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Series: Vision 2022 – *Building Up the Body of Christ*

Title: *Building Up the Body of Christ Through Fellowship*

Text: Acts 2:42-47, Hebrews 10:23-25

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There was once an old monastery that had fallen upon hard times. In past decades it had been a thriving community of faith where many dedicated monks lived and worked and had great influence on the region. But now only five monks lived there, and they were all over seventy years old. This was clearly a dying order.

A few miles from the monastery lived an old hermit who was known to walk closely with God. One day as the monks agonized over the impending demise of their order, they decided to visit the hermit to see if he might have some advice for them. Perhaps he would be able to show them what they could do to save the monastery. The hermit welcomed the five monks to his hut, but when they explained the purpose of their visit, the hermit could only sympathize with them.

“Yes, I understand how it is,” said the hermit. *“The spirit has gone out of the people. Hardly anyone cares much for the old things anymore.”* The abbot asked, *“Is there anything you can tell us, that would help us save the monastery?”* *“No, I’m sorry,”* said the hermit. *“I don’t know how your monastery can be saved. But I can tell you this: one of you is an anointed apostle of God.”*

For months after their visit, the monks each pondered the significance of the hermit’s words. *“One of us is an apostle of God? Did he actually mean one of us here at the monastery? That is impossible. We are all too old. We are too insignificant.”* *“On the other hand, what if it is true? And if it is true, then which one of us is it? Do you suppose he meant the abbot?”* *“Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant the abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation.”*

“On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly, Brother Thomas is a holy man---a man of wisdom and light.”

“He couldn’t have meant Brother Elred. Elred gets crotchety at times and is difficult to reason with. On the other hand he is almost always right. Maybe the hermit meant Brother Elred.”

“But surely he could not have meant Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, so shy-a real nobody. Still, he’s always there when you need him. He is loyal and trustworthy. Yes, he could have meant Phillip.”

“Of course, the hermit didn’t mean me. He couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just an ordinary person. Yet, suppose he did? Suppose I am an apostle of God? Oh, God, not me. I couldn’t be that much for You. Or could I?”

As these thoughts went through their minds, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect--on the off chance that one of them might actually be a special apostle of God. And on the off, OFF chance that each monk himself might be the apostle spoken of by the hermit, each monk began to treat himself with extraordinary respect. Since the monastery was situated in a beautiful forest, many people came there from time to time to picnic on its tiny lawn and to walk on its paths, and to go into the tiny chapel to pray. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out of them--permeating the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling about it. Hardly knowing why, people began to come back to the monastery more frequently for picnics or meditation and prayer.

They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends. As more and more visitors came, some of the younger men started to talk with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join their order. Then another and another. Within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the hermit’s gift, a vibrant center of faith and spiritual growth throughout the region.

I love this story because it illustrates the importance of fellowship among believers. When fellowship is weak, as it was with these monks before they visited the Hermit, the little group of disciples began to die. When it was strong, as it was after the Hermit's prophecy, the group began to thrive and grow.

I share this story because it underscores the need for us to fulfill one aspect of our vision for this year--the need to BUILD UP our fellowship here at Redland. To be the Body of Christ He needs us to be in these difficult days, our fellowship, our relationships with each other need to be healthy, strong, attractive to our community.

Take your Bibles and turn to Acts 2:42-47, a passage that describes the strong fellowship in the first church in Jerusalem. And then to Hebrews 10:23-25 which tells us more about this important purpose of the church. If able, let's all stand in respect for God's Word as it is read.

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.

Hebrews 10:23-25

23 - Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for He Who promised is faithful.

24 - And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,

25 - not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

This morning I want to go back to the basics like we did last week and review some principles of fellowship in the hope that it will help us all understand how vital it is that we build up our church body in this way.

1.) **First, I would remind you that we all NEED fellowship.**

It's how we are made. All people are designed to need OTHER people. To thrive, we all require healthy, life-giving relationships. As someone once put it, *"In the same way that the body is nourished by food, the soul is nourished by people."*

And several scientific studies prove this.

For example, there is an academic journal called, *The Journal of Happiness Studies* that publishes the results of research that is done to identify what makes human life grow and develop properly. This "relationship journal" reports that when researchers look at what distinguishes very happy people from less happy people, one factor consistently separates those two groups. It is not how much money you have; it is not your health, security, attractiveness, IQ, whether or not you keep your hair, or career success. No, the thing that distinguishes consistently happier people from less happy people is the presence of rich, deep, joy-producing, life-changing RELATIONSHIPS.

And I think we see a great example of the validity of this principle in the life of Winston Churchill, Britain's prime minister during WWII. Like many of you Sue and I watched a lot of Churchill on PBS' *The Crown* and they got him right. They showed that Churchill had a wonderful marriage with his wife, was deeply connected to his family, his friends, his nation, and his work. But his health habits were terrible. His diet was awful. He smoked cigars all the time. He drank too much, had weird sleep habits, was completely sedentary—and yet he lived to be nearly ninety. Somebody asked

him, “Mr. Churchill, do you ever exercise?” He replied, “The only exercise I get is serving at a pallbearer for my friends who died while they were exercising.”

I think one thing that helped keep Churchill going all those years was his life-giving fellowship—connectedness—with other people. That’s the way it is for all of us. It IS NOT good for people to be alone! As 1 John 3:14 says, “**Anyone who does not love, remains in death.**”

And this is one of the ways Jesus became like us because He modeled the importance of fellowship.

Remember?

One of the very first things He did after beginning His public ministry was to select 12 disciples from among the broader group that traveled around with Him. When Jesus sent them out, He never sent them alone. Plus, within that group of 12, He was particularly close with three, and in difficult times like that night in the Garden before His arrest, Jesus reached out to them.

All people NEED fellowship---need good friends---close friends. And that’s a problem these days because most of our “friendships” aren’t deep. I can’t help but think of the “conversations” we have with “friends” on our cell phones. When someone texts you---you don’t have to talk back---the phone automatically suggests a response---you just click a “like this” or a “love this” or a “laughed at this” and the “conversation” continues.

Sometimes you don’t even have to use words, you can just click a “heart” at something or a “smiley face” at something. We need more than that kind of surface-level interaction. We need more than “emoji faces.” We need REAL faces.

And this is especially important for disciples of Jesus. We NEED fellowship with other believers--deep, healthy fellowship. To be a strong body of Christ, we all need friends in that body that stick closer than a brother or sister.

We need the kind of Christian fellowship Dr. Luke describes in the church in Jerusalem. “**All the believers were together and had everything in common. 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.**”

The point is we can’t grow as disciples---our church can’t be strong---it can’t be built up without this caliber of Christian fellowship, especially in these difficult days. This is one reason the pandemic has been so hard, it has separated us.

Here’s another reason this kind of Christian fellowship is so important.

2.) **We all need ENCOURAGEMENT.**

In the same way that a child cannot properly grow and develop without parents---we can’t grow and develop as Christians without other believers---our church body can’t be built up without people who love us enough to help us reach our full potential.

There are two main ways we fulfill this ENCOURAGEMENT requirement.

The first is when we lift each other up---when we compliment another believer on their growth as a Christian and cheer for them---urging them to continue on. This is what Hebrews 10 is referring to when it says we are to: “**...think of one another and how we can ENCOURAGE one another to LOVE and DO GOOD DEEDS.**” In difficult times---hard times---we all benefit from this aspect of encouragement.

This week I read about a married couple named Dustin and Caren Moore. In 2020, they were flying home to California on a Southwest flight and they asked a flight attendant for help in disposing of their newborn daughter’s diaper, but they received much, much more. When that flight attendant, whose name was Jenny, asked them why they were flying

with such a young baby, she found out that the Moores had tried to have children on their own for nine years---unsuccessfully---and now they were bringing home their first child, a newly adopted daughter.

Jenny learned of the struggle the couple had endured all these years and all the challenges they had faced in adopting the baby.

Well, when she took the diaper away, Jenny sprang into action. Enlisting the help of her workmate Bobby and other members of the Southwest flight crew, Jenny organized an impromptu in flight baby shower for the Moores. Bobby came back and asked a few other questions, which initially left the Moores confused. Caren Moore told reporters after they landed, *"Five minutes later, Bobby came on the intercom and said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, there's a very special guest on the flight today. She's only 8 days old and she's traveling home with her mom and dad.'"*

After the passengers burst into applause, the crew then passed out pens and napkins and encouraged them to jot down notes of advice, love and encouragement, which the Moores put in a scrapbook.

One person advised, *"Catch up on your sleep by sleeping when the baby sleeps!"* Another said, *"The hard times---sleepless nights and endless diaper changes---don't last. Hang in there!"* Another said, *"Adopt a golden retriever when your daughter is about 6."* If a healthy Christian was on that plane, they would have advised, *"Get a good church home!"* I don't know if that happened but after they arrived in California, Dustin contacted Southwest Airlines and said, *"For an entire crew of strangers to come together like that, to partake like that, to show us that kind of love and kindness meant everything to us."*

Caren AMENED that in a tweet writing: *"It's been a difficult week. But, rather than publicly air my grievances, I'd like to share w/ you the kindness strangers offered us the day we brought our daughter home. I hope our story uplifts you, and reminds you there is goodness to be had in this world."*

Have you ever been encouraged like that? It feels wonderful doesn't it!? It keeps you going when discouraging times make you want to quit. And when a church member meets that need in another church member, the more they do that--the more they help one another--the stronger their fellowship becomes.

But there are times when we don't need people to cheer us on---there are times when we are going the WRONG direction---times when we are embracing sinful behavior and in those times we need people to encourage us to repent, turn around and head the right way. Many times the help a fellow believer most needs to reach their God-given potential is a brother or sister who loves them enough to correct them when they sin and stray from that potential.

Immature believers shy away from this kind of discipline thinking that doing the "loving thing" means doing what the person they love would want them to do. This is of course, not love. It's not TRUE fellowship. No, the kind of fellowship required in those times is the kind that risks saying painful things, if pain is the only way to push a brother or sister toward Christlikeness. The kind of friends you find in a healthy church family keep you on the cutting edge of personal growth, by encouraging your progress---AND by being willing to speak the truth to you in love---even when it means a confrontation. As Romans 15:14 says, if we have real Christian character and experience we are, ***"...capable of keeping one another on the right road."***

How many of you have seen the Broadway musical *Hamilton*? Sue and I enjoyed front row seats in our living room when it was streamed. *Hamilton* has of course been VERY successful and I remember the last year we were in Puerto Rico on a mission trip---the day before the earthquake hit---that Broadway Show was performed in San Juan. Lin-Manuel Miranda and the entire cast came down there to do the show.

Well, a woman who was able to attend that night in the flesh got a "shout out" from Lin-Manuel Miranda, but not the kind she would have hoped to receive. Of course, every theatergoer, whether you're in a theater to see a Broadway show *Spiderman: No Way Home* gets a warning before the show begins not to record what you enjoy. No recording devices!

But, this woman ignored that rule and that's why she got a shout out from Miranda. He shared how he did his "shoutout" on Twitter saying that he was able in the moment to impromptu rewrite his rap lyrics to his song "MY SHOT" so that he said: *"I'm a get a scholarship to King's College. I probably shouldn't brag, but dag, I amaze and astonish! LADY FILMING IN THE FOURTH ROW, PLEASE STOP IT."*

Amid the kudos he received for his ad-hoc admonishment, he acknowledged the mental strain it took for him to respond that quickly, in rhythm. *"Having to think that fast within 'My Shot' takes a year off my life, please just enjoy the show."* Though the amateur bootlegger was never officially identified, she'll likely think twice the next time she has the urge to record a public performance with her phone. That's how admonishment works, it helps us do better. It helps us turn from wrong.

We need that to have a strong body here at Redland because church fellowship is not just enjoying each other's company. It is taking seriously our God-given responsibility to help each other to turn from attitudes and actions that stunt our spiritual growth. Let's think of it this way. Part of the purpose of a biological family is to help each family member to grow from infancy to full physical and emotional maturity. And in a sense, the church—as a family of God—functions in the same way. As someone once put it, the church is a *"mothering community."* A church body is a place where people are accepted at whatever level of maturity they are and then with the right blend of encouragement and admonishment, they are nurtured in such a way that they grow to full maturity in Christ.

Ephesians 4:15-16 refers to this principle when it says, ***"Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things GROW up into Him Who is the Head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, GROWS and builds itself up in love as each part does its work."***

Do you want to help BUILD UP THE FELLOWSHIP of this body of Christ? Then go to that person who has come alongside you in a difficult time and spurred you onward and thank them. And go to that person who loved you enough to admonish you--and thank them.

That leads to a third reason we must build up our fellowship.

3.) **We all need unconditional LOVE and ACCEPTANCE.**

We need to be welcomed and loved by other church body parts---no matter what news network we watch---no matter what our stance is on masks and vaccines no matter who we vote into office. We need to be accepted and valued unconditionally.

Too many times in our world, acceptance is based on what you DO or DON'T do and HOW WELL you do it. It's kind of like dividing up and picking teams for a baseball game when we are kids. The first chosen by team captains are the best hitters and fielders. Nobody wants to be picked last—like I was over and over again.

A healthy church family is different---because in that kind of body of Christ acceptance is not based on performance—on what we DO. No, it is founded on who we all ARE; sinful people Jesus Christ VALUED enough to DIE for. As Paul puts it in Romans 15:7, a healthy church is a place where we, ***"Accept one another just as Christ accepted us."***

And, HOW did Jesus accept us? He accepted each of us UNCONDITIONALLY. ***"While we were yet sinners, [HE LOVED US AND ACCEPTED US] dying FOR us."*** (Romans 5:8). Jesus opened His arms and loved sinners like you and me even though we were unlovely and in a healthy church family we do the same for each other.

In his book *The Fine Art of Friendship*, Ted Engstrom writes, *"We must decide to develop friendships in which we demand nothing in return. Love, in order to work, must be unconditional. Just as God accepts us on an 'as is' basis, so, too, must we enter into friendships based on taking the other person unconditionally into the relationship."*

One thing that makes our fellowship strong---one way that our fellowship needs are met in a church is when others accept us, love us---regardless of our disabilities, character flaws, shortcomings, insecurities, and immaturity. This is vital because we ALL need that kind of fellowship. We all need the kind of friends Proverbs 17:17 describes. We need a friend, ***“Who loves at all times.”***

This week as I was driving around I was listening to WGTS and a song by Cochren and Company came on. The title caught my ear: *“Oh I Want to Go to Church.”* I love the lyrics I heard:

*There was a time that I swore I would never go back
I was blind to the truth, didn't know what I had*

*I was running, I was searching
But every place I turned for healing
Left me more broken than the last*

*Take me back
To the place that feels like home*

*To the people I can depend on
To the faith that's in my bones*

Take me back

*To a preacher and a verse
Where they've seen me at my worst*

*To the love I had at first
Oh, I want to go to church*

*Tried to walk on my own but I wound up lost
Now I'm making my way to the foot of the cross*

*It's not a trophy for the winners
It's a shelter for the sinners*

And it's right where I belong

*Oh, more than an obligation
It's our foundation*

*The family of God
I know it's hard*

*But we need each other
We're sisters and brothers*

Oh---I want to go to church.”

To build up our fellowship, we need to be that kind of church. As I said last week, we must be the kind of church sinners WANT TO GO TO--a church they run to, not from

Here's a fourth reason it is vital to build up our fellowship.

4.) We all need HELP.

The burdens that come with living life in this fallen world are often too much for us to handle on our own. We need believers who will make OUR burdens THEIR OWN. We see this in that first church in Jerusalem church where it says: ***“Selling their possession and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.”*** (Acts 2:47)

Years ago I came across a story that illustrates the importance and blessing of burden-bearing. It’s about something that happened in the Special Olympics one year—where there was a foot race where each of the runners were mentally disabled. The gun went off and they all began to run. They were close together as they came around the track toward the finish line. Then one of the runners stumbled and fell. When that happened the rest of the runners stopped. They went back as a group, helped the runner who had fallen to stand up, and then they all started running the race again.

These young men gave a picture of this principle of fellowship. Their behavior reminded me of 1 Corinthians 12:26 where it says, ***“If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”*** In fact, their behavior on the track that day shows they were a lot more mentally ABLE than most, for they made that fallen runner’s burden their own.

So, building up our fellowship is important because:

- We all NEED fellowship
- We all need ENCOURAGEMENT.
- We all need UNCONDITIONAL love and acceptance.
- We all need HELP.

And as I inferred earlier, a final reason we need to BUILD up our fellowship is this:

5.) Our world needs a picture of JESUS.

The people of Montgomery County need to see the effect knowing Jesus has on a group of people--THIS group of people. They need us to be like Jesus; helping one another, encouraging one another, sacrificing for one another, LOVING ONE ANOTHER unconditionally.

You may remember that Dwight Moody, the famous evangelist, started a Sunday School in Chicago. He tells the story of a little boy who, every Sunday, walked many, many blocks across the frozen streets of the great city, passing church and Sunday school after church and Sunday school, so he could attend to the church school Moody had founded. One day, a Sunday school teacher at another church stopped the little boy one morning and asked, *“Where are you going?”* He said, *“To Mr. Moody’s Sunday school.”* The man said, *“Why, that’s a LONG way from here. Come into my class in my Sunday School. It’s right over there.”* The boy said, *“No, thank you.”* The teacher asked the boy why he went so far through the cold across the city to Mr. Moody’s Sunday school. He said, *“Because they love a fellow over there!”* When we LOVE EACH OTHER AS CHRIST LOVED US it draws people to Him. Our healthy fellowship shows people the difference Jesus can make.

COMMUNION

We share this meal---to REMIND US of the PICTURE OF JESUS we are to show this world.

This bread and cup illustrate the Christlike kind of love we are to enjoy here. It is our tradition here at Redland to invite ALL CHRISTIANS to share in this meal. So even if you are not a member of this church, if you are a Christian, please join us. After all, if you are His--this is yours.