

Sermon: September 17, 2023

What an awesome morning already! Today, I'd like to take just a few minutes to wrap up our three-week sermon series through which I've been hoping to present some of my sabbatical learning. I know the food and activities are calling, so I promise not to be too long. Anyhow, I've been using the metaphor of a family road trip to present all of this, namely that my sabbatical kind of felt as though I had pulled over at the side of the road on the road trip that we've been on together as a church family. In doing so, God began to reveal some things to me, revelation that occurred along three dimensions. While pulled over, God prompted me to look back, to check the rear view mirror to discern where we have been. He led me to examine our current position, to perform a circle check of sorts of where we are. And He urged me to look forward, to listen for His direction for where we ought to head in the next few years as a church. Over the past two weeks, we touched on concepts related to where we've been historically as a church, learning together that God is calling us to be both a rooted and a revived community of believers here in Mount Albert and, by examining our current situation, we've recognized an opportunity to gift those around us with the blessing of community and significance that only comes through faith in Jesus.

Today, I want to put before you some thoughts around where God might be calling us over the next few years. As I mentioned two weeks ago, our way forward will be one discerned together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, so please understand that these ideas are for our communal discernment and evaluation, not a given direction as "an anointed one of God", OK? My hope then this morning is that in suggesting to you some of the guidance I believe the Spirit of God has generated for me during my time of sabbatical that you will receive it and hopefully both excitement and practical ideas for ministry will emerge within us corporately.

As I prayed and journaled throughout my time of sabbatical, a very strong impression repeatedly rose to my attention in regards to where God might be leading us. It is related to the present reality of a perceived lack of community in our region and specifically within emerging generations. As I mentioned last week, I cannot tell you how many conversations I've engaged in with those in our community who feel a sense of detachment from community; finding a place for connection and significance is a powerful community desire. Initially, I sensed that perhaps God was calling us to be a body of believers who create community where it is lacking. Sounds like a worthy calling, right? There is a need for community out beyond the four walls of the church, so why not be a people who go out and meet that need? Being actively involved in creating community in a void of community would certainly decrease the irrelevance of the church in the eyes of many and, let's be honest, it would permit the church more visibility, a position from which we might **"let [our] light shine before others, that they may see [our] good deeds and glorify [our] Father in heaven"** (Matthew 5:16).

But as I continued to reflect on this inkling, God added a little flavour to the leading; He began making an important distinction as He led me further. Now, I do believe that we live in a world often void of significant community. People begin all kinds of programs and organizations to increase the possibility of opportunity for connection – 4H Clubs, Lions Clubs, Red Hat Societies and Boys and Girls clubs all operate to create community in unique ways. In my estimation, the church has seen the success of such organizations and sought to replicate them within a Christian context – AWANA and Christian Service Brigade instead of Boy Scouts and men’s and women’s groups instead of 4H or Lion’s Clubs. Melding with a growing consumer mentality within culture, the contemporary church more generally has become a community into which people can opt-in and opt-out at will. If a person is not finding the right “kind” of community at one church, they can seek out that “kind” of community at any number of other churches down the road. If connection programs don’t suffice at one church, then we shuffle off to church programs elsewhere. Listen, I understand that things happen and sometimes people do move from church to church for lots of really great, God-honouring reasons, but I have seen a growing lack of faithful allegiance to churches within modern Christianity. And so, in my wrestling and reflection, I found myself asking “is this opt-in/opt-out the kind of community we ought to be developing” and secondly, “if not, then what kind of community ought we be striving to see established here at Hillside?”.

Not surprisingly, God seemed not to leave me floundering for an answer for very long, because in book after book, article after article, podcast after podcast that I accessed during my sabbatical, God seemed to be whispering the same message – “we are to be the children of God inviting others into, not just community, but family”! It was strongly and repeatedly reinforced to me that we are not to just create opt-in/opt-out community, but we are to profoundly be a family.

If you look at the people of God in Scripture, right from Abraham on down, you’ll notice that very rarely did they function primarily as a community; instead, they functioned far more visibly as a family. The writings of the New Testament are particularly emphatic in this regard. In writing to his protégé, Timothy, the Apostle Paul mentioned this in terms of his reason for communication - “although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:14-15). Paul makes a subtle point here. The church is referred to using familial language – as God’s household. Now, in ancient times, households were made up of family members, associated employed individuals and any slaves or servants owned. But as Galatians 4:6-7 indicates, there are no slaves in the church; instead “because [we] are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” So [we] are no longer [slaves], but God’s child[ren]”. You see, the bulk of weight in the New Testament falls upon us understanding ourselves not as “community members” but as children – as family members – within the church.

A propos for today, our practice of baptism is directly tied to a moment in the life of Christ in which during His baptism, God spoke saying **“this is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17)**. I believe it is fitting that we envision our participation in baptism as a moment in which God too speaks those same words over us - **“this is my son/daughter, whom I love; with him/her I am well pleased”**. Though baptism is a great physical depiction of becoming a son or daughter of God, Galatians 3:26 makes it very clear that **“in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith”**. You see, it is not the act of baptism – or any other “act” we might point to – that makes us a son of daughter of God, but it is our faith in Jesus that ensures we are a part of the family of God. To be a part of a community requires no faith – this is based upon one’s physical location most often – but to be a part of the family of God, faith in Jesus is required. Showing up physically to a church service might permit you to be a part of a community, but it is a shared faith in Jesus that will permit you to be a child of God and truly a part of His family, the church. We must find ways to move from attendance mindset to engagement by faith mindset within the church.

Now, some of you might be right now questioning why I’m seemingly dwelling on semantics – community vs. family; you might resolve that this is a “potato, potato, tomato, tomata” sort of thing. I believe that this is much more than a question of semantics, because I believe that the way we understand the church determines the way we involve ourselves in relationship with one another in church. Let me put it plainly; despite all the “love conquers all” rhetoric in our world today, in a community, you not only don’t have to love one another to be a part of that community; in fact, you don’t even have to like one another. Spend any time on “community” Facebook pages and you’ll see this to be true. The vague veil of “community” permits us to find a place of shallow belonging and it also permits us the option of remaining distanced from some members of such a community. The result of all of this is that we engage in community only up until a certain point, most often only until engagement in community proves uncomfortable.

But the church is to be a place in which people engage even in highly uncomfortable ways – a family in which we **“bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another” (Romans 12:14-16)**. Just as familial bonds can never be truly severed, the church ought to be focussed on developing similar “unbreakable” family bonds. I believe that we are sometimes reluctant to do this because of a pervasive lack of trust – a powerful “us vs. them” thinking – that governs our activity with others. We are unsure how those we are associated with in church might behave and therefore we connect rather superficially with one another. We are reluctant to, at a profoundly deep level, love one another because we don’t really even know one another. In many ways, we might even experience shame in referring to one another as a brother or sister ... not Byron though; he’s forever calling me brother!

And you know what, the writer to the Hebrews makes an incredible statement in Hebrews 2:11, writing of all who would trust in Jesus, these words – “Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters”. Did you catch that? Jesus, the one whom Colossians 1:15-17 calls “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation ... [the One who is] is before all things, and in him all things hold together”, this One is not ashamed to call you and I His brothers and sisters. Our ability to bring shame upon Jesus by our sinful actions is so much greater than our ability to bring shame upon one another. We know that the inclinations of our hearts and minds can convey shame upon Christ in ways impossible to bring shame upon one another. So then, if by faith in Jesus, we become children of God and brothers and sisters of Christ, and if Jesus Himself is not ashamed to call us His brothers and sisters, then why are we reluctant to not only envision ourselves as a family, preferring the “safer” designation of a community, but also to actually function as a family? Why are we sometimes reticent to “rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn [and] live in harmony with one another”?

I don't have all the answers for this today, but I do believe that our way forward as a church will be by wrestling together through such questions. I also believe that our effectiveness in reaching those around us yet to know Christ with the Good News of Jesus will only be amplified when we begin living as a family and not simply as a transient community. I believe we are surrounded by people desperately craving the community and significance that can only be provided by inclusion by faith in the family of God and I believe the only way we'll begin engaging in the harvest that God has been preparing for us is when we do so as a family with an invitation into this family.

So, as I look forward towards the horizon of the next few years, this is where I believe that God is leading us – that, in Christ, we will truly become a family that celebrates and mourns together, a family that loves one another deeply, and a family that seeks to envelop others into the loving relationship that God has initiated within us. Let me encourage you, therefore, to open yourself to the possibility of seeing church differently – as a dynamic family rather than a transient community. Be willing to engage uncomfortably at times too, permitting yourself to be stretched for Christ's kingdom purposes. In 2023-24, you'll likely see us seek to facilitate the development of family do this through engagement in our H2H Groups – be on the lookout for an October launch of these groups – through more regular family meals as a church, and through opportunities like our upcoming Community Corn Roast, in which we will be present as a family, inviting our community into family relationship with us. My hope and prayer is that in doing so we will see a decrease in our irrelevance to the community, truly becoming a family and not an opt-out “able” community. Might we be provided the ability to “see what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God” and might living in familial relationship within the church permit us to shine the light of Jesus into the world around us! Let's pray!

