

Date: October 11, 2020

Series: *Communion*

Title: *Faith Lessons from 2020*

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Scripture: Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 46:1-3

Acts 2:42-47

42 - They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

43 - Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

44 - All the believers were together and had everything in common.

45 - They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

46 - Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,

47 - praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Psalm 46:1-3

1 - God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

2 - Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,

3 - though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.

As you know, for several weeks now, we've been studying the life of Joseph, the son of Jacob. The purpose of this series is for us to learn more about faith from the way Joseph endured tough times. This morning I want us to put Joseph aside and look not to his tough times, but to our own. And this year we have lots of tough times to look at haven't we!?

A few days after the new year dawned, our mission trip team was sent to Puerto Rico. Shortly after we arrived, the island was hit by an earthquake. Not long after we returned the global pandemic hit. It has killed over a million people in the world so far and 214,000 of those were citizens of the U.S. To prevent the spread of the now infamous Covid-19 businesses were shut down, as were schools and even churches.

In those first few months we experienced shortages of everything from toilet paper to hamburger meat. For many months we were on lockdown, not allowed to leave our homes except to get food or medical attention. Worship was limited to online for quite a while. All visitors, including Pastors haven't been allowed to visit in the hospitals.

Speaking of pastoring, I never thought this job would require learning how to be a cameraman and a video editor. There were no classes on those subjects when I was in seminary. Of course, the computer as we know it was not around then either.

But I have to say, I've had it relatively easy; school teachers have been forced to learn so much more. They don't just prepare a weekly message like me, they prepare several DAILY ones and then they are on-line in Zoom meetings all day long. I think when they close their eyes at night they see little "Brady Bunch" squares floating in front of their eyes.

All kidding aside, can you imagine trying to keep the attention of children and teens and the only tool you have is a talking head? Our teachers have had it VERY hard this year. And so have the families of the children they teach. Here in this county where to survive the high cost of living both mom and dad have to work, many have had to give up their jobs to care for their children. Pretty much every parent has had to become a home schoolteacher. Other parents have lost jobs because the pandemic forced their place of business to close.

We have seen the financial effects of this aspect of the pandemic here in Derwood. People who live around our church almost constantly come to the food pantry Sue and her *Grace In Store* team set up. I've heard reports of people standing in line to get some of the canned meats and vegetables that are kept there. Sue is making two or three trips a day to restock its shelves. Many times she reports that in just a couple hours most of the food was taken. I know she's thankful

for all the donations Redlanders have made to keep the pantry full enough to meet the needs of the families who live around us.

And in the midst of this pandemic, so many other tough times have come; the wildfires and hurricanes, the racial injustice seen in all the killings of people of color. And I hate to wax political, but on top of all the other tough times we have faced this year, there is this dreaded election. I mean, many people smarter than me say no matter who wins on November 3, there is a real chance that for the first time the U.S. may endure a time when there is not a peaceful transition of power. I could go on, but suffice it to say, it's been a rough year.

And with that in mind, what HAVE we learned about faith in 2020?

1.) One main thing we've seen is how much we need EACH OTHER.

The events of this year have underscored the fact that we can BECOME a Christian alone, but it is VERY hard to BE one alone.

- This quarantine has shown us that we need fellowship with other believers.
- We need people of faith to help us have the faith to get through tough times.
- We need believers to admonish us for sinful, selfish, complaining attitudes.
- We need other Christians to build up our faith as they remind us of God's character and promises.

And you don't find that kind of people out in the world. I mean, one thing we have learned this year is we need CHRISTIAN friends. We need our church family.

You know, the main thing on which any friendship is founded is something known as AFFINITY, which is just another word for common ground. Scientists like Paula and Cynthia who are working with Dr. Fauci to develop the vaccine use the term affinity to describe the attraction that causes atoms to bond with each other. And, in friendships, affinity refers to those things that attract us to each other so that a friendship can grow. Think of affinity in this context as "friendship seeds." I'm talking about a common love of golf or MARVEL SUPERHEROS or football or flea markets. And our lives are full of people with whom we have this kind of surface level affinity. But, this year has reminded us that we have a need for a DEEPER level of affinity because these surface level friendships don't hold up under the stresses like we have endured these past 8 months.

This is what King Solomon was getting at in Proverbs 18:24 when he wrote, "**A man of many COMPANIONS** [surface level affinity relationships] **may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.**" This friend who sticks closer than a brother is someone with whom we share a deep-level affinity. We don't just find common GROUND but common VALUES. We share a consensus concerning our core beliefs. We don't just talk about how to avoid infection, we talk about God's promises and power and presence even if infection comes.

In the Old Testament, David and Jonathan had this quality of affinity. Their souls were intertwined because they both based their lives on a deeply held love for God. This was the foundation of their famous friendship. Gary Inrig addresses this principle when he writes, "*The quality of a friendship is nearly always determined by the quality of that which unites us.*"

This is why CHURCH friends are so important in times like these. For it is here that we find people who, like us, have experienced the grace of God. We find other people who have given their lives to Jesus Christ and because of that, is where we find soul-mates in the truest sense of the word.

This week I came across an excerpt from an article that appeared in *Readers Digest* a few years ago. It is entitled, "*What Good Is a Tree?*" and it explained that when the roots of trees touch, there is a substance present that reduces competition, an unknown fungus. Somehow this fungus helps link roots of different trees--even of different species. With its help a whole forest can be linked together such that if one tree has access to water, another to nutrients, and a third to sunlight, all the trees have the means to share those things with one another.

That's a good picture of the fellowship we find in a church like Redland. We are linked together by the Holy Spirit of God so we both NEED and SUPPORT one another in a way other friendships don't and can't. This is what Paul is talking about in Ephesians 4 when he says, we are each parts of the same ONE body or "forest" serving the same ONE Lord. (Ephesians 4:4-5) When one "tree" in the church is having a hard time others feed him or her spiritual truth, others work to supply tangible needs.

The point is as Christians in the same local church, we do have a depth of affinity you cannot find anywhere else. This is why when we began to worship ON CAMPUS again it was SO wonderful to SEE you. When we first gathered in the Sanctuary it was like we were all coming out of months in a bomb shelter---it was SO GOOD to see each other, even if it mean seeing only half your faces and listening to hymns or choruses together instead of singing them! It was just wonderful to BE together. And then that first outdoor service where about 80 showed up and we COULD sing out loud. Well, it was amazing! It was a balm to my soul---all our souls---for we NEED each other and by the way, the world needs us to need each other too.

You see a healthy church with DEEP level affinity not only blesses the Christians that make up that church, it blesses the world as well. Do you remember Jesus' command? In John 13:34-35 He said, "**A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this will all men know that you are My disciples if you love one another.**"

In other words, the way we relate has a direct impact on whether or not lost people recognize us as God's children. This means, our behavior toward each other can affect whether or not an individual comes into relationship with God. They look at us to see if our relationship with God makes any difference in our relationships with one another. And because this is true, you can count on Satan attacking us at this point which he has done these past months as believers have politicized things like wearing masks and have argued on Facebook over who's the best Christian based on how they vote.

Listen we must not let that happen. The more we argue over things like that, the more people Satan can keep from Jesus. Remember our RULER is not up for election and He commands us to love one another, to nurture that deep level of affinity that both we and the world needs.

Here's a second thing we have learned in the tough times of the past year.

2.) We need GOD.

You can look back at times of world war or attacks like 9/11 or natural disasters like the tsunami that hit south east Asia, you can look back and see that there is always a surge of interest in spiritual things when a crisis hits. There is always this universal realization that we need God.

Well, the events of 2020 are no exception. This disease, and the other trials that have come this year, have reminded us how small we are and how much we need our ALL-MIGHTY Heavenly Father. We've all been on our knees more this year, we've all run to Him like a child runs to his or her parent when they have a nightmare.

This week I came across something Princeton professor James Loder once wrote about how his life was redirected by a near-death experience he had in an auto accident. This accident led him to study what happens to people when something happens that puts them in a place where they stand between life and death. In his study he came across a case that he says is typical. It concerns a man who commuted to work every day by train. One morning while waiting at the station, he slipped and got wedged between the train that was about to depart and the platform.

In desperation and pain, he cried out to God that he would do anything if he could be saved from the death that would surely come when the train moved. At this point, a few people came and pulled him free. Later on, in the safety of a hospital room, the man decided that his "promise" was merely an expression of panic and, therefore, nonbinding. Loder says, "*Is it possible, that this man was closer to the fundamental reality of his existence while being crushed in pain against the platform---than when he was reclining safely in that hospital bed?*"

Loder's point is that trials, the nightmares of life, are a blessing in the sense that they enable us to see more clearly our need for God. And the events of this year show that. Once again our sinful eyes have been opened by crisis such that we can see our desperate need for God, not just in the tough times of life, but in ALL times.

We share this communion meal as a church family, unified by our confession of faith in the only Person to give us access to God, His only Son Jesus, the Christ, who died so that our sins could be forgiven and we could experience the HOLY almighty God with us.

THE ORDINANCE OF COMMUNION