

In my 30 years of pastoral ministry, I've done a lot of weddings.

In fact, I've done four so far this year, two more already scheduled.

I love weddings.

It's always great.

It's kind of a free date for Dory and I. But the reality is people say, oh, we really love how you do your service.

And they ask me, what's the favorite part?

And I tell them it's when the bridal party is introduced.

Yes, the ceremony is over.

We're there normally in the reception hall.

And it's always kind of crazy.

Some music comes on.

They either maybe dance or they run in.

The groomsmen do something.

The bridesmaids do something.

And, of course, ultimately you have the parents of both the bride and the groom.

And then you have the main attraction.

The bride and the groom come on in.

And everyone is celebrating.

And now you might ask, why is that your favorite part?

Because for me, it really is a foretaste of what I think heaven is going to be like when Jesus is ushered in and we get to celebrate him.

One of the things that we've been coming together over the last couple weeks has been talking about worship.

And that worship isn't about what we prefer or what we like or what we think God wants from us.

There are many churches that say, well, if we like this, this must be what God likes.

And so what we've done is created an idol.

We've created a God in our own image who likes to be worshiped the way that we like to worship.

As opposed to recognizing that this is a ceremony that's going on.

That in many ways what we participate in on a weekly basis has a lot in common with a wedding.

You get to your invitation in the mail.

You're excited that your friends, your family members are announcing that they are going to unite their lives together.

You set the date.

You look forward to it.

You make the plans to attend.

And every week you have an invitation to come and to be a part of what God is doing in our midst.

Now, God is doing and working in your lives.

I know that.

I understand that, that it isn't just here that God works, but yet this is a unique time.

where we come together and we celebrate the fact that we have been invited into relationship with God.

Now, you could all zoom into a wedding, or you could wish them well from afar, and sometimes you do that, but the idea is that when you have that wedding ceremony, it's not something you're doing by yourself.

No, you're surrounded with those who are involved and engaged in your life, whether it's your parents, your grandparents, your friends, your family, they are there to celebrate this occasion.

You've been invited.

There's a profession that occurs in that ceremony.

I always ask their declaration of intent.

Do you, groom, take this woman who you now hold by the hand to be your lawfully wedded wife?

And they declare yes to each other.

The bride does the same.

When we profess our faith, we are saying yes to what God is and what he has done and what we believe concerning his word, what he's doing.

And so we have this profession.

Now, there is a time of confession too.

We've gotten rid of it in most wedding ceremonies.

If there is anyone here who objects to this man and woman, let them speak now or what?

Forever hold their peace.

There's the aspect of that they're confessing their love for one another, that there's no other entanglements, that there's no other previous relationships that would somehow pull away from what is happening in that moment.

And then, of course, we go through the entire process where they consecrate themselves, they make their vows, they hear from God's word concerning what it is to be husband and wife.

And then we send them out and we party.

And so part of what we do is being sent out and we party.

We party together.

We're at that point right now.

We're at the reception.

This is kind of maybe the cocktail hour.

And then we're going to get into the food as well.

And guess what?

I know you're Presbyterians, but there might be some dancing.

So the reality is, is that what we are a part of when we talk about covenant renewal is

It's something very important for us to understand because it has with it what I also do a lot of and I'm willing to do for anyone because I love the covenant of marriage.

And that is...

facilitate or officiate people's vow renewals.

Dory and I have been married 30 years.

Our 25th, we did that.

It was COVID that year, but we were able to get a few of our family and friends to come together.

And it was there that I and Dory renewed our commitment to one another.

In fact, every year we kind of do that.

Now, think about it.

As you're thinking about

Our passage today, we're going to get to the sense of what those renewal looks like and how we're to do that regularly.

And just because you've been married, it reminds me of the couple, the old couple sitting out on, well, maybe they used to sit on the Cracker Barrel porch and rocking chairs.

I don't know if they do that now, but, you know.

But they're sitting there and the wife looks over to the husband that they've been married for 60 plus years and said, honey, you know what?

You never tell me that you loved me, that you love me.

And the husband was quiet for some time and said, honey, on the day we were married, didn't I tell you that I loved you?

And she said, yes.

And he said, well, if anything changes, I'll let you know.

We know that's not how that operates.

Whether or not I take Dori out on date night or whether or not we celebrate our anniversary, we are still married, all right?

We're still married.

but we don't experience the, we have that union, but we're not experiencing that communion.

And so, yes, the reality is for those of you who are in Christ, you have this union, but what we are talking about right here and why this is important is because of the communion that we have with God and with one another.

So let's just look at three aspects of this passage and how you and I are called to community.

The very first thing in this passage, as we see elsewhere, is the communion that we have with Christ.

And so he begins praying in his high priestly prayer.

Now granted, this is at the Last Supper.

They have just finished.

He's praying now for his disciples.

However, he's also praying for you and me.

He's praying for those who now believe on him because of their testimony, because of their witness.

And he's praying to God, our Heavenly Father, saying, sanctify them in the truth.

Your word is truth.

And so we have a very clear idea there that in order for us to be sanctified, and that is growing in holiness.

That's what that means.

In fact, throughout church history, they've even referred to this.

We don't refer to it anymore that way, but to deification.

We're not becoming gods, but rather our lives are to be conformed in the image of Christ who is God.

You recognize that this isn't just you start out, you say your vows to God.

Lord Jesus, come into my heart.

I confess my sins.

I know that you're faithful and just.

You forgive me.

You cleanse me from all unrighteousness.

I repent.

I turn to you as Lord and Savior.

So you make that profession.

You've professed your faith.

Similar to when a married couple comes together and they declare and profess their vows.

But folks, if that's all that they do and they don't continue to build upon and grow in that, then their love, even though the union exists, the feelings of love, the connectedness, the closeness will fade away.

You see, we come together as part of a renewal where we recognize we fall away every single week, almost every single moment.

That's why we confess our sins.

Not for some sort of shame.

It's where our shame meets God's grace.

And so we come and we do that as part of this.

This is a renewal time for us where we say, yeah, I did blow it.

Yes, I was self-centered.

Yes, I did lose my temper.

Yes, my thought life was out of control over here.

Yes, I was acting a way that does not reflect me.

Christ-likeness.

And we can confess that.

And that's what we do.

And then we receive God's absolution, the reminder that our sins are cast from us as far as the east is from the west.

And so Jesus is then moving on.

He says, I have sent them into the world and for their sake I consecrate myself.

What Jesus is saying is he's making a commitment to us.

He's saying, I am setting myself apart.

That's what it means to consecrate.

I am setting myself apart for God's will, my heavenly Father's will, to be done through me.

Now, remember, he's saying this right before he's going to be put to death.

He's going to go through an awful trial that's going to insult him.

They're going to physically abuse him, and then ultimately they'll kill him.

And he's saying, I'm setting myself apart for this because I am setting myself apart for

For you, Jesus, who is God, who doesn't owe you anything, who by anything that you have ever done or will do could ever deserve his affection or his attention or his love.

But he says, my entire existence where I can do anything, I set myself apart for these individuals that my life,

Even my very existence is for you.

That is grace unknown, as we sang.

That boggles our mind.

And it's that type of commitment that should cause and stir within us a desire that we would be sanctified.

I think all the rom-coms and all the romantic movies out there for all the Hallmark movies that are now starting up for Christmas.

Every woman's dream, it seems, is to have a man who is fully devoted to them.

And in those Hallmark movies, it shows men that sacrifice or make amazing commitments

To show their love for this woman that they're pursuing.

Greater love has no one than this.

And the fact that Jesus has laid himself down for you.

And he's inviting you to come into this.

To come into this communion.

To be engaged in that which really matters.

Yeah, we have school.

I know you guys have school and it just started up.

In fact, we're very excited.

I want to take a little break here.

We're going to do two things.

One, very excited to have Becca Smith here, our new Associate Director of Student Ministries.

So welcome, Becca.

You can stand up and wave and say, hey, we're excited.

She'll be working with Derek and working with our girls.

Yeah, very excited.

Of course, here with her parents, Emily and Jason, thank you for bringing her on down.

Thanks for having her because, you know, now we get to be blessed because she exists.

So good job.

Also, I'm excited to have Josiah Gosine here, our new academy Bible teacher.

Go ahead, Josiah, stand up.

Many of you know Josiah.

He's part of our partnership in Trinidad in the Caribbean with Covenant Reformed Evangelical Church.

But we have gone through the very long, long and difficult, expensive process to get an official visa.

So after, seriously, everything we had to go through, I can see why people want to sneak in here.

It is a difficult...

A difficult process.

We were almost going to smuggle Josiah in a suitcase, we thought.

No, I'm just teasing.

We didn't do that.

But Josiah is going to be teaching our Bible classes in our academy as he continues to finish up his seminary as we are excited about ultimately seeing Josiah be a part of our work in the Presbyterian Church in America's work in Trinidad.

So that's the plan.

He'll be here.

He's going to help us out, and then we're going to help him, equip him, and send him on back.

But we get to be a part of this.

We've given invitations to both of these individuals to be a part of our church family here.

And all of us have received an invitation to be a part of that communion that is with Christ.

That if Christ is living for us, it calls us and reminds us that we are called to live for him.

That this union that we have, now let's be clear, there's a difference between union and communion.

So Jesus is praying that everyone would be, you know, kind of one.

Union with Christ is like the vows that are made.

And once made, it's permanent.

It doesn't change.

So when you married your spouse, those vows have been made.

You guys now are one.

That's union.

And what happens is when we are united with Christ, we get that new identity as Romans 5, 17 tells us.



We're now sons and daughters of God.

It's like you're changing your name when you get married so that now you are one.

You have that new identity.

We are justified just as if we haven't sinned.

We are declared righteous.

in God's sight, by nothing that we have done.

We are adopted with our union in Christ.

It doesn't change.

We are a son or a daughter of God.

He's not just judge or creator.

He is dad.

And then the idea of sanctification and the idea of being preserved in our faith.

That's what we get with union with Christ.

And then when I said back on May 20, 1995, that I would love Dory in sickness and in health, for better or for worse,

Those vows that I made then, I'm living out by God's grace right now.

But if I just made those vows, yes, we would be married.

But if we never talked, never engaged in doing life together, then that union, even though it exists, would not be at the level with the joy and the excitement and the passion and the love.

You see, we come together every week basically to date, to renew our vows to Jesus, to hear from Him that He's been faithful even though you haven't, to hear from Him that your union with Him is solid, but you can now live in the joy of what that communion brings.

So there's a difference between unions.

Some of you, yes, you're in union with Christ.

But when you talk with me, you're talking about not feeling or feeling separated or it seems that when you pray, your prayers are not being answered.

Well, that's where communion comes in.

And ultimately, yes, it comes into the sacrament, which we'll be celebrating in a few weeks, when we actually come and are reminded that

physically through real elements, that spiritually we are being united and fed and encouraged and strengthened through the body and blood of Christ.

We are in communion with Christ.

We are to co or with, with union, live our lives.

You're to live your life with union in Christ.

And because of that, we are a unique group now.

Because each of us individually, and it's important that you hear this, each of you individually need to have that personal commitment where you have personally appropriated the gospel to yourself, where you don't just believe doctrinal truth that Jesus died upon the cross for the sins of the world, rose again according to the scriptures, and that through his life, we have life.

That's great theologically.

The issue is, do you believe that in here?

We talked about that last week, that it's not just the issues of expressing words or having knowledge, but rather being lived out in your life.

There's a sense where the gospel and the fact that we have faith in Jesus is something that then unites us with everyone here.

As you look around, you need to recognize that those who are professing faith in Christ like you are individuals that you're going to know for eternity.

That's why Jesus talks about reconciliation.

Be careful.

Maybe up in heaven you're having issues with somebody.

He might make you roommates.

But we have that community because we are unique.

Now, always one of the challenges that we have here in any church is when we're putting together small groups.

There are things that necessarily, it doesn't matter what the age is, but it's kind of the stage of where you are.

And so, you know, oftentimes when we have our 21 North, our young people getting together, you know, a lot of them are single.

They're single and they're mingling, you know, that kind of stuff.

But then that mingling results in people getting married.

which, like I said, I do a lot of weddings.

But now they're married, and you recognize there's just a difference.

Not that they can't relate and get together, but married couples are dealing with issues that single individuals aren't necessarily dealing with.

Their life is a little bit different.

Then you throw on their kids, and so even though they're married and the other couples they've been with are married, now that they have kids, it adds a whole new level.

So you create community based upon kind of where you are.

And what you believe when it comes to our relationship with one another, if you're saying, hey, I don't have any friends, I don't know anybody at the church, there is an aspect where, yes, we want to do more to help you with that.

But you also need to recognize you're to seek that out.

You're supposed to find and be with individuals who, like you, want to consecrate their lives for to live it in line or with, co-with, community with Jesus.

That's the people you're supposed to hang out with.

Those are the people that you are related to.

Those are the individuals that you're supposed to ultimately demonstrate to the world that the way that you treat others, particularly those who are in community with you, how you treat them

is actually your primary witness according to Jesus.

I and them, you and me, that they may become perfectly one so that the world may know that you sent me and love them even as you loved me.

Now, here at Pinewood, we're PCA, Presbyterian Church of America.

We're reformed.

We are very precise theologically.

We want to take seriously the Word of God.

We want to know it, study it, understand it.

We preach through it, whole books at a time, so that you might know it.

And for some, many people believe their witness is based upon how much they know.

And let me tell you, it's important to know stuff.

In fact, Sundays, 9 a.m., we are making the change that we've made to really emphasize that time of discipleship.

Because we realize in the church of the United States, worship is absolutely essential.

But you need more than that to understand why we worship God the way that we do and who He is.

We need to be teaching them all that I have commanded you.

That's part of the Great Commission, not just having large gatherings and great experiences and fantastic music and going through liturgy and just unbelievable, life-changing, inspiring sermons every Sunday.

that in understanding that, you wanna do that together.

We wanna do this as part of our lives.

You are called to do this in such a way with each other that other people look here and they say, wow, there's something happening at Pinewood.

And not just particularly our congregation, but individuals should look at our lives and say, wow, there's something different in your life.

There's something about you.

And for Jesus, it isn't just your theology.

That's absolutely essential.

But he says what people are looking at isn't your library.

He's looking at your life and how you treat and love one another.

Now, as many of you know, and I always hate talking about it, but I'm hoping that maybe through all of this, God is glorified because it might encourage some of you.

But let me tell you, it has been amazing being on the receiving side of the care of this congregation, particularly with the food that people bring.

I mean, it's like food channel chef competition kind of food, let me tell you.

In fact, I'm trying to think of ways I can get sick to keep this going.

And it's amazing.

And there's individuals, we have relationship with neighbors, and they're like, hey, we'd like to bring you something.

I'm like, well, actually, I've got like two weeks of food already.

And they're like, wow, that's amazing.

Your church does that.

I say, yeah, they probably do it way more than even what they're doing for me.

And that's what shocked them and amazed them.

Not that Romans 8, 28, God is working all things together for good.

I can say that, and they'll be like, yeah, okay, sounds great.

But what they see

is that community that exists because of our communion with Christ then communicates to the world that we really believe this stuff.

And that the primary way in which we're called by Jesus to express that is through our unity, through our love for one another.

In fact, Francis Schaeffer in his work on the Mark of a Christian said, we cannot expect the world to believe that the Father sent the Son

unless the world sees some reality of the oneness of true Christians.

We're called to communicate the truth of our oneness and God's love by how we are one and how we love.

That's great.

I want you to read your Bibles.

I want you to go through the discipleship classes and opportunities we have.

You women, get connected with Flourish.

Hit the Bible studies.

Students, when it kicks off, be there with Derek, Becca.

Kids, well, they're not here, but they're back with Jason.

I want all of that, all of that to occur.

Be a part of that.

But I think what you really need to be asking, and this is your takeaway...

is how will others see Christ in the way I love his people this week?

Not by just what I believe or what I state or I can quote the five points of Calvin.

I know all the books of the Bible.

I know even what the shortest verse is, which technically could be Job 3.2, he said, but we won't get into that.

But how we love.

How we love.

How we love.

One of the stories that just kind of shocked the world back in the day when John Wesley and George Whitefield were touring America, they were the great evangelists.

They were the Billy Grahams of their day.

A lot of celebrity, a lot of influence, a lot of popularity.

They preached to tens of thousands of people.

But George Whitefield was reformed.

John Wesley was not.

And so what people often saw and assumed is that they didn't like each other.

because they differed theologically.

But what blew everybody away was two things.

One, George Whitefield's people, all Reformed, all very biblical, said, hey, do you think we're going to see John Wesley in heaven?

And George Whitefield said, absolutely not.

He will be so close to the throne of Jesus, and we will be so far that we probably won't see him.

But here's the thing you might not know.

Both George Whitefield and John Wesley went to Oxford together.

They're the same age.

They both became ill.

John Wesley was able to overcome, by God's grace, that illness.

George Whitefield, by God's grace, was able to enter peacefully into eternity.

And John Wesley preached at George Whitefield's funeral.

That's who George Whitefield wanted.

And people are like, what?

even though they disagreed, they had love for one another.

And so we have this unique communion that is reflected in the sacrament of communion, when we receive it.

Notice, you don't take communion, you receive it.

We have this community that we're called to have with one another, a community so tight, so for one another, that when others look at us,

And think about throughout history.

The hospitals we have are because of Christians.

Christians who are willing to remain while the plague ravished a city to be able to care for the sick.

Why do we have orphanage from Christians who took care of and took and provided for those who had been abandoned or were left parentless?

The world...

throughout history has seen the love that the church has for one another that then is reflected in the love for the world.

I think we need to get back to that.

I think about what we're doing even in our worship service is a declaration of that unity and what we're prioritizing as coming together as one, but also that through our unity others might know Jesus.

And so we've been called to community.

And the reality is, Jesus turns to the world and says, I have something to say to you.

On the basis of my authority, this is Francis Schaeffer speaking, I give you the right, you may judge whether or not an individual is a Christian on the basis of the love he shows to all Christians.

Life is tough.

I'm experiencing that more as a reality than I have in the past.

And even this week, I know many of you know Dori went under anesthesia.

We were concerned about that.

She came out fine with that.

However, they weren't able to do what they wanted to do with her foot.

My wife does everything to the max.

Alzheimer's to the max.

Break your foot to the max.

They couldn't really fix it because it was like they said putting screws into an eggshell.

So they put like this bone putty.

That's my...

theological doctorate, medical, bone putty, we'll call it, and they stuck all the shards there, and they're hoping that it calcifies, which means now we have longer healing time, you know.

And regularly, Dory wakes up in the middle of the night in pain, and it takes her a while to figure out why she's in pain.

So, life right now for me, a little bit difficult.

but I know I have all of you, and I know she has all of you, and our small group, and the ladies who come sacrificially at least three, four days a week so that I can come to the church or continue to do the ministry that God has called me to.

We're in this together, and it just reminds me, and I'll just close with this because I just watched it recently, the movie Gladiator.

If you haven't seen it, I'm going to ruin it for you, but it's been like 20 years, so that's on you.

That's on you.

But Maximus is there in the arena with all the other gladiators, and they're to reenact the battle of Thermopylae, which they're going to get wiped out.

And they recognize that, and Maximus says, whatever comes through that gate, it doesn't matter.

If we stay together, we will overcome it.

Now we are in an arena, and thank God we're not being fed to lions anymore.

as many of our forebearers of the faith were.

But I do know this calling that we have is regardless of what comes through the gate in our lives or any of our lives, we're in this together.