutuality, and inter-dependence. It is a family that's living and growing together. We can demonstrate that kind of healthy community as we're bound together by the three-fold cords of love, peace, and kindness.

Dr. M.L. Codman-Wilson 8/6/17