

Building friendships in the Body of Christ

Romans 12:3 – 10

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

I'm sure you've all heard the saying, "no one is an island". We cannot do without each other. This applies especially to the Body of Christ, or the church, in whatever form, whether it's a mega church in the northern suburbs of Sydney, or a little house church here in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne.

The most famous prayer of all, the one that Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, the Lord's Prayer – how does it start? Our Father. Our Father, not My Father, or My Lord. Our Father. Jesus teaches us to live in community. He also taught that the greatest commandment was "love the Lord your God" and "love one another". Jesus always spoke in terms of community. He recognised that we cannot live on our own.

Back in May I spoke at our Collingwood congregation on the Trinity, and part of what I said back then was about how God Himself is His own community – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the Trinity. God's very nature, God's very essence, is relationship. God does not exist in isolation. The Christian psychologist Larry Crabb explains, God is a trinity in the sense of being "3 persons, 1 God....the message here is that there is relationship within the very nature of God. God is a personal being who exists eternally in a relationship among persons: He is His own community."

God is his own community. This means that we are not meant to live life on our own. We are created to live in community, to live in the image of God, and to live in the image of God is to live in community. So when things go well in our life, our brothers and sisters rejoice with us. And when things go wrong, our brothers and sisters weep with us. In sharing our lives like this we grow. In fact, if we don't share our lives like that, opening up to each other, **we will never grow.**

Margaret Thatcher, the former Prime Minister of Great Britain, once famously said, there is no such thing as a society. No greater untruth has ever been spoken. Her point was that we are a bunch of individuals and that individualism is the way forward. And that's the message that we are constantly bombarded with day after day after day, and no wonder we fall for it. The message is that you are number one and you must look after yourself first, look after your own needs first and then, if you have time, you can look after others. We're advised that we have to keep up with the Joneses. Outdo the next person. Contrast that with the words of the apostle Paul: "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment... love one another with mutual affection". The only way Paul advises us to outdo each other is in showing honor. Elsewhere he says "let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another".

Another message that is drummed into us is the message of finding yourself – be yourself, find your destiny. Even in the Christian church we often hear that people get in the way of our growth and get in the way of us living our Christian life. However, in this passage Paul also talks about finding ourselves, although his message is vastly different to that which we find taught to us in the daily bombardment of media messages that we receive.

Paul states that it is in proper involvement in Christian community that we find a proper understanding of who we are. Listen to what he says, and I'm reading from the Message version of the Bible, as I think it explains it in a way that is very relevant to what we're learning today: he starts by saying, "the only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him. And then, to explain what he means he says, "in this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around". The body doesn't get its meaning from who we are as individuals. Then to make it clear who he's talking about he says "the body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body."

We cannot live apart from our relationships. Think of the relationships in your life and how they have formed you. I don't know how well you know each other here, but it is in fellowship and community and being there for each other that we grow in our own relationship with Christ. As I mentioned before, if we don't share our lives with each other as believers, we will never grow. We need each other. Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another.

In my first years as a Christian, my focus was purely on my relationship with God – the vertical Jesus and me thing. I didn't see the link between my growth as a Christian and my relationship with other believers. But looking back on it now, the times of my greatest growth were as a result of the support, encouragement and challenge of other Christians, either ones I knew personally or ones I looked up to. It was the faith of other believers and the way I was relating to them that pushed me to grow in my walk with Jesus. And today nothing has changed. I am constantly challenged in the way I relate to other Christians, and indeed to other people, whether they are other believers or not. It is in my relationships at all levels that I see how I need to grow. Just like a physical body cannot live without a heart, I cannot live as a growing Christian without relationship with others. It is not that community with other believers is just something that would be good to help me – it is simply not an option.

One of the pastors at the church that Nell and I used to attend has written a couple of books on what it means to be church and to be a Christian community. Listen to what he says:

'Does God need the church?' – p. 18 – "It would be a fundamental contradiction....It is inescapable. Both the fruit of community and its reality witnessed to the essential character of God" (p. 20).

Relating to the analogy of how the parts of our physical bodies cannot operate in isolation to each other, a Bible study on this topic that has been kindly given to me by Paul Baker says, "what we affirm about the members of our physical bodies, we often deny about our membership in Christ's spiritual body. For a variety of reasons, ranging from biblical ignorance to willful stubbornness and unbelief, we think we are self-sufficient or superfluous in relationship to other Christians.

This is a big area of conformity to the world. Our culture has long glorified the ideal of autonomous individualism, which emphasises individual freedoms more than communal responsibilities. So we bring this mentality right into our Christianity. It is true that we can each have a personal relationship with Christ, but this distills to a "just Jesus and me" view of spirituality.

Listen again to what Morris Stuart says about what the Scriptures teach us about community. ('Does God need the church?' – p. 16) – "Of all the pictures....church as a community dominates...the church is the 'body of Christ'...what God is calling the entire fallen creation to be".

As we finish this morning, listen to this challenge:

(Read 12:9,10,13,15.) Paul is describing the kind of Christ-centered friendships all Christians ought to have with some other Christians. Are you involved enough with some Christian friends that showing affection between you becomes normal and natural (12:10)? Are you involved enough with some Christian friends that you know one another's practical needs and are trying to meet them (12:13)? Are you involved enough with some Christian friends that you are emotionally affected by one another's lives (12:10)? With that, Stuart is going to lead us in communion.

by Nils von Kalm
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