

Sunday Morning
Freedom Church 2023

Yesterday we talked about the waiting room – ending with making room for faith, tenacity, and mystery.

I want to end this morning with one more way to make room – Make room for community.

This might sound strange, but I want to start by looking at aspen trees.

Romans 1:20 ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature.

I ran across an article recently about aspen trees and I want to read a portion of it for you.

Above ground, aspen grow as individual trees, but below ground they're enlivened by one interconnected set of roots. They are the most expansive growth of trees to share a common root system. This means they are one living organism and one living community—at the same time! This is a powerful metaphor for how inextricably knit the life of the individual is with the life of community. What happens to one tree happens to all aspens in the grove. How do they live as one and many at the same time? How do they communicate with each other? How do they sustain each other?

As one living root system, the aspen grove treats each of its trees as a shoot or limb called a ramet. When an individual tree dies, it's as if the grove loses a branch. The grove then rushes nutrients to the damaged area the way immune cells rush to the site of an infection. The huge root system allows the ramets that are close to water to absorb and send that nourishment to the other connected trees. When we can accept that all humans share the same invisible root system, we, too, can rush nutrients to others who are damaged or suffering.

Quaking aspen, a particular species that grows where avalanches, mudslides, and fires have occurred, is nature's example of relational resilience. The grove roots and regenerates most strongly after disasters. In Yellowstone National Park, a quaking aspen grove grew out of the 1988 wildfires. This is one of nature's gritty forms of resurrection. Likewise, when we can focus on the clearing made between us rather than on the disaster that caused it, we can resurrect and flourish like the quaking aspen.

In the Fishlake National Forest in Utah, there is an aspen grove named Pando, Latin for "I spread." Considered one of the largest aspen groves in the world, it contains about 47,000 individual trees and is estimated to be about 80,000 years old. Shared roots live longer, a lesson for us all.

This is the aspen wisdom we need. We need aspen sensitivity, aspen memory, and aspen compassion. We need to learn how to enliven that depth of connectedness whereby we can feel all of humanity while living our very small, individual lives. In moments of great suffering and love, I believe we do this. But how to understand this capacity and keep it alive when the days are ordinary and we seem so far away from each other?

This is powerful stuff.

Many of you know that I pivoted to becoming a therapist in the last few years. I can't tell you how much of my work with people, I am going to say 98% – if not 100% of the reasons life is hard and complicated is due to relationships.

Relationships have taken such a hit in the past decade. We are in our phones, we are polarized, we are so...disconnected and scared.

I have so much love for the church and I have such great hope for the church to be a thriving community that paves the way for society to reach for each other again.

The fabric of our society is so torn and ragged. But our faith is solid and sure.

What does it look like to make room for community?

I want to finish by quickly looking at three chapters in 1 Corinthians:

Go to chapter 12:14-26

The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit.

Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. If the foot says, "I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand," that does not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear says, "I am not part of the body because I am not an eye," would that make it any less a part of the body? If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything?

But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it. How strange a body would be if it had only one part! Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. The eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you."

In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary. And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect those parts that should not be seen, while the more honorable parts do not require this special care. So God has put the body together such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad.

Sounds a lot like the aspen trees.

Now turn to 1 Cor. 13: 1-7

If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

This passage is often read at weddings and rightfully so, but it is a good reminder that it was actually written to strengthen the love in the body of Christ. Patient, kind, not jealous or proud or rude? Keeps no record of being wrong? Never gives up?

I have work to do.

What if we, the body of Christ heard this passage as a challenge of how we love each other?

One thing is for sure, we cannot go alone. But to be together, we need a conversation around how to get along and deeply love one another.

1. A foundation of trust – believing the best about each other. Giving people the benefit of the doubt. “I love what I know, I trust what I don’t know.” Friday night we said preparation is commitment – I am not easily out of here.
2. A generous conversation – fighting. When we are mad, it is like we are walking on a tightrope, and the floor is lava.
 - a. A generous conversation leaves room for mistakes, misunderstandings and faults.
 - b. Matt 6:12 – forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.
 - c. The truth is, sometimes we just stomp all over people and make messes.
Sometimes hurting people return the favour.
 - d. As a believer, I pray that God would give me the grace to cushion some of these hard conversations and allow them to temper me, grow me and teach me new ways to love others more perfectly.
 - e. A generous conversation understands that relationships tear sometimes and then they repair.
3. Vulnerable love – the glue of relationships. A heart wide open can get hurt.
 - a. 2 Corinthians 6:3-13
 - b. 2 Cor. 6:11- 13 (MSG) Dear, dear Corinthians, I can’t tell you how much I long for you to enter this wide-open, spacious life. Open up your lives. Live openly and expansively!
 - c. Real, human love is letting people get close enough that they can hurt you. Of course, we hope they won’t but is it actually love unless there is risk that it won’t be returned?
 - d. If I have learned ANYTHING in my time as a pastor and my short time as a therapist, its that relationships are the BEST part of life, and relationships are THE HARDEST part of life.
 - e. I have said all of this to say...Loving people is so worthwhile. In the end, it is really the only thing in life that matters.
Also, we are human and our strength ebbs and flows.
Our imperfect love and our human weakness make the fall out of relationships so damaging to our overall emotional health

4. Sacrificial love –

- a. Phil. 2:1-4 Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.
- b. Confession – a love/hate relationship with boundaries. They are so, so necessary in unhealthy relationships, but if we are constantly laying out our requirements for how we are to be treated, are we loving sacrificially?
- c. Sometimes, loving people is just work. But it is such good work and, in the end, it is the only work that matters.

With all of this in mind, turn to 1 Cor. 11:23-26

For I pass on to you what I received from the Lord himself. On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood. Do this in remembrance of me as often as you drink it." For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord's death until he comes again.

You have likely heard this important verse if you have taken communion, but let's look at the context:

In vs. 17 we see that this was written to confront the divisions in the church.

Vs. 20 he says, "When you meet together, you are not really interested in the Lord's Supper. 21 For some of you hurry to eat your own meal without sharing with others. As a result, some go hungry while others get drunk."

And this is the context that we get before we take the Lords supper.

The bread is his body. WE are his body. We cannot function properly without each other and when one suffers, we all suffer.

Christ suffered and poured out his blood yes, to provide salvation but ALSO to give us the power to love one another.

John 13:34-35 "So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples."

With all of this in mind, we want to take communion. My hope is that we all take communion with a fresh perspective and a fresh commitment to community.

I will ask a few questions -

1. If you were an aspen tree, examine your condition. Consider your roots, trunk and leaves. Where do you see health? Where do you need strength or growth? What does your tree look like?
2. Do you see any “trees” (other people) around you that need nutrients (encouragement, help, support, etc.) from you?

You are a great church, with great pastors and leaders.