

WELCOME 26th July 2020 – 8 Pentecost '20 A

Acts 2:42-47 & John 13:31-35

Welcome back to the On-line well of Living Water! I'm glad you're here AND I pray you experience God's grace in this brief time on-line. Please check our website for our weekly Zoom Bible Study catch-ups. Those are a great way to stay in touch & experience God's Word together!

We're continuing with our adapted...as usual there are Group Study/Discussion resources available on our website & I hope you've got those handy. Our on-line service is compact so you have time to go through that material & the Growing Praise with those you've gathered in your homes. Our aim is to equip you so your home becomes a place of the Spirit working leading you into the fullness of God's word & his work in your lives & then out into this city to declare what God has done for you. **As we move into this week...**

No man is an island entire of itself, Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less...
Any man's death diminishes me, Because I am involved in mankind...

John Donne wrote that in 1624...It's still true...always has been. We were not created to be 'islands.' We were created for community. We are built to be engaged in the lives of other people. We're hardwired for relationship. From the beginning God formed us for relationships, to relate w/, care for & cling to others...**especially** in Christian community.

To be isolated for any reason for any extended period of time causes a person to lose touch with reality...you suffer... physically...emotionally...The results are awful. The longer the isolation the more lasting the damage. For a prisoner, solitary confinement is *MEANT* to be punishment.

To be isolated from the Christian community damages your spirit...you lose touch with the reality of the Father's love & your neighbour's need...The results are deeper & more disastrous...your soul begins to wither & harden. The longer the separation the more lasting the damage.

"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.

FAITH FORMED RELATIONSHIPS...lives connected by the unbreakable bond of Jesus' love...lives united by the eternal power of the Spirit...hearts transformed together working for the Father's will that all lives & all things be made new. Only in **FAITH FORMED RELATIONSHIPS** do we find life in its fullest & joy that never ends.

We'll explore and experience that together today...especially when we turn worship over to you in your homes with those other disciples around you... Let's pray...then we'll get stuck into it.

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

God of saving love & hope, you made the world & sustain all creation. Yet your world feels strange right now. The news is full of stories about this contagion. Many are anxious because of it; many are anxious that they might become ill; many are anxious about their family & friends; their jobs & their security. Many are anxious because they have been told to be anxious by the media or government. But you say; "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer & petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." So we bring our worries trusting you for help & peace. Thank you that even in these strange times, you are with us. Help us to look for & be the signs of your goodness & love in this world. Keep our hearts overflowing with your presence & power; through Jesus Christ, our Lord...Amen.

FAITH CHAT:

1. Share a time when you needed a group of people to help you _____ do something/get you out of a jam...etc.
2. With what do you think churches today struggle most? Why that?
3. If the church could do one thing in Wagga Wagga (your city) right now...What would that be?

BIBLES

8 Pentecost '20 A - FAITH FORMED RELATIONSHIPS

"I don't need to go to church to be a Christian" I've lost count of how many times I've heard that. From the rugged outdoorsman who proudly declared his fishing boat/hunting lease an adequate cathedral & the presence of God in the 10-point buck or dove with its nest in the fork of a cactus...to the executive who always seemed to be travelling to the next sales presentation on a Sunday flight...to the family chasing the next sports event for their kids across/out of town. Each of them felt sufficient in their relationship with Jesus on their own...The gathered community simply didn't rate high enough to draw their energies. Oh...they liked the idea of being part of a church...but to actually engage in those relationships was rarely the primary non-negotiable thing on the family calendar. So they usually didn't.

Our Christ-following early church ancestors would have found such a mindset...indefensible...unfaithful. *All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, & to fellowship, & to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), & to prayer...all the believers met together in one place & shared everything they had...They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, & shared their meals w/ great joy & generosity...* In the first few days after Pentecost when 3000 new followers of Jesus were drawn into the community, it seems they couldn't get enough of each other. I don't know where they found a place large enough for all of them to be together...but they did. Social distancing my left foot, there was no stopping them gathering...even given the persistent threat from the Roman Empire/Jewish religious hierarchy that had killed Jesus

Ok...I hear you..."Pastor John, can't you be a Xn by yourself? Do you have to be part of a church to be saved?" Look Of course you can believe in Christ by yourself...Why would you? Nothing in the whole of the Bible gives any indication that God's people are anything other than a PEOPLE...a gathered people...a community drawn together by his saving strength & love. There is nothing OT/NT that sees God calling isolated individuals into his Kingdom apart from the whole of the faith community – the family of God. The kingdom of God is a PEOPLE whom Christ's blood "*has ransomed for God from every tribe & language & people & nation.*" – Rev 5:9 The Bible is unequivocal: we are indispensable to each other... essential to one another. The very nature of the church is that the church is not a building or an activity but people... People whose lives are united to Christ & united with each other for the purpose of living the good news of Christ for all the world to see. How did Jesus say it? *Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.* Missionary Francis Schaeffer says, "Our relationship w/ each other is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our message is true — Christian community is the final apologetic/evidence." Here's the thing...in this world the church is the only vehicle God has chosen to share his good news with the world. The church is the only place God has chosen where the grace of Jesus can be heard clearly & lived out passionately. Ok...I know...folks can live in ways that reflect the image of God within them & live out grace in a "Christlike" way...BUT the gospel is the witness of the church alone via Word & Sacraments which are given by Christ to the church & lived into reality by the church by us/you/me scattered in the world 24/7/365.

Let's start from the beginning...1st – Jesus' primary ministry was in community. He was not Lone Ranger. When Jesus began his ministry he called to himself a proto-church...a group of 12 who, acc to the gospels. "*were to accompany him, & he would send them out to preach, giving them authority to cast out demons.*"- Mk 3:14 They were to live in his presence, share what he planted in them & have authority over the evil one. They were not necessarily the best/brightest of Israel some fishermen, a revolutionary, a tax-collector/traitor, various others including one who would betray him. They eventually included varied sorts of women & a few others. Most all abandoned him at crunch time. That model of discipleship & mission has not changed to this day, except now we carry out that call to mission in the presence/power of the Holy Spirit instead of the physical presence of Jesus. In fact Heb 10:23-25 *Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise. Let us think of ways to motivate/spur one another to acts of love & good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.* Jesus' primary ministry was in community & his ministry continues in the community called the church.

2nd - We know God most deeply in the gathered church...*All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, & to fellowship, & to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), & to prayer...* There are things you can teach me about following Jesus I will never know on my own. You bring the experience/expertise of your faith, your failures, your victories. When Christ healed what you thought was broken forever & when he broke you free from what you thought had you trapped forever. God has given you a different set of gifts & different measure of wisdom. My theological education & extended seminary training may have blinded me to some clear straightforward truth you gained some other way. The church is the place where we can hold onto one another & assure one another in the worst/best of times that w/o a doubt God is w/ us/for us & we can reassure one another again & again that Christ's grip upon us is eternally secure...He who conquered death & sin & hell for us is not going to let go. By myself I may forget...To be isolated from the Christian community damages your spirit...you lose touch with the reality of the Father's love...We know God most deeply in the gathered church.

3rd - We experience transformation most completely in the church community. Christianity is not just a Bible study...not just singing cool songs, it's a lifestyle...it is SHARED. LIFE. TOGETHER. IN. CHRIST. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Luth pastor killed by the Nazis for plot to kill Hitler, wrote: Christianity means community through Jesus Christ & in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through & in Christ. The church isn't a building/place/activity (can't GO "to church") but a fellowship — people doing life together who ARE church. Since we belong to one another...You've heard me say before that church isn't a nursing home for saints it's a hospital for sinners & it's a hospital that once you start getting well you become an apprentice Dr & say to other sick folks "this is what worked for me." I love the NT letters because great majority of them are written to faith communities that are struggling. They've got issues...who doesn't? But it's never just finger-wagging guilt & shame...IN the middle of our issues big small & in-between...we point each other over & over again to Jesus who has already died/risen/rules over all things in love so that we might find life in its fullest in him.

I love the book of Colossians...In Col 2 Paul 3x says "don't." But it isn't "Don't" what you might think. *"Don't let anyone capture you w/ empty philosophies & high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking & from the spiritual powers of this world rather than from Christ."* Then *"don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths."* Then *"Don't let anyone condemn you by insisting on pious self-denial or the worship of angels, saying they have had visions about these things."* Col 2:8, 16, 18 Why... they are not connected to Christ...You were dead because of your sins & because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. It is only in the church that my fear of not measuring up is fully conquered. It is only in the community of Christ that I am held accountable to the life of Christ & the work of Christ in me & for me. It is only in the church gathered as one that by the love of Christ at work in us we can be honest with each other & by the power of the Holy Spirit shape each other into the image of Christ. (Ephesians 4:17-32 "That's killing you & strangling the life out of the church & it has to stop.") The church is not made up of whole people, but rather of broken people who find wholeness in Christ who was broken for us

Finally – 4th - We witness to the world most effectively through the church. That should come as no surprise. 2 times on the last night of his life Jesus told the disciples that our witness to the world was dependent on our relationship with each other in the church. *"Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples."* Only if the world sees love here, can it begin to believe what we say about God's love is true. Jn 17:23ff Jesus prays to the Father for us *"May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me & that you love them as much as you love me."* Only if the world sees one heart one spirit one purpose cohesion accord here can it begin to believe that what we say about the Father sending the Son so that the world can be brought into the fullness of a relationship with Him is true. We witness to the world most effectively through the church... *All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, & to fellowship, & to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), & to prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, & the apostles performed many miraculous signs & wonders. All the believers met together in one place & shared everything they had. They sold their property & possessions & shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, & shared their meals with great joy & generosity — all the while praising God & enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.*

Eph 5:25b—27 - *"...Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy & clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word. He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy & without fault."* As imperfect & fallible as the Church is...as we are right now...we are still his bride, & Jesus will always love us For it is through his Church that We know God most deeply that We experience transformation most completely & that We witness to the world most effectively.

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Let's pray with that in mind: **Father prepare me for whatever you require today and lead me in faith wherever you call me to go. In Jesus' Name...Amen**

...Let's sing...Hear our Praises...