

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
October 31/November 1, 2015  
John Crosby  
We Are Known  
Acts 2:42-47**

[Video]. To view, see link below

We're talking today about the idea of community, of fellowship. Bob (Kerr) just talked about his place in the community and how it changed when his wife, Lee, died here and how it's changed the journey for him. And frankly, it's sometimes hard after loss like that to figure out where your place in the community is—or for many of you, to come to church. Is that the same thing as being in the community? Is that the same thing as having fellowship? It's a very American idea. We are with people all the time.

Two sociological studies of the last 25 years have been Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* and the *Lonely Crowd* by Glazer. Both of them said that people are with other people a lot because they are afraid to be alone. We've lost the sense of what it means to be alone? But we're also afraid of intimacy, of letting people get too close, and we move so fast that it's hard to establish the kind of community that looks like those Norman Rockwell paintings of everybody caring about each other. So how do *you* fit? You personally? Are you a visitor just checking it out? Have you been here forever, but you feel like you just sort of come? Do you feel like you're a part of a rich community of fellowship that would notice if you're gone?

The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once said,

“Life is lived forwards, but is only understood backwards.”

Life is lived forwards, can't go back, but it's only understood as you look back. So sometimes, if you have a place in the community or a part of the fellowship, you can only understand why that's important or how that can happen by looking back at the beginning. Going to the root of why we're supposed to be in community instead of just going to church, going through the same old routines that won't change things. We can live forwards, but only understand backwards. How did it start? All month we've been saying 'This is how it started.' The book of Acts tells us how it started for the first followers of Jesus. It says,

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the wonders and signs performed by the apostles and all the believers stayed together and had everything in common.

46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of

all the people. And daily the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. [Acts 2:42-47]

If you go back to the roots, you discover that whatever else following Jesus is, it cannot be a solo sport. It's not him or her, but they. They devoted themselves, it says, to the fellowship. I think that's very different than they were regular in church attendance. I'm not arguing with that, but I am saying, they devoted themselves to the fellowship. What does that mean? Well, the dictionary defines fellowship as friendship or loyalty, or more common in the past, it says, allegiance to a common goal. I think that's what fellowship is closest to . . . relationships with allegiance to a common goal.

The first week when we talked about this *We the Church* business, I said it's a matter of *association*. Remember, I said association is choosing to gather with people that we don't choose, some of whom we like, some of whom we don't like, most of whom we don't know, choosing to gather around a cause larger than any of us? Association. Fellowship is an association.

As the early followers of Jesus lived their lives, they started to scatter. Some got jobs out of town. Some returned home to places far away. Some were scattered when persecution came, and so these little pockets of Jesus followers started to emerge all around the Roman Empire. What's interesting to note is how different the fellowships were from each other. When Paul writes to the little house group, it's not a church. They weren't organized enough to be a church. They met in somebody's house. When he wrote to the fellowship at Rome, he said,

“Remember me to Caesar's household.”

Now, that means that there were some pretty important people in that house group, members of Caesar's household, certainly part of the Praetorian Guard. The rich and powerful were part of that fellowship, but most of the places where followers of Jesus gathered were not like that. When he writes to the little house gathering that's in Corinth in Greece, Paul says this,

26 Remember who you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise, or important, or noble. 27 God chose the smallest people in the world so that nobody could boast. [1 Corinthians 1:26-27]

The first fellowships were filled with poor people; with slaves. Worse than that—with women —people that were discounted with society. And they kept gathering together, having this new kind of community. And it started not only to spread, but it started to get the attention of the authorities and they became suspicious.

Any of you get to hear Matt last week? I thought young Matt did a terrific job. One of the things I liked was his attention to history, and he quoted one of the church fathers, but it was interesting for me to see how outsiders viewed these gatherings of Jesus followers. There was a guy called Pliny the Great. Probably the only person who called him “The Great” was his biographer who got paid to say, “Pliny the Great.” Pliny the Great was a

governor of one of the provinces of the Roman Empire. He was in Bithynia. Now, since you probably don't remember where Bithynia was, it's in that red circle. And that red circle is basically Turkey. What we would call modern Turkey. Bithynia is probably close to the Northwest edge of Turkey right where Istanbul and Constantinople is. And this governor—of what was probably an important province—was sending frequent letters to the Emperor in Rome. At this point the Emperor was Trajan, because the year was about 110 AD, about 50, 60 years after the Christian churches got going, and 50 years after what we read in the Book of Acts. And it spread around the Empire so there are little house churches in Bithynia, and the Empire is suspicious of them, and so they've asked for a report. Pliny goes out and investigates very thoroughly and says,

“I'm not sure that you have anything to fear.” And then he says this, “I talked to these believers. They asserted however, that their summon substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn.”

This is the early service folks!

“On a fixed day before dawn, and sing responsibly a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to crime, but NOT to commit fraud, or theft, or adultery, not to leave loans unpaid, not to refuse to give to others when called on to do so. When their ceremony was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food—but ordinary and innocent food.”

Pliny is saying, “Emperor, I think this is all they do.” But to make sure, and this is written out in the letter, he says very nonchalantly, “So I tortured two of the female slaves.” They called them deaconesses. A lot easier to be a deacon today, folks!

“I tortured two of the female slaves called deaconesses, but discovered nothing called excessive devotion to these superstitions. And it's spreading Your Majesty, it's spreading, not only to the cities but also the villages and farms, to many of every age, every rank, and both sexes.”

In other words, that association, when people would gather with other people that they didn't choose, some of whom they liked, some of whom they didn't like, most of whom they didn't know, around a cause that was greater than any of them. That fellowship started to change the culture. Because the fellowship wasn't gathered around their relationships, it was around the *why* they were there. What do you think the most common use of the word fellowship in the last 25 years is? I'll give you a hint up on the screens. Exactly. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The Tolken story of the Lord of the Rings starts with his book, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, where an odd group of people—hobbits, and dwarfs, and heroes, and even traders—are gathered together and put in a fellowship and sent on a long journey that will require everyone to do their part from which they're not sure that they will return, but that will change their lives. It is their journey together that changes them.

So somebody that says, “Yeah, I come to church every week” cannot be in fellowship just by coming to church because you can bowl alone at church. You can be part of the lonely crowd at church. We miss the journey of faith when we just come to church. And we miss fellowship, the thing that changes us, the association that changes us, when we don’t go on the journey.

I saw the Fellowship of the, it wasn’t the *Fellowship of the Ring*, this was the Fellowship of the King. I saw this at our dinner table on Friday night. Laura and I had four couples over and we had a great, fun time talking about Halloween and enjoying each other. At one point over dinner we said, “What’s one memory you have of your time at CPC?” And the four couples each shared something different. The first person was interesting. He said, “We first came to this church almost 20 years ago. What struck me was that at the very first worship service we went to, you stood up and said that one of your staff had stolen \$150,000. Whoa, great church!” “But what struck me,” he said, “was that you didn’t try to hide it. And you said, ‘We need to treat this brother with truth for what he has done and grace for who we are together.’ And you talked about the process that you wanted to walk through together.” He said he turned to his wife that very day and said, “If this is what they’re like on their worst days, let’s hang around to see what good days look like.” That’s the first part of the fellowship. If you’re perfect, leave. We’ll screw you up before you screw us up. We are broken people. We’re held together by grace.

Somebody else said, “You know, we don’t have family here. We were just sort of looking around and we came to this church. We met another young couple, and they were so neat and we finally had friends that had our values, and they invited us into this little group of young couples and now we have a family here.” He goes, “We think about leaving to go for another job, but it’s hard to leave your family.” That’s what fellowship is. It’s single people. It’s widowed people. It’s divorced people. It’s young people, and old people, finding a sense of family here.

The third couple said they had come to church for a while and their kids were real active, so they were actually looking at other churches, but he said, “This became our church when one of our friends in the neighborhood got sick. He was an Agnostic. Right on that Agnostic/Atheist line and never had any time for church. We started to help, and then this church just wrapped their arms around that whole family. It didn’t matter that they didn’t come to this church. It didn’t matter that they didn’t believe. It just mattered that they needed help.” He said, “And we watched them deliver meals and drive to the hospital and help their kids with homework, and then when he got really sick, they helped this guy die.” He said, “The neat thing was that toward the end, toward the very end, this guy came to believe in Jesus, and that was great, but what convinced me that this was our church was that I wanted to be a part of THAT kind of church, not just so that if I got sick, but so that if somebody else that I love got sick, we would gather around.” That’s the fellowship that we talk about. It’s not coming and sitting in church; that’s important as that is.

The fourth couple was another young couple. The young woman said, “We came here because one of our neighbor friends invited us to come to Mom’s Morning, and it was

like an hour of sanity in a crazy week and I loved it. I built my week around it, it was great, but they had just elected my husband to be an Elder at another church. And so we had to go to this other church all the time.” She said, “What struck me is that when we were driving to the other church, I would always be sad when we went past this church after the joy of having been invited into their life through Mom’s Morning.” That’s *fellowship*.

We all experience it in different ways. I really don’t want to make it sound like some super mystical, feel-good group where everybody knows everybody. That’s just not the case. That’s why we started with Bob. For fellowship, Bob finds that he has real fellowship with other people who take these pink cards and pray for them day after day, and he connects with them through the Internet. It’s deep fellowship that at 9:30AM the choir sits here. Some of you are in small communities or small groups. Others of you are out in the parking lot trying to help people not kill each other and you are a little band of warriors who are having fellowship. Some of you chase after children. Some of you put your arms around those that have just lost people to death. It looks completely different for everybody because our personalities are wired very differently.

The first century not only said that following Jesus was not a solo sport. It found that gathering together in these little communities was so important that if you did not do it, your faith would be changed. Your faith would be hurt. As a matter of fact, to that church in Corinth, the one that I talked about in Greece before, there was a young man who came to Christ and still wanted to stay sexually active and was proud of his sexual prowess. In Greece, being like Vegas, it was like, ‘Yeah, I can be a Christian and be cool, too.’ But Paul kept saying, “Tell him no. Tell him no! Sex is reserved by God for marriage. It is holy. He shouldn’t be doing this to these women.” Dat, dat, dat, dat. And the man said, “No, this is what it means. You said I was free. Well, I’m free, baby.” And Paul finally turns to the church and says, “No, here’s what you do. Two of you go and talk to him and if he won’t turn it around, have a whole group come together and tell him that God is saying no! And if he won’t obey then, you guys need to cast him out of the fellowship.” What’s interesting is where Paul writes cast him out of the fellowship it says, *for the destruction of his flesh*. In other words, if you throw him out of the fellowship, it will destroy him (spiritually).

Now, I have to tell you, our membership standards are a little more relaxed than that, but there is something at work here. When you get to 2 Corinthians, the letter that comes next, some time has gone by and these people have actually done that. They have confronted this guy, he doesn’t repent, they throw him out, and out in the wilderness he says, “What have I done? I’ve thrown away this beautiful, life-giving God and these people.” And he begs to change. He comes back and he says, “I will follow Jesus.” And Paul, in the 2 Corinthians letter says,

“Bring him back. Welcome him back.”

Somehow, we are not meant to go this alone. Now, with a church on every corner, it’s not like it was back then. That was the only game in town. It’s different today, but the

principle is the same. If you are not absorbed in the fellowship of the community, then you're experiencing a pale imitation of what God has for you.

I got an example of that this week. A friend of mine wrote me a note. I'll read the appropriate parts. "Dear Cros, thanks for sending me the book and for the implied optimism that I'll be able to jump on board in a group Bible study and get my spiritual life back in gear. In all honesty, I'm adrift spiritually since having to leave CPC. The summer always brings distraction and falling out of a routine, but with the advent of fall, and lacking a church home and center of spiritual gravity, it's been a struggle to connect with a religious community where we feel like our needs are met and we can also create a sense of fellowship and community. I'm hopeful we'll find that eventually, but in the meantime, your prayers for my guidance and peace and soul are much needed and much appreciated."

I don't think this is an optional thing. I think that if you content yourself with coming whenever your schedule approves or coming when you feel like it, or just coming to church, you're staying in kindergarten when you're supposed to get to second grade. The things you learn in second grade are much better than kindergarten. Where has the idea of us being in fellowship with each other enriched you? Where has it changed your faith? Is there something missing from your journey of faith because you're not involved in fellowship? That's why we did this today so we could say we don't have to bowl alone. We come to the table. The best sign of fellowship is this table right here because it breaks down all the barriers of rich and poor, black and white, gay and straight, of Republican and Democrat or whatever, and it says when we come to King Jesus's table, everything can change.

Link to video shown during this service <https://vimeo.com/144379095> | (We the Church, We Are Known)

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*