

Week 1: Don't Swim Alone!

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne September 9, 2007

*As parents feel for their children, God feels for those who fear him.
God's love, though, is ever and always, eternally present to all who come to him ...*

From the Psalms [103, The Message]

Reading from the Bible [Romans 8 The Message]

Obsession with self is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God. Anyone completely absorbed in self ignores God, ends up thinking more about self than God. That person ignores who God is and what he is doing. And God isn't pleased at being ignored. But if God himself has taken up residence in your life, you can ... experience life on God's terms. God's Spirit beckons. There are things to do and places to go!

Reflection: It's a catchy phrase, a good commercial. It gets my attention every time. But then I really liked it when they showed the Vikings. You've all heard the phrase, right? It's: "What's in your wallet?" Today I want to ask you something else. "What's on your mind?" Paul wrote to the earliest Christ Followers, reminding them of a timeless truth. If you want to follow God, you have to keep your eyes on God. You need to set your mind on God. If you are more interested in yourself, in your own worries, your own plans, your own fears and delights and all the rest, you know what that makes you? Well it makes you normal, human. But God calls you to be more than just what comes naturally to you. He also offers you something more, for when you look first to God can experience life on God's terms. There are things to do and places to go, and they all begin once God takes up residence in your life.

So there's a lot of good stuff waiting for you when you change your mind about life, when God becomes a priority ... (A priority, of course, does not mean it's the only thing you look at, as if all you had to do every day was think dreamy thoughts about God and somehow your lawn would stay mowed, your checkbook balanced, bills paid and dog walked). The question here is more like this, "Who comes first?" And while it may come naturally to focus on yourself, to look out for number one, when you have a change of mind, everything else in your life changes as well. Paul continued by saying:

This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike "What's next, Papa?" God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children.

Reflection continues: Putting God first in your life means taking your whole life up a notch. It means changes, yes, but that's another way of saying you want to trade up. You can live an adventure, you can expect good things to happen (along with the bad). But best of all is this. When you know God, you come to know a lot more about yourself, like your purpose, and what your ultimate destiny can be. You see, to really know who you are in this world, you have to start by knowing whose you are. Paul is saying something like, "You belong to God the Father. That makes you a son or daughter. It also makes you part of a big family. And knowing all that will change how you live." Yup, it's when you know whose you are the real adventure of life begins.

So what's on your mind these days? I'll bet if you're anything like me, you'll agree it has not always been God, at least God is not always the first thing. I often forget my real place in this world, my real role as a brother of Jesus, a son of our Father in Heaven. And so I need a moment to ask God to forgive me all that is past. I need to ask for God's help to reawaken in me the desire to be changed and renewed. Please stand and join me now as we ask for God's forgiveness together as his family in this place ...

Insert Confession of Sins and worship music here

Intro to the message: Well, fall is here, and with it a return to the faster paced life. Unless of course you forgot to add in some extra time for your morning commute this week due to the fleets of school buses now clogging things up. Each September we run a message series here at *The Spirit* designed to help you get your act together, so to speak. After all, it's a good time to get back into routines. Except at church ... because routines often kill a spiritual life. Remember, we heard this morning how God intends for your life to be anything but routine, folks. It's supposed to be large, and filled with Spirit, an adventure. It's also supposed to be something else: Life was designed to be played as a team sport. So instead of talking about how you can get it all together in your life, we're actually going to be talking about how you can get it all, together, sort of, getting all God has offered you by focussing on your relationship with God, your relationships with others,

with the church, and with the community of people who live around you. After all, whether you focus much on them each day or not, you need the people around you. You can't go through life as an island, a rock. You can't. Even you guys out there ... and if you're thinking you can live as an independent kind of guy, I can prove you wrong in 30 seconds. Just tell me what you did this morning before coming here. Me? I woke up in a house I did not build, turned on electricity I did not produce, took a shower with water I did not pump, ate food grown for me by people I do not know, rode a bike I did not make down roads I do not maintain to the church I started, but where even so, I still can get a cup of coffee and a Danish for which I did not pay. Ooops, don't tell the church treasurer about that one ... We got the tips jar out there on the back table again, right? Good ...

You see, none of us really goes through life alone. Some of us just act that way. And that has draw backs. Didn't your mother ever tell you not to swim alone? It's dangerous to go through life without any backup. I guess some of you just live for danger ... Many of you have something in common. You're guys. Right? In the book *Men: A book for Women*, the author offers what he calls the Creed for Real Men. It's a funny way of exposing how us guys were brought up to think of ourselves ...

"The real man shall not cry, he shall not display weakness, he shall not need affection, gentleness, or warmth. He shall comfort, but not desire comforting. He shall be needed, but not need. He shall touch, but not be touched, he shall be steel not flesh. And he shall stand alone."

Does any of that sound familiar to you? Well you're not alone. I guess that's the whole point. You women don't have it any better, and there may be many of you who would rather not recognize it either. One newspaper columnist, named Marla Paul, recently wrote about her own struggles with being alone:

"I think there are women out there who don't know how lonely they are. It's easy enough to fill up the day with work and family. But no matter how much I enjoy them, they are not enough. I recently read my daughter Hans Christian Anderson's The Ugly Duckling. I felt an immediate kinship with this bird who flies from place to place looking for creatures with whom he belongs. He eventually finds them. I hope I do too."

While finding how to solve this situation may take some time, the solution seems obvious enough. You and I, man and woman, single person, single mother, family man, and teen ... none of us were made to be alone. In fact the Bible begins with this simple statement, *"It is not good for man (or woman for that matter) to be alone."* We need more than to go through life by ourselves. It's time to drop the masks and pick up your relationships. You can learn how to take your relationships to another level. That's what we can help you do here this Fall. But how about we start simply this morning? You could start by turning and smiling at someone near you. Come on people, that's not too much to ask is it? Come on people now, smile on someone ...

Get Together

words and music by The Youngbloods

Love is but a song we sing and fear's the way we die
You can make the mountains ring or make the angels cry
Though the bird is on the wing and you may not know why
Come on people now, smile on your brother
Everybody get together, try to love one another right now
Some may come and some may go,
and we will surely pass
When the one that left us here returns for us at last
We are but a moment's sunlight fading in the grass
Come on people now, smile on your brother
Everybody get together, try to love one another right now
If you hear the song we sing, you will understand
You hold the key to love and fear in your trembling hand
Just one key unlocks them both, you know,
it's there at your command
Come on people now, smile on your brother
Everybody get together, try to love one another right now

Back to the message: So, some of you remember the 60's then ... I could see some of you singing along ... the idea is at least familiar to you. Maybe during the week to come you'll hum that tune again and remember. You were not meant to go through life alone. You were made to live and love, to have relationships of all kinds ... with workers and neighbors, with friends and family, for some people, with a mate, and for us all, that one relationship that defines all the others: a loving relationship with God.

Some folk get confused here. They figure Christianity is a religion. That's not supposed to be the case. A religion focuses your attention on you, on what you need to do to earn God's love, or the things you need to do to make God happy enough to give you blessings. Religion focuses on the fear of punishment and the hope for rewards. That's not what Jesus taught. Not at all. To be a Christ Follower means to have a relationship with God. It goes further too, because no matter how nice a *"personal relationship with Jesus"* can be that's not where it all ends. It's where your relationships with others begin. Your relationship with God redefines how you relate to the other people around you. As we said earlier in the service, once you learn whose you are, you know who you are. And you learn who other people are too. For a Christ Follower, everyone else you meet was meant to be a part of your family. Remember: everyone else you meet is someone God loves every bit as much as he loves you.

This week I had a very clear vision of real life. It all started when my daughter's two hamsters escaped from their cage one night. We didn't discover they were MIA until the following day, and then started searching frantically for them, only my wife kept telling me to do it without letting Sami notice before she went off to school. No reason to spoil her whole day with worry. The shorter version of this adventure at my house includes hours of crawling around looking for the little guys, my wife nearly in tears, worried about the effect it would

have on Sami, Sami's tears when she came home and we told her they were missing, and of course there was my scientific approach to hunting the elusive hamster. I figured the little guys could not go up stairs, but they would be able to throw themselves down them, one at a time. So I decided to head to the lowest, darkest and farthest part of the basement to look. I set traps, the kind they tell you in the books ... buckets with food in them and a ramp so they crawl up and jump down but can't get out again. In the midst of all this, I discovered one little hamster face peaking out at me. She went deep, but I found her in a corner where she had tried to make a nest by chewing up some styrofoam. OK, one down. Still one to find. But where should I look? It's a big house for one so small. So Sami and I waited up until 10:00 pm, knowing they get more active at night. Nothing. By 2:00 am I had not heard anything or seen anything, but went back one last time to check the nest that the other hamster had made. And there she was. And my daughter will now remember me as super dad, finder of lost rodents instead of the idiot who set up the cage in a way that they could chew their way out ...

The moral of the story? The two little hamsters knew enough to stay together out in the great big world. They could have gone their own ways, or become separated from each other without realizing it. Instead, they knew enough to stick together. They knew enough that they needed one another. And their brains are the size of a nickel. If they could figure this out, why can't we?

You and I need deeper relationships with God, and with others. Otherwise it's like we've chosen to put ourselves in a spiritual solitary confinement. And isn't solitary the worst punishment we can give anyone short of killing them? So why sentence yourself to it? Don't forget, Jesus, who was God with us, had little need for anything or anyone. Yet Jesus chose to draw to him a small group of men to share his life with. He gave us an example. It was an example the early church followed. Here's what we know about them:

Reading from the Book of Acts (2:41-47 NLT)

Those who believed and were baptized ... devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, sharing in the Lord's Supper and in prayer ... And all the believers met together constantly and shared everything they had. They sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people.

Even hamsters know well enough that they need one another. And their brains are the size of a nickel. If they could figure this out, why can't we?

Back to the message: They gathered together frequently, shared their meals, took care of one another, they did life together. On occasion, when persecuted, they died together. And the earliest historians writing about this new sect of Jews called Christians were amazed at the love which they showed to one another, and even the way they served people who did not belong to their faith. Wouldn't it be something to experience that same thing today?

It would, and you would expect nothing less from the church. Only your results may vary. Not everyone can say their experiences of others have been warm and accepting, especially in churches. I'd like to make sure that doesn't happen here. We have the example of what life should be, when Christians remember that they are brothers and sisters, part of the same family. That's not to say there weren't issues back then, like what to do with someone who was always looking for a hand-

out because he didn't want to find a job, or the guy who was living with his stepmother, or the religious folk who didn't want to deal with people they thought were unworthy. Oh sure, that kind of thing is human nature. That's why if you are a Christ Follower you need to focus first on God. That will help bring out the best in you. Following God's example will also help you build better relationships with the other people around you. The Bible teaches us this in a few simple statements of how we should treat others. You know the Bible's Golden Rule, right: *"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."* Well that's good, but it focuses your attention on you, on what you are doing. There's an even better rule given to us too ... which comes down to following God's example. So the Bible also teaches us to look more to God in how we treat others:

Forgive one another, as God has forgiven you.

[Colossians 3:13]

Jesus said, "Serve one another as I have served you."

[John 13:15]

Love one another as God has loved you.

[1 John 4:11, others]

Welcome one another as God has welcomed you.

[Romans 15:7]

Forgive, love, welcome, serve. In a perfect world you'd do them to others, they would do them for you. I know it's not realistic, but the alternative stinks. It may end up looking like this ... this is a story told by Lee Stroebel in his book *God's Outrageous Promises* (I also used this earlier in the message):

Some east-coast parents received a call from their son who had been out of touch for many months fighting in the Korean War. He called to tell them he was in San Francisco, but was on his way home. "Mom," the young man said, "I just wanted to let you know that I'm bringing a buddy home with me. He got hurt pretty bad, and he only has one leg and one eye. He's in really bad shape." The mother replied, politely, "He sounds like a very brave man. We can find room for him for a while." The son replied, "Mom, You don't understand, I want him to come stay with us." The Mother said, "well, we could give it a try for six months."

"But you don't understand, he's in really bad shape. He needs us."

By now, his mother had lost her patience. *"Son, you're being unrealistic about this. You're emotional because you've been in the war. This boy will be a drag on you and a constant problem for all of us. Be reasonable."*

The phone clicked. The son had hung up. The next day the parents received a telegram their son was dead. He had committed suicide. A week later the parents received the body. They looked down with unspeakable sorrow as they saw their son, a veteran of the war, with one eye and one leg missing.

I hear that story and know there have been times when I felt like the son ... when I wondered if I was good enough, or whether I would be welcomed or accepted by others. For one 18 month period of time I recall saying over and over to myself, *"I'm not such a bad person, you know."* It took that many months to go by before I stopped myself and asked, *"Why do I say that to myself so many times a day?"* It was because I was being given the message many times a day by people where I worked that I was indeed, not a very good person. How often have you felt like the Ugly Duckling, the man standing alone, the outsider? That's not what God intended for you. That's not the way to experience life at its best. And to solve that problem will take following the example God has given, by letting others close to you, by seeking out community with others, hopefully with other believers. Remember too, it is in giving you receive, it is in loving you are loved ... it is in seeking community, not just waiting for it to happen magically, that you experience the blessings God has waiting for you. This week don't sit back and wait for community. Make it. Start building deeper relationships. You'll find others responding because they need them too.

But let's be honest, I have to ask myself the other question. I have to ask myself how often have I been in the place of the parents, how often have I sent the message to someone else that they were not welcome, or accepted. How many times have I closed doors to relationships when I could have just as easily allowed them to grow deeper? Here to I need to follow God's example better ... to forgive, and welcome, and love and serve others. And that's something I can do not by trying harder, but by going back to God myself. A growing relationship with god lets more of his love and forgiveness flow into your life. Then, with his help, your wells will not be dry. By the power of God's Spirit you can overflow with what you need to build into the relationships in your life.

We'll talk more about the benefits of doing life with others in the next few weeks. For this week, let's leave it at this ... that in your relationship with God you can discover the example and the resources you need to make your other relationships much more fulfilling. So the place to start, is right where you'd imagine it to be. Come back closer to God. Doing life without him isn't much of a way to live. It's like pretending you can do everything on your own. It's just not so ... in fact I'm sure I would be lost without God.

Lost without you

words and music by Jaci Velasquez

I know I can be a little stubborn sometimes
You might say a little righteous and too proud
I was looking for a way to compromise
Thinking maybe I could work things out
I thought I had all the answers, never givin' in
But you loved me all along and I admit that I was wrong
All I know is I'm lost without you, I'm not gonna lie
I could never be strong without you, I need you by my side
If I ever thought we'd never be together
'cause of all my foolish pride
Don't know what I'd do, I'm lost without you
I keep tryin' to find my way but all I know is
I'm lost without you
I keep tryin' to face the day but I'm lost without you
You're the only one who gets rid of these blues
When I fall, you'll catch me every time
The way you give me clarity when I'm confused
Just to hear your voice can ease my mind
Oh, my world's so cold at night when I wander far away
Only you can make it right, no, I'm not too proud to say
All I know is I'm lost without you,
I'm not gonna lie (I will not lie)
I could never be strong without you, I need you by my side
If I ever thought we'd never be together
'cause of all my foolish pride
Don't know what I'd do, I'm lost without you
I keep tryin' to find my way but all I know is
I'm lost without you
I keep tryin' to face the day but I'm lost without you
I know that you can hear me now,
you make the pain just go away
Stop all the tears from running down my face
All I know is I'm lost without you, I'm not gonna lie ...

There's no reason to feel lost and alone. Not when what God offers is a way home. And folks, nothing compares, nothing at all compares with what God offers you today ...