

The Humility of Community

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Philippians 2:1-11

Sermon Series:
Gospel in Life

*Dimension
One: loving
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We are in the midst of an eight-Sunday Gospel in Life series.

We have looked at the themes of the city—the place where we live, the heart—the place where God seeks to live, and of idolatry, the counterfeit gods that undermine our allegiance to the one true God who loves us.

Today, we talk about the topic of Christian community, which is a complex 3-D, three-dimensional interaction among God's people. Dimension One: loving the Lord who loves us with the resulting unity that it gives us. Dimension Two: loving the people God gives us, with our resulting relationships with one another. Dimension Three: engaging the world to which God sends us.

First, Dimension One, loving the Lord who loves us leads to the unity of community, centered on the Lord who loves us. In our text for this morning, the apostle Paul speaks of our encouragement “in Christ,” our sharing “in the Spirit” and that, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.” Our most fundamental unity around Jesus is our common

commitment to Jesus, who loves us. This essential unity leads to the expectation that God has a good future for us, which produces a great spirit among us. The early Christians had that great spirit. Listen to how they are described: “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good-will of all the people” (Acts 2:46-47a). They just plain enjoyed each other. That's the result of the unity of community.

I was recently in Fairhope, Alabama and asked a lady there, “How is your church doing?” She replied, “We're bubbling!” I said, “You're bubbling?” “Yes,” she said, “It's not just the pastor, although we appreciate and love him, it's the spirit of the church. It doesn't make any difference if you are in worship Sunday morning or attending a Women's Circle or a Men's group meeting or just talking to people in the parking lot, you have the sense of expectation and anticipation that God is up to something and that it's good to be here.” I thought to myself, the word “bubbling” only occurs in the Bible to describe

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streams and brooks, but I do know I want to be a part of a bubbling church where God's people are loving the Lord who loves them, loving each other and engaging the world to which God sent them with the love of Jesus. While we at VPC have experienced many things in recent years, this is a bubbling congregation with a great bubbling future!

While the Bible doesn't use the word "bubbling" in reference to the church, it does use the word "fire." Jesus will "baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matthew 3:11). Last spring, on the night before the Royal Wedding of William and Kate, I was in Chicago in a Doubletree Hotel with a fellow instructor by the name of Steve. So I said, "Steve, come to my room at 5 a.m. I will order room service, and we will watch the Royal Wedding," and I am so glad we did. There was a dramatic moment in the wedding when the Bishop of London went into the pulpit of Westminster Abbey and began his wedding sermon looking directly into the eyes of the royal couple and the billion of us watching, and he began, "Catherine of Siena said, 'Be who God wants you to be and you will set the world on fire!'" If you personally and we the congregation of the Vienna Presbyterian Church will be who God wants you to be and us to be, then we will set this community and this city and this world on fire. That's the

unity of community, the unity centered on the Lord who loves us.

If the first dimension of Christian community is unity centered on Jesus and the spirit that generates among us, the next dimension is Dimension Two, loving the people God gives us. You see right away how related these two dimensions are. When our relationships are sound, our sense of unity is intact, but damage our relationships and the tie that binds gets ripped up. You can hear the central nature of healthy relationships in our text for this morning as the Apostle Paul speaks of compassion and sympathy, of having the same love and looking to the interests of others. Interestingly, Paul makes it clear that humility is the key to the relationships in community. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves... Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself." That's the humility necessary for community.

Humility is an interesting subject in our "It's all about me" culture. Some regard humility as weakness or as someone who is a nothing—timid, mild, and meek. Yet true humility is "strength in the service of another." Think of the squire who sought to

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become a knight in old England by serving as an apprentice to a knight. When ready, the squire came before the King or Queen and knelt. Notice, the squire is at the peak of strength, training and ability, and certainly not weak—yet the squire places all that strength in the service of the King or the Queen—that’s humility—and is in turn dubbed “Sir Knight,” the one who rises to serve. Humility means we are not larger than the one we serve or larger than the one who may serve us. We are here as those who serve. When you can do it later today, take a moment to “bend the knee” before our Lord—literally if you are physically able and in spirit whether you physically can or not—and offer yourself—all that our Lord has put into to you and all that our Lord has given to you—in his service. “At the name of Jesus every knee should bend.” When Jesus emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, he, in all his glory, was humble. That’s the humility necessary for community.

Once there was a man named Joe Mills, who knelt at the communion rail in his church. As the pastor was approaching with the bread and cup of the Communion service, Joe said, “I prayed silently, asking how I could dedicate my life more truly to God. The thought flashed through my mind, ‘What about the peanut brittle?’ I said, *Be serious,*

God: I’m asking how I can dedicate myself more completely to you. Again came the question, ‘What about the peanut brittle?’”

In Joe’s family, it was traditional for one of the kids to go to the candy store on Friday and buy a bag of peanut brittle as a weekend treat. The candy was for everyone; it was ceremoniously placed in a dish and passed from one member of the family to another. No one was allowed to snatch a piece privately. If you did, you ran the risk of being denied the treat the following weekend. Joe had fallen into the habit of regarding himself as “above the law.” After the children were in bed on Friday night, he’d find his way to the kitchen cabinet and take a piece or two. He rationalized his action by thinking, “Well, who paid for it?” or “Who made the rule?” or “Nobody needs that bit of extra energy more than I do.”

When Joe got up from the communion rail, he tried to think about something else, but the peanut brittle stuck to his mind the way it stuck to his teeth. By the time he got home from church, he knew he would have to ’fess up to his cheating, and he determined to do so right after dinner. He was surprised at how difficult it was to admit his crime to his teenage sons and ten-year-old daughter! Humility isn’t easy. Still, as he humbled and stumbled through an awkward confession, he

“... I wanted all the time to tell you, but I was afraid if I did you wouldn’t love me any more.”

comforted himself with the thought that one of them would come to his rescue with, “That’s okay, Dad. You work hard and you have a right to favors like that.” Unfortunately, no one spoke up. Joe felt like a condemned prisoner. Nothing much was said. Joe thought, *That’s that.*

But it wasn’t. A few days later, Joe and his wife were reading late one night when they heard sobs from the bedrooms. “That’s Ruth,” the mother said. Going to her little girl’s room, she found Ruth with her head buried in the pillow, trying to stifle her sobs. Joe came and sheltered Ruth in his arms, “Now, whatever is the matter, Ruth?” he asked. “I’m the thief,” she sniffled. “What thief? What did you take?” “The cake.” Joe’s wife raised her eyebrows and shook her head bewildered. “What are you talking about?”

“The chocolate cake!” More tears. The *chocolate* cake! Suddenly, everything made sense. Months before, on a Saturday morning, Mother had baked a large chocolate layer cake, iced it, and put it on a plate in the refrigerator. That evening when she began to prepare dinner, she found that the cake was missing. So was the plate. “Don’t look at me, Mom,” said the older son. “I thought you were taking the cake to a church supper or something.” His brother’s denial of guilt was equally

vehement. “Sure, I thought of taking a piece—but I didn’t dare.” Little Ruth’s plea of innocence was most persuasive of all. “Mama, I know you’re trying to teach us to be good like Jesus, so I didn’t touch it.”

The parents concluded that it was another piece of mischief on the part of a boy who lived across the street and considered the matter closed. And now, months later, here was Ruth admitting that she had taken the cake. “But how? Why?” Joe said, mystified. Ruth sobbed out her story. She had wanted to give a party for her girlfriends, and she had taken the cake and a bottle of ginger ale out of the refrigerator. What remained of the cake was hidden under Ruth’s bed and eaten at night bit-by-bit until it was gone. “Then I broke the plate and threw it away so I wouldn’t get found out.” Fresh tears flowed and Ruth said, “I haven’t been able to say my prayers. I wanted all the time to tell you, but I was afraid if I did you wouldn’t love me any more. I decided that if I waited until I was twenty-one and then told you, we’d all laugh about it together.”

Looking at his daughter, Joe realized how much they were alike. He, too, found it difficult and costly to be honest, especially with his wife. “Ruth, even now I have trouble being honest. Remember the peanut brittle?” “Uh huh,” she said. “When you told us about that, I

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knew I would have to tell you about the cake.”¹ Joe had messed up, in humility he ’fessed up, and by the grace of God was able to stand up and to represent the love of God to his family. So we know that there is an essential humility required for the unity of community.

So we see the first dimension of Christian community is unity centered on Jesus as we love the Lord who loves us with the resulting sense of bubbling spirit that gives us. The second dimension of Christian community is our relationships and, specifically, the humility that makes those relationships possible. Now, related to the support of our ongoing relationships in the life of the church is our support of the church community with our personal involvement and financial support. Healthy church-based Christian community requires a lot from us—our hard work—to enable the groups and activities that make our friendships possible, and our financial support means our involvement in the church community literally costs us something.

Last Friday, we sent to you the link to a wonderful short video from Pastor Pete (http://www.viennapres.org/ministries/giving_at_vpc/pastorpetemessage). This is particularly relevant to us because this coming November 13, three weeks

from today, will be Pledge Sunday, when each of us is invited to make a financial pledge to the work of Christ in and through VPC for the coming year. Whether we calculate our gift based on some percent of our income, such as the ten percent tithe, or give as our heart leads us to give, we know our congregation has need of our participation.

In the coming year, we have two parallel financial challenges as a congregation which is why, this year, we will all receive a pledge card with two line items, one for the Ministry and Mission part of the budget and one for the debt retirement part. Our regular ministry and mission budget for next year seeks just a 2.3 percent budget increase over this year. We all know the financial uncertainties of our day, which is why this is a conservative budget increase.

The second challenge is our debt retirement. Our minimum debt service for principal and interest, or our “mortgage payment” for next year is about \$436,000. Our hope is to receive \$500,000 or more. We’ll use any extra funding to reduce the debt principal. Our expectation is that we’ll have a final capital campaign in the spring of 2013. However, if the debt retirement method (the second line on the pledge card) appears to be a highly successful means of reducing our debt, we’ll simply keep doing it instead of having a full capital campaign.

¹ Lionel Whiston, *Are you Fun to Live With?*, (Waco: Word Books, Publishers, 1968), pps. 13-16.

***... Dimension
Three:
engaging the
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Our Lord has hugely blessed us in so many ways. God spoke through the prophet Malachi urging gifts be brought to the storehouse of God's people saying, "...that there might be food in my house." We, as the people of God, are the house of God, and our urgent desire is that people who are hungry, hungry to know God, hungry for a word of encouragement and hungry to know the joy of Christian community, might indeed find food in this, our Lord's house. I do pray you simply pray, "Lord, I ask you to put on my heart an amount that I/we will give—an amount I/we will trust God for." Then make your pledge and trust your generous God to enable your generosity.

If the first dimension of Christian community is the unity of community around our Lord and the second dimension is the humility of community in our relationships, then the final dimension is Dimension Three: engaging the world to which God sends us. I love how Elton Trueblood put this: "The effective Christian pattern is always a base and a field. The base—whether it be in a private house or in a church building—is the center to which the soldiers of Christ repair, periodically, for new strength. The field is the world, and this is where Christians are supposed to operate....The society of a little group of fellow believers

can be so pleasant that the poverty and the sorrow of the outside world are forgotten, at least for the time of meeting. But the poverty and the sorrow must never be forgotten, not even for a little while. A prayer group, which does not make its members more effective apostles in their jobs and homes, and more sensitive participators in the fellowship of those who bear the mark of frustration, is essentially a failure. The test of the vitality of a group does not occur primarily while the group is meeting; it occurs after the meeting is over."² Wherever we go, God is sending us. He has something He wants to do through us where we are.

May our bubbling Christian community grow here at VPC as we grow together in loving the Lord who loves us, in loving the people God give us and engaging and loving the world to which God sends us. Amen!

² Elton Trueblood, *The Company of the Committed* (New York: Harper & Row Publisher, 1961), pp. 74-75.