

“The Sacrament of Christian Friendship”

Date: March 18, 2018 **Place:** Lakewood UMC **Occasion:** Lent 5, A Disciple’s Heart, series **Texts:** 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 4:1-16
Themes: Friends, community, groups

During the season of Lent we’re talking about the Wesleyan way of salvation. You see, the journey toward perfection is always personal, but it is never private. We live it and learn it in community. We share our lives with a company of friends, fellow disciples who are drawn into the body of Christ. Quaker Theologian Elton Trueblood describes it this way: “The Company of the Committed.” I like that expression.

Life in the body of Christ is never easy. Sometimes the church feels like a cage full of, well, porcupines. Because of our imperfections, we almost inevitably bump into each other, hurt each other, and are tempted to pull away into our own private corner of individualized spirituality.

No matter how far we’ve come in the process of being made perfect in love, it is usually in relationships with other imperfect disciples that we discover how imperfect we are. At the same time, it is in the community of other disciples that we find support in our weakness, accountability for our discipleship, and the encouragement to keep on striving toward the perfection that Jesus calls us.

When Jesus began his ministry he called twelve other men to join him on the journey. It’s clear that Jesus never intended to do his ministry alone. Jesus’ life with the disciples becomes the model for the way his followers of every age are called to be in community with one another.

In the spring of 1729, John and Charles Wesley and a few other Oxford students were drawn together with a clear and simple desire to live a holy life. When other students observed the orderly way in which they

practiced their spiritual disciplines, they sarcastically called them the “Holy Club.” It would be easy to romanticize these groups, as if the participants were always in perfect harmony with each other.

By contract, one of the member’s, Benjamin Ingham, wrote in his journal how very real differences between the members sometimes led to strained relationships. But they were bound together in their shared desire to be fully devoted to Jesus Christ.

That desire led John Wesley to Aldersgate Street, where the Holy Spirit lit a fire of divine love in his heart that ignited a movement that continues to this day. Wherever the Methodist movement has lived up to its heritage, it has thrived through some form of small group community that is modeled after the Holy Club. There, disciples become faithful companions in “the Community of the Committed.”

Some of you have been a part of small groups that have met for prayer and accountability. As I’ve listened to you, it is in those small groups that your faith has really deepened and grown. There is a love and a friendship that develops that is quite unique and special, that you don’t find anywhere else.

Margueritta Estes recently told me about how special the Wednesday evening prayer group has become for her. Brad Enterline shared with me that the men’s group which meets on Wednesday morning has been meeting for over 20 years. There is a special bond that has developed among those men.

The encouragement that Benjamin Ingham found in the Holy Club, that Margueritta has found in the prayer group and that Brad has found in the men’s sharing group are not unique. They are the ongoing gifts of God’s grace that enable women and men to continue to grow as disciples

of Jesus Christ in a wide variety of small groups, classes, and ministry teams as people share their lives together in *the Company of the Committed*.

The reading from Corinthians today was written to the most contentious, conflicted and messed up congregation that Paul had to deal with. My guess is that some of the folks in Corinth were surprised to hear Paul say, “Christ is just like the human body – a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though we are many.” (1 Cor. 12:12)

A few verses later he argues using an absurd analogy. It’s absurd for the foot to say, “I’m not a part of the body because I’m not a hand.” (1 Cor. 12:15). Well of course, not, duh! It reduces the argument to absurdity because it is so obvious that every part of the human body is connected to every other part. If you’ve ever broken a toe, you know how it affects the whole body.

Here’s the point. According to the New Testament, there is no such thing as private, individual Christianity. John Wesley taught that “Christianity is essentially a *social* religion; and that to turn it into a solitary religion is to destroy it.” That means that no follower of Jesus needs to go through life alone.

But people do. They pull away from the body of Christ, thinking they don’t need the church any more. They can function quite well as a hand or a foot without the rest of the body. But like a branch that is cut off from the vine, it is easy to quickly wither.

God gave us the church so that we can support each other, love each other, encourage each other, challenge each other. Christian friendship is

a sacrament; it is a means of grace; it is a tool that God has given us to help us grow in faith, in love, and in knowledge of Jesus Christ.

James Harnish, in his daily workbook, *“A Disciples Path,”* the one we’re using for our Lenten study wrote these words:

“While visiting Durham Cathedral in England, I became acquainted with a 12th century saint name Aelred, who is best-remembered for his work on “Spiritual Friendship.” He wrote to counter the common monastic idea that individual friendships were incompatible with devotion to Christ.

Aelred said that taking pleasure in the company of friends was, in fact, an expression of the highest degree of Christian perfection. He specifically referenced John 15:15, where Jesus said that his disciples were no longer “servants,” but “friends.”

Although the church has never named friendship as a sacrament, I believe Jesus’ words around the Last Supper raise it to a sacramental level – an outward and tangible sign of the inward and spiritual grace. It may be that friendship is the most overlooked of Christian virtues, the most easily forgotten work of the Holy Spirit, and the most often neglected means of grace.

Friends are people who enjoy each other’s company. As I think about my closest friends, I realize that I smile when I enter their company. We laugh a lot. We enjoy the time we are together.

My guess is that the disciples might have said the same thing about Jesus. Walking with him beside the seashore, telling stories on the hillside, celebrating at a wedding party, or weeping beside a best friend’s grave – just being in Jesus’ presence could change the ordinary disappointments of life into the joy and freshness of eternal life.

People were drawn to Jesus because they enjoyed being in His presence. Christ-centered friendship is like that.

St. Aelred got it right. Friendship is not a contradiction of the Christian life, but a vital tool that the Holy Spirit uses to perfect us in love. Disciples continue to grow in their discipleship because they share Christ-centered friendship with other disciples.

Even as the bread and cup becomes the outward and visible sign of God's inward and spiritual grace in Holy Communion, Christian friendship becomes a tangible expression of the love of God that became flesh in Jesus, becoming flesh in us. Amen? So be it.

Let us pray:

“Loving God, I give thanks for the gift of friendship – for those friends in my past, those current friendships that give me hope, and the ones that will come in the future. Shape these divine relationships into ones that will blossom through trial, disagreement and all of life's transitions. May they reflect the divine commitment you make to me reflected in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Amen.”

This sermon borrows heavily from the daily workbook of the book *A Disciple's Heart: Growing in Love and Grace*, by James A. Harnish with Justin Larosa. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015, pp. 64-80.