

## **Week 3: So who needs the church, anyway?**

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne    September 23, 2007

***In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is we are all in a common relationship with Jesus.***

[Galatians 3:28 The Message]

### **Multimedia: If we are the body**

#### **Reading from the Bible [Romans, 14:17-19 NLT]**

*For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God. And other people will approve of you ... So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up.*

### **Reflection by Chaplain Jones**

**Intro to the message:** We're working through a series of messages about doing life together. Life together. That's meant to be a blessing you know, not a life sentence or punishment. Doing life together is how we can better experience God's presence. Jesus promised that when two or three of us gathered together in his name he would be in the midst of us. Being together is also how we grow in our faith. The Bible reminds us just as iron sharpens iron, so friends encourage one another, sometimes through comforting them and sometimes through challenging them. Back when we first started this series, I reminded you all of how the Bible pulls us together, teaching us that we are to welcome one another, serve one another, love one another and forgive one another. Each of these guidelines was based on something else ... do you remember what that was? We're told to love one another just as God has loved us. We are to welcome one another as God has welcomed us, and so too, to forgive and serve one another just as God has done those things for us in Jesus. But that's not our default setting as normal human beings. Especially those of us who are men. We want to be independent. To do things for ourselves. Sometimes even to do things by ourselves ... But that's a hard way to go through life. God created us to be together, to support one another and hold each other accountable. To be honest, how many of you would say you have very few people in your life right now with whom you could be totally honest, and yet expect to be totally accepted for who you are? Maybe you have moved into the area and don't know anyone well enough yet. I understand. When my wife and I moved into the area it was two weeks before school started. We registered our son at school, and they asked us who to call in case of emergency. We knew

two people in the area. Bruce our realtor and the Bishop. We put down Bruce's name ... We simply didn't know anyone. Over the years I've been able to fill that need for others, I've been listed as "next of kin" for a whole bunch of people I'm not related to, except here at church. It's odd, no matter how much we know in our heads that we need others, we still find it hard to create deep, lasting relationships. Maybe you even feel that way with God, that it's hard to trust and know God well. But then, you know the alternative isn't great either. Who among you honestly, wants to live ... all by yourself?

### **All by myself**

*words and music performed originally by Eric Carmen*

*When I was young I never needed anyone  
And makin' love was just for fun, those days are gone  
Livin' alone, I think of all the friends I've known  
But when I dial the telephone nobody's home  
All by myself, don't wanna be all by myself anymore  
All by myself, don't wanna live all by myself anymore  
Hard to be sure, some times I feel so insecure  
And love so distant and obscure remains the cure  
All by myself ... don't wanna be ... all by myself anymore*

**Message:** God knows, no one really wants to live all by themselves. Even grumpy people need someone to complain to, you know ... God knows, God knows, you and I need a sense of community. But where will you go to find it? There are a lot of choices out there ... clubs, civic groups, and so-called on-line gaming communities; there's bars and single's groups. Anything to get out with others. Remember the show Cabaret? It started with "Why sit alone at home in your room, come to the Cabaret." Well, along with all those choices, let me add that God calls us into a community called the church.

OK, for some people, "church" comes with lots of baggage. Before starting Church of the Spirit, Henry and I found out we had both had very bad experiences with churches before. So we thought it would be nice to have a church which didn't focus so much on church as on God. Still, people have a lot of funny ideas about churches, and so it wasn't shocking to find the top five reasons people go to church were:

- (5) Free baby-sitting every weekend
- (4) One hour a week when the boss can't reach my cell phone
- (3) The breakfast and coffee are both free
- (2) Wine on Sunday mornings helps the hangover from Saturday nights
- (1) It's the one place they have to forgive you no matter what

Or something like that. Your reasons for showing up this morning may be a bit different. I sure hope so at least ... Sure, there's a lot of reasons to really wonder about churches. When you see all the bad things that have been done in churches or by churches, you have to wonder if this is really what God had in mind. The answer would be no. It's not. But then, that's the funny thing about a church. It's supposed to allow everyone in. I mean ... just look at the band. OK, for years I've made fun of them, but they aren't really any different from the rest of us here. So when you let anyone into a church, you have to expect people to be people. Churches are not perfect. It's often enough been said that as soon as you find the perfect church, and join it, it won't be perfect any longer. It's not surprising that churches fail to live up to every standard. I'd be suspicious if they did. I know some churches try to pretend they do, We're not one of them. I'm in charge here, and I have to admit, I don't always live up to the standards of God. So what's to be done?

This past week the Anglican Church (of which we are a part) has been in the news. Unfortunately, it's not over yet. There will, be more news and controversy in the week ahead. There has been a major international meeting this week among the American bishops and leaders of the Communion about what it means to stay together, and whether the actions of the American Church will mean it is no longer a part of the Anglican Communion. Why's that matter? Well for one, the Anglican Church is the third largest Christian group in the world. Along with the other two largest churches, the Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans trace their church lineage in an unbroken line all the way back to the apostles. That's cool. There's something special about being part of the original church, even if now, when it's in such turmoil. Again, people are people, and whenever two or three gather together there's apt to be a disagreement. Sometimes those disagreements are over essential things, that's where we are now in the Anglican church, in a clash about the essential authority of the Bible. Other times, I'll admit, church disagreements end up being over small things only insiders can see. And so, every group needs a way to hold onto what's essential, and keep people focused on that. Kind of like this ...

**Video Clip: Nerd Law**

OK, maybe not. Even in the midst of all the controversies in churches today, we would do well if we could agree on the

essentials ...so what would a real, honest church look like? What would it be doing? The Bible tells us such a church would be building its members up, so they would grow into the full stature of Christ. It would comfort and challenge people. That's how we grow.

**From the Bible (from Ephesians 4 NLT)**

*Be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Always keep yourselves united in the Holy Spirit, and bind yourselves together with peace. [For] We are all one body ... The leader's responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ, until we come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature and full grown in the Lord, measuring up to the full stature of Christ.*

**So what would a real, church look like? The Bible tells us such a church would be building its members up, so they would grow into the full stature of Christ. It would comfort and challenge people.**

I think the real church would act like Christ to one another, and would show the rest of the world

what it mean to be like Christ. I'm not suggesting we do away with doctrines and differences in churches, only that we not lose sight of the main thing: that Jesus has called us into a new life, individually and together as a group, as a church. And where he leads we need to follow, if we are going to be Christ Followers. That's something I hold to strongly enough to take a stand. Paul gave similar instructions to Timothy:

**From the Bible (Titus 2 and 3 from The Message)**

*I want you to put your foot down. Take a firm stand on these matters so that those who have put their trust in God will concentrate on the essentials that are good for everyone. Stay away from mindless, pointless quarreling ... That gets you nowhere. By persisting in divisiveness a quarrelsome person cuts themselves off from the church ... So mostly, show others [the Christian life by] doing it yourself ... then anyone who is dead set against us, when he finds nothing weird or misguided, might eventually come around. We're being shown how to turn our backs on a godless, indulgent life, and how to take on a God-filled, God-honoring life. This new life is starting right now, and is whetting our appetites for the glorious day when ... Christ returns.*

If we as a church could keep the main thing the main thing, we'd be better off. May I encourage you not to get wrapped up in the arguments and the politics of the church. Let us concentrate on the essentials here, on sound doctrine, and even more, on how God is changing your life and challenging you to grow into a person who honors God with all they do and think and desire. I also challenge you to let God open

your eyes to new ways that you can show what you believe to people around you who may have been turned off by the church in the past. As one famous fellow said, "You may be the only Gospel someone else ever reads." So how you live your life matters. People are watching. You can either help them find God for themselves, or give them yet another reason to turn away from the church.

Next week we'll give you some very clear ways you can choose to connect with others here at Church of the Spirit. We'll have displays around the building, and we'll interview some of our people as part of the service so you can hear from them what a difference it makes in their lives when they not only connect with others, but make a commitment to live out their faith on the front lines. Today I want to leave you with a vision for what the church is really all about ... that is, when the church is real and focused on the essentials. There's a story from a few years ago that makes the point well. It's told by Tony Campolo, who is a short, balding, middle aged guy from New Jersey who admits he talks really fast. He was one of the professors at Eastern College, where Sebastian our Head Usher got his degree. The way he tells it: *he checked into his hotel in Hawaii for a big conference and tried to get some sleep. Only he was wide awake and his stomach was growling. So he found the only diner open at that hour. It was a grungy dive in an alley. As he sat there munching a donut and sipping his coffee at 3:30, in walked a group of prostitutes who had just finished working. They sat down at the counter and Tony found himself uncomfortably surrounded by this group of women smoking and swearing. Before he could make a quick getaway, one woman next to him said to her friend, "You know what? Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm gonna be 39." To which her friend nastily replied, "So what d'ya want from me? A birthday party? Huh?" The first woman said, "Aw, come on, why do you have to be so mean? I'm just sayin' it's my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"*

*When Tony heard that he made a decision. He sat and waited until the women left, and then he asked the guy at the counter, "Do they come in here every night?" The owner said, "Yeah," Tony asked, "What do you think? Do you think we could maybe throw a little birthday party for that woman right here in the diner?" The owner turned to the kitchen and shouted to his wife, "Hey, come on out here. This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow is Agnes' birthday and he wants to throw a party for her right here." His wife came out. "That's terrific," she says. "You know, Agnes is really nice. She's always trying to help other people and nobody does anything nice for her." So they made their plans. Tony said he'd be back early the next morning with some decorations and the man, whose name turns out to be Harry, says he'd make a cake.*

*At 2:30 the next morning, Tony was back. He had crepe paper and other decorations. Harry had gotten the word out on the streets about the party and by 3:15 it seemed that every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. At 3:30 on the dot, the door swung open and in came Agnes. Tony had everybody ready. They all shouted "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" Agnes was*

*absolutely flabbergasted. When the birthday cake with all the candles was carried out, that's when she totally lost it. Agnes started sobbing. Harry mumbled, "Blow out the candles, Agnes. Cut the cake." Only Agnes looked down at the cake and, without taking her eyes off it, slowly and softly said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if ... I mean, if I don't ... I mean, what I want to ask, is it OK if I take the cake home. I'll be right back with it ..." She got off her stool, picked up the cake, and carried it off. Everybody watched in stunned silence and when the door closed behind her, nobody seemed to know what to do. They looked at each other. Then they looked at Tony. Now Tony's a fast talking guy who's rarely at a loss for words. So he blurted out, "What do you say that we pray together?" And there he was, in a hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon, with half the prostitutes in Honolulu, at 3:30 and there, Tony prayed for Agnes, for her life, her health, her salvation. Later he said, "I prayed that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her."*

*When he had finished, Harry leaned over, and with a trace of hostility in his voice, said, "Hey, you never told me you was a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to anyway?" And then, in one of those moments when just the right words came, Tony answered him quietly, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning." Harry thought for a moment, and said, "No you don't. There ain't no church like that. If there was, I'd join it."*

Folks, that's a church I want to join too. I couldn't find one so I thought I'd try to create one right here in Kingstowne. I want to be part of a church that welcomes all people. I want to be part of a community that holds one another up in prayer, but also holds one another accountable to God. I want to be part of a church where we can accept all people, just as they are, and yet we can also expect them to become so much more, to be all they can be with God's help. This is not a place for painting on smiles and happy faces, or for too easily loving and forgiving everyone so we can all just get along, you know, without challenging one another to grow. Yes, I want to be part of a church that accepts everyone as a child of God, and yet I also want to be in a church that has the nerve to tell the truth and which reminds each of us when we need to grow up. I want to be part of a church community like that, because that's real. It's what I'm sure God had in mind for every church.

Here's the reason I want to be part of that kind of church. I know I want to be accepted for who I am, and yet I also know I need to be challenged to grow. I need a place where I can go where people are real and honest about their failings, and where offers of support and compliments are not someone's way of being polite. I need the real thing, real community, real opportunities to serve and be served. Life's too short to accept a substitute, or to play at this stuff. And where else but church would you expect to find a safe place to be real and honest? Are you expecting to find the comfort and challenge you need to grow at a club, or a meeting, in an on-line chat room, or E-Harmony, or on Oprah? Not me. One day as Jesus was teaching, he challenged the crowds to follow him and trust him. Many were upset. Here's how it unfolded:

## Reading from John (John 6:66-69 The Message)

*After this a lot of Jesus's disciples left. They no longer wanted to be associated with him. Then Jesus gave the Twelve their chance: "Do you also want to leave?" Peter replied, "Master, to whom would we go? You have the words of real life, eternal life ..."*

Where else could I go and expect people to talk about the truth I need most. Where else would I go and expect people to be honest with me, to celebrate with me and to support me when things get hard? Where else can you go but to Jesus when you need the real thing, or hear the words of real life? That's why I'm here. I need the best a church can offer. What about you? I figure, what I need is not so far from what you need, or from what everyone needs ...

## Every Man

*words and music performed originally by Casting Crowns*

I'm the man with all I've ever wanted,  
all the toys and playing games  
I am the one who pours your coffee,  
corner booth each Saturday  
I am your daughter's favorite teacher,  
I am the leader of the band  
I sit behind you in the bleachers,  
I am every man  
I'm the coach of every winning team  
and still a loser in my mind  
I am the soldier in the airport facing giants one more time  
I am the woman shamed and  
haunted by the cry of unborn life  
I'm every broken man, nervous child, lonely wife  
Is there hope for every man,  
a solid place where we can stand  
In this dry and weary land, is there hope for every man  
Is there love that never dies,  
is there peace in troubled times  
Someone help me understand  
is there hope for every man  
Seems there's just so many roads to travel,  
It's hard to tell where they will lead  
My life is scarred and my dreams unraveled  
Now I'm scared to take the leap  
If I could find someone to follow  
who knows my pain and feels the weight  
The uncertainty of my tomorrow,  
the guilt and pain of yesterday  
There is hope for every man,  
a solid place where we can stand  
In this dry and weary land, there is hope for every man  
There is Love that never dies,  
there is peace in troubled times  
Will we help them understand?  
Jesus is hope for every man

There is hope for every one of us, together. There is hope for you in this place. There is hope for you when we can come together and comfort one another and challenge one another to grow more like Christ. Heaven knows the church may not be perfect, but it is still the hope you and I have, the place we can stand. Where will you stand? How will you make it through the week to come? Will you do it all by yourself, or in the community of others who like you, and every man, need to hope and the challenge, in fact, the solid ground on which to stand. No matter what else may happen in the church out there, I find the best part of taking part in church here is this ... that when you are standing next to someone else who is also looking for the real thing, you will see that another person has joined you. It's just as Jesus has promised. For when we gather in his name, Jesus is among us. And his presence both quenches our thirst and makes us hunger for more of him ...

Please stand ...