



Keep Bumping Into All Those Other Followers of Jesus

TEXT
Mark 1:16–20
Philippians 2:1–8

September 18, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

My friend Michael Lindvall has written a collection of short stories titled *Good News From North Haven*. He tells of Minnie and Angus MacDowell and their trip to visit their son Larry. It was a stressful visit.

Larry is married to Sherry. And she was under a lot of stress. Not unusual stress, just the normal kind. They have two small children, and she is seven months pregnant with their third. The oldest child, Jered, has chicken pox. Sherry was preparing to give him an oatmeal bath, when she discovered the hot water heater was broken — two and a half children, in-laws, chicken pox and no hot water.

Larry squeezed through the crawl space under the house to repair the hot water heater, and that's when Sherry reached the breaking point. Minnie said, "Sherry, it's a good thing you never lost that baby fat, or David might have sent you under the house to repair the water heater." Sherry didn't say anything. She went upstairs, packed a bag and went home to stay with her mother.

Relationships are complicated. So church is complicated

— because church is a network of relationships. It has been that way from the beginning.

Last week we reflected on how it is not good to be alone. Our humanity is caught up in each other. I can't be human by myself; we are human together. Not only can one not be human in isolation, it is also true that we can't be Christian in isolation. I can't be Christian by myself. Christian faith happens among us.

Jesus begins his ministry by announcing that the life of God, a life he calls the kingdom of God, has drawn near. Jesus says, "I can show you that life." And the first thing that Jesus does is he calls fishermen to follow him. He calls them together. Because even as complicated as relationships can be, if we are to see this kingdom, if we are to know this kingdom, if we are to experience this different way of living, it will happen together.

Now this seems pretty basic, but sometimes we think of faith as a private thing.

As you well know, we have many memorial services here at Village where we commend the saints to glory, to the church triumphant. It's not uncommon in preparing for those services to hear something like, "Daddy

liked the old hymns." They are talking about *How Great Thou Art*, *Amazing Grace* — and sometimes they may be talking about *In the Garden*.

Do you remember that one? My former youth pastor called it "Andy's Hymn." *And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own; and the joy we share while we tarry there, none other has ever known.*

It seems that the best thing about that garden is that no one else is in there. *I come alone. He walks and talks to me, tells me I am his own, and none other knows my joy.* It celebrates a private faith.

This idea is not completely absent in scripture. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me ... he leads me ... he restores me.* It's the same. But that private, personal focus is the significant minority in scripture. When we are following Christ, we cannot help but bump into others who are following Jesus. It is impossible to be Christian by yourself.

I have recently noticed how frequently the New Testament writings speak of the importance of the unity of the church. Jesus says, *They will know that you are my disciples; they will know that*

*you belong to me by your love for one another.*¹

And if you read the letters of Paul, any of them, there will be an urging for the unity of the church. Corinthians will compare the church to a body: *We are all different parts, but we are all united, like parts of a single body.*²

Galatians will say *we are no longer slave or free, Jew or Gentile, male or female; we are all one in Christ.*³

Thessalonians will say *we are all children, brothers and sisters in one family.*⁴

But perhaps none lift up the unity any more than Philippians. *Make my joy complete, be of the same mind. Have the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus. Be of one mind.*

The consistency of this teaching in the New Testament tells us two things. There is something essentially Christian about being in this faith together. It tells us that. But it also tells us that being Christian together has been hard for a long time.

Presbyterians can give testimony to that. Our history gives such testimony. In the colonial period, even before we became a nation, we Presbyterians split over the importance of the teaching of the Westminster Confession. The factions reunited pretty quickly, but it was a painful time.

In the 1860s, we split over slavery. The country formally got back together in 1865, but it took our church until 1983 to reunite. It was painful.

In the 1920s, we split over what was called the “Modernist Controversy.” It was the influ-

ence of science on how we read scripture. Most who left in that split 100 years ago have never come back.

In the past few years, there are Presbyterians who have left our denomination over our inclusion of LGBT folks — that includes congregations right here in Kansas City.

Relationships are complicated. And sometimes in church, folks have found them so complicated they just pack a bag and go live somewhere else. Given how common this experience is, I have begun to wonder: When the church does stay together, when we do hold together in unity, what is it that holds us together?

Some point to this passage in Paul and say the answer is right here: *Make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.* They say the church is unified in our beliefs. That seems to make sense. When we share the same beliefs, the same doctrine, we stick together. We are on the same page. We have the same mind.

But there is a problem with this. We don’t think alike. We don’t all have the same beliefs. It is obvious from the New Testament constantly calling the church to live in unity that not thinking alike has a long history. And the irony is that when the church has insisted that we all get on the same page belief-wise, the result has not been unity but division.

We are watching this right now. In the past five years, there were some in our denomination that identified what they called

the essential beliefs. If you were to really be faithful, you had to believe those certain things. They told us it would unite the church — but four years ago, they split and formed a new denomination.

Well, doesn’t the text say, “Have the same mind”? It sounds like we are to have the same beliefs. There is something confusing in the translation. When the text says have the same *mind*, it doesn’t mean *thought*. Here *mind* is understood to be the center of the person, the core of the person; it means have the same mind-set . . . orientation.

Paul describes the core of Christ as humility. *He humbled himself taking on the form of human likeness — humbled himself to the point of death on a cross.* That is the mind of Christ. We spoke of this last week.⁵

I have told you a good bit of church history today, some of it current. I wouldn’t blame you if you thought, “Well, that’s interesting, but I don’t really care about denominations.” That’s OK. This is the point: What is clear is that the unity of the church is not a matter of the brain; it’s a matter of the heart. When the church lives in unity, it is not because we have our head straight; it is because we have our relationships prioritized.

I learned this from Rev. David Nzioka. Many of you know David. He came to Kansas City from Kenya. He was the product of Presbyterian mission service in Kenya, so when he came to Kansas City, he looked us up.

He wanted to start a church for African immigrants to our

community. He began that new church at the Meneilly Center, and now they have their own building, and David oversees a vibrant ministry.

When folks were leaving our presbytery, they went to David. They said, “David, come with us. We think you agree with us.”

David said: “I do. But I cannot leave. This is the church that gave me life. This is the church that taught me the faith. This is the church that showed me the love of God. How could I walk out on that?”

What holds us together is not a matter of the brain; it is a matter of the heart. Because Christian faith is not an idea; it is a radical love.

My father-in-law was a pastor. With his years of experience, he enjoyed mentoring me. He found great joy in telling me how I ought to do things. But there was a problem. I was 28 and already in ministry about 24 months, so I knew everything. I didn’t want to be told how to preach and how to write a newsletter article and how to plan a Session meeting. But that did not slow his eagerness to guide me. Without fail, every visit would include at least one tense conversation. There we were, two pastors, arguing with one another about ministry.

It took a while, but things changed between us. I figured something out. When we were arguing, the one who was hurt the most was not me. And it certainly wasn’t him. It was Carol. The two men she loved more than any others in this world were at each other. You know what that

is like when two people you love are at each other.

I realized that I needed to love him because she loved him. It worked. I loved him. Church is like that. We treat each other with love because we are all loved by Christ, and if we are genuine in wanting to love God, we love those whom God loves. We hold on to each other because God holds on to us. When the church holds together, that’s what holds us together.

I told you that Sherry packed a bag and went home to her mother. That was just for a brief while. She came home. About her return, Michael wrote: “Life together is hard. There are no perfect husbands, no perfect wives, no perfect children, no perfect in-laws. (And he could have said there are no perfect churches.) [Life together] is both our sorest test and our sweetest joy. For the only thing harder than getting along with other people is getting along without them.”⁶

¹John 13:35

²1 Corinthians 12

³Galatians 3:28

⁴1 Thessalonians 1:2–9

⁵The sermon preached on September 11, 2016, “It Is Not Good That the Human Is Alone,” can be found at villagepres.org

⁶Michael Lindvall, *Good News From North Haven* (2002), p. 122. This quotation has been edited a bit. But the spirit of the quote is all Michael!

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.