

THE IDEAL COMMUNITY OF FAITH

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A series of reflections based primarily on Colossians 2:2-7,
written in 1983 while minister of St Paul's United Church, Orillia, ON

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FOREWORD

When we hear or see the word “God” today it is important to know what a speaker or writer means by the word. Our understanding of words is often changing as our understanding of the world itself is changing.

We no longer believe that we live in a three-storied universe and that the earth is at the centre. Ongoing developments in the study of evolution have changed the understanding about life and its origins and the earth’s place in the universe.

During my lifetime additional information has been discovered concerning the origins of Christianity which has changed my interpretation of “God”.

I have come to think of “God” to be the creative intelligent spirit (energy) that is everywhere throughout the universe and present in all life. This creative Spirit seeks to enable all who are willing, to be the energy for good where ever they live.” God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Similarly the word “Christ” is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah”, the meaning of which, for the Jews, meant “a Special Messenger” who was to come and restore the Kingdom of Israel.

Jesus, a Jew, while believing he was a special messenger did not see his mission was to rule the Kingdom of Israel. Mark’s gospel indicates that Jesus sought by word and deed to call people to a different way of life – a way of *love*, i.e. *agape love, unconditional caring for all people* (vastly different from that which was current in their time). Those who followed Jesus’ teaching were known as the People of the Way. Through time I have come to consider Jesus to be the messenger of this creative energy, intelligent spirit, and the example of this Way of Life, lived in love for all, even unto death. What could his *Way of Life* mean for us in our day and time?

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1. THE CHURCH – A COMMUNITY OF COURAGEOUS HEARTS

Text: *“I want them to continue in good heart” (Colossians 2:2)*

INTRODUCTION

What is the church?

There are as many different answers as there are people, for on hearing the word “Church”, each one of us will have his or her own picture in their mind – the church we grew up in, or the one we felt most at home in. For some it will be a rural building at a crossroads, for others a stone church on a busy city street corner. Each of our pictures would be a little different. But is the building we call Church really the Church?

I am reminded of the occasion when I was serving on a pastoral relations committee as a congregation was looking for a new minister. Their Church building had burned to the ground. One of the members asked at the beginning of our first meeting, “What’s the point in looking for a minister, we don’t have a church!” Was he right?

Paul and the first Christians would have disagreed. In their day, church buildings did not exist. For them the word Church symbolized one thing – that group of people who gathered together in the name and spirit of Jesus the Christ. Where they met was immaterial. It was their common commitment to the Jesus way of life that made them the Church. They were a Community in Christ, a Community of the Way.

Our New Testament reading this morning came from the letter Paul wrote to the Christian Community of Faith in Colossae. In it he addressed a concern he had about the life of the faith community in Laodicea. Colossae and Laodicea were neighbouring cities in the valley of the Lycus river, about 100 miles from Ephesus in what, today, we know as Turkey. The Lycus valley was noted for its earthquakes and the city of Laodicea had been destroyed more than once, but the citizens had always been able to rebuild without help from Rome. She was a rich city and in need of nothing. Because of her position straddling the main east-west highway, she was a great commercial and financial centre, banking, the manufacturing of cloth and medical services being her main activities.

Paul, concerned for the growth and development of this young community of faith, seeks with a few well-chosen phrases to paint the picture of what he believes the ideal church should look like. He mentions seven. The ideal community of faith should possess courageous hearts, love, knowledge and wisdom, be able to resist seductive teaching, be a disciplined community, a community in Christ and abounding in gratitude.

Needless to say, it would be foolish of me to try to talk about each of these qualities this morning. I have chosen to share some thoughts around the first of these qualities. What does it mean to be a community of courageous hearts?

A. THE FAILURE OF COURAGE

But the questions surely is, “Why did Paul feel it necessary to hold up before the Community of faith in Laodicea the ideal of a community of courageous hearts?” Was there a danger that they were losing heart? Was their commitment to Christ only a superficial one; outwardly they appeared strong but inwardly lacking the staying power? Could it be that Paul knew the city so well that he was fully aware of the dangers such a city held for the Christian community of faith?

Paul does not tell us his reason for his letters; he seldom does. But we know they were written in response to a problem. We also know from the book of Revelations, written much later, that this congregation receives a scathing condemnation:

“I know your works; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! Because you are tepid and neither cold nor hot I will vomit you out of my mouth. Because you say I am rich and need nothing and are quite unaware that it is you who are wretched and the pitiable one, the poor and the blind and the naked one..”

Did Paul have a premonition that, despite their brave appearance, they would ultimately miss the mark?

The citizens of Laodicea enjoyed all the comforts of the world of that day. For the Christians living there the temptation would be to live as their non-Christian neighbours lived, participating fully in their social and economic life, turning a blind eye to the compromises with their faith that this would entail. There is nothing like a life of comfort and ease to soften a person’s resolve to love God with all one’s being and one’s neighbour as oneself. That is not to say that comfort and ease in and of themselves are bad. But what effect may they have on our commitment to Christ? When the challenge of God comes, when we are called to make tough decisions, when we are called to live courageously, when we are called by God to act in a way that may lead to the loss of our comfort and ease, are we able to respond positively to God’s challenge?

For the Christians in Laodicea faithfulness could mean persecution. They could not bow the knee to Caesar. They could not participate in the pagan festivities which were usually connected with commerce and industry. Non-participation could deprive them of the financial benefits of the city. It is the challenge that comes to all of us at some time or another. We may be asked by the boss to do something which we believe is unethical, for example, fit gun mountings to civilian aircraft being sold to a South American country. We may discover that the

company we are working for is violating anti-pollution laws, for example, dumping waste from a pulp mill into a local river. We may discover that an organisation we belong to or work for is secretly discriminating against certain ethnic or language groups. We may be called upon to exercise tough love in a family situation.

To take the Christian action in any of these situations may cause loss of ease and comfort. It could be costly in terms of our economic or social security. What do we do? When we turn our back on the challenges God sets before us, we can quickly become indifferent to the human issues of life. We can become like the Christians in Laodicea, neither hot nor cold, just lukewarm. A character in one of Bernard Shaw's plays says, "The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them but to be indifferent to them; that is the essence of inhumanity." While Jock A. Davidson says, "Indifference to the needs of others, to their suffering, to their simple human rights, is one of the great pervasive sins of our time. And it is a sin that is nurtured by and expressed by the conveniently closed ear and the conveniently tied tongue."

Indifference leads to the lack of vision, and a people without vision are dead. For without vision there is no hope and no light. Paul sensed in the Laodicea situation the potential for the failure of courage. He senses that the day would come when they would be unwilling to pay the price of courageous living. It is the danger every Christian and every congregation faces as we are confronted by the challenge of God in Christ in the midst of life. Paul's words are true for every generation. We have been called to live courageously.

B. THE SOURCE OF COURAGE

The pages of Christian history are filled with the stories of men and women who have lived courageously against all odds. Father Damien, hearing his bishops call for a volunteer to go and spend the rest of his life among the lepers of Molokai, which meant in those days becoming a leper himself, offered himself without hesitation. Why? Where does the courage come from to do such a thing?

In 1743 Charles Wesley set out from London to meet his brother John in Nottingham. He wrote, "My brother came, delivered out of the mouth of the lion. He looked like a soldier of Christ. His clothes were torn to tatters." This was neither the first nor the last time that John Wesley was mauled by a mob.

When we were in New Zealand we saw a film of the work being done by a young New Zealand couple in the Philippines. They were living with their children in a tin shack with a dirt floor in the ghetto. There they had established a community of faith, among the poorest of the poor. Why? Because it's the only way. As the Christian life is lived out daily in the community, so some will be drawn to such a community of faith.

There are untold stories of men and women in Central and South America, South Africa, Angola, Indonesia, Taiwan, Korea, who, having heard the message of Jesus the Christ, seek to challenge

the injustice and inhumanity they see around them and as a result, face possible torture and death. They meet the most difficult and dangerous situations with confidence and courage. But where does such courage come from?

In our Old Testament reading this morning we heard about Joshua's leading the people of Israel into the Promised Land. Over and over again they were urged to be strong and resolute, that is to be of good courage. Paul's call to continue in good heart came out of his own experience of being shipwrecked, stoned and imprisoned. He is one who did not lose heart nor abandon his faith. When faced with difficulties, dangers, the crises of life, he could say, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

Courage to face life and all its experiences triumphantly comes from our relationship to God in Christ. If we believe with Paul and have experienced the reality that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, we will have the courage to face everything that life throws at us. We will be able to find something to lift our spirits no matter how dark and stormy the day. The key to courageous living is not to be found in the things that happen to us, but in the attitude we choose to take towards the things that happen to us.

One of my favourite Disney characters is Pollyanna. Her father, a missionary, taught her the glad game. He taught her to look for something to be glad about, no matter how dark the day. Pollyanna always found something to be glad about. She could always find a silver lining beneath every dark cloud. She chose to take a positive attitude to life. Those who practise the Positive Mental Attitude concept have a saying, "Bloom where you are planted". That's all very well, you say, if you have been planted in the Garden of Eden. But what if you find yourself in the desert?

C.W. Bess says:

"Look again, God has programmed into every desert ecology a multitude of hardy plants which thrive in that harsh environment. And not just cacti! We're talking mainly about weeds which are the bane of farmers. But in the desert these weeds can be a blessing. Botanists have begun to discover what the Aztec Indians understood 500 years ago. Rather than being a nuisance, many desert weeds are nutritious. To be specific, a wild grain called amaranth is edible like popcorn and can be ground into flour. Its leaves provide more nourishment than lettuce. Optimistic researchers believe that deserts can bloom again with new crops of recently improved weeds. Life flourishes even in a dry desert. And where there is life there is hope. So be encouraged by this truth of nature designed by our Creator. We Christians know that God works well even in the deserts of lie."

"The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never mastered it." (John 1:5).

C. NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE

The future is always unknown territory. None of us has been there before, so none of us knows what challenges we may be called upon to face.

As a congregation there is, of course, the obvious challenge of meeting our budget obligations. For those serving on the Board and various Committees there is the never-ending challenge of reassessing priorities in the light of our Mission Statement. What ought we to be doing so that our Mission Statement takes life both in the structures of the congregation and in the personal lives of all who are part of this community of faith?

There is the ongoing challenge of how we reach out to those who are seeking a faith community. Some congregations have discovered that meeting in small groups around common interests such as bereavement, family life issues, an outreach project. When one person finds a faith community that meets their need, they invite others to join them. But such a faith community requires a large group of leaders – a role some may feel inadequate for. The challenge is to commit to the training that would be necessary. It takes courage to step forward. But in a faith community of courageous hearts there would be those who would respond to the call if God.

Then we all face personal challenges – an unexpected illness, stress from work or lack of work, economic hardship due to the world economic crisis which isn't supposed to happen. For some, it is the challenge of prosperity and how to be a good steward of all that God has given in the face of so much human need. There is always the challenge of family relationships, often a delicate balancing act. Some days are good and some not so good.

Many in our society simply throw in the towel when the going gets rough. It takes courage to stay the course, to love unconditionally. As we struggle to be the hands and feet of Jesus, our Christ, we are continually challenged by the life he lived and by what he calls his disciples to do and to be, the challenge to be good stewards of all that God has bestowed upon us, the challenge to lose ourselves in the service of others.

As a community of faith have we the courage both as a congregation and as individuals to accept God's challenge in whatever area of life it meets us? To take on new challenges, to develop new forms of ministry, can be costly in time and talents. Discipleship takes courage, it may prove costly, as it was for the rich young ruler of the gospel story. In the face of Jesus' call, he turned sorrowfully away. The price was too high. When communities of faith turn away from God's challenge they become like the Laodicean community, neither hot nor cold, and will soon die.

CONCLUSION

I am sure that the Christians in Laodicea began their life with Christ full of courage and enthusiasm. Where did they go wrong? I am sure their missing the mark was not intentional. They did not make a conscious decision to become indifferent. They did not choose to become a community of faith unable to meet the challenges of their day. They simply drifted off-target. They allowed the winds and the tides of their society to carry them out of their depth until their anchor broke free.

One summer day, while sailing in Georgian Bay, we cruised into a beautiful bay at the north end of Christian Island. We dropped anchor and quickly got into the cool, crystal clear, refreshing water of the bay. Late in the night when we were all asleep, the wind came up and we found ourselves adrift. Why? In my hurry to enjoy the pleasures of a dip on a hot day I had not made sure that our anchor was firmly embedded in the sand of the bay.

The Laodiceans were very comfortable, enjoying all their city had to offer. They had no wish to move against the current of secular life. So they drifted beyond the point of no return. They came to the place where their minds and hearts were closed to God's challenges.

Jurgen Moltmann, in his book "Experiment Hope" paints an alarming picture of the Church in western society. He writes:

"The churches in this society often function as nothing more than religious establishments, caretakers of the idols and laws of this society. If this society is to turn itself towards humanity, they must destroy the idols of action and apathy, of success and anxiety, proclaim the suffering, the crucified God, and learn to live in His situation. They must discover the meaning of suffering and love. They must spread abroad the spirit of compassion, sympathy and sorrow. They must confront successful and despairing man with the truth of the Cross in his situation so that man may become a compassionate, joyous and therefore free being."

As a community of courageous hearts we must stand firm in the faith, we must know in whom we have believed and have the assurance that, no matter what the future holds, our God will enable us to meet the challenges of each new day with courage. For Jesus said, "But courage! The victory is mine; I have conquered the world." (John 16:33)

2. THE CHURCH – A COMMUNITY OF LOVE

Text: “and in the unity of love” (Colossians 2:2)

INTRODUCTION

Paul, writing to the Christian community of faith in Colossae, shares with them a concern he has about their neighbouring congregation in Laodicea. What that concern was we are not sure. The message or the correspondence that elicited this letter has not survived. However the content of his message would indicate that it had to do with the lifestyle of that Christian community and the image that their lifestyle was presenting to the rest of the community in which they lived. In a few well-chosen words and phrases, Paul seeks to point them to a positive ideal to which they should be moving. For Paul the ideal community of faith has as its common denominator commitment to Christ as Saviour and Lord, by which I mean commitment to the Jesus way of life.

Last week we looked at the first characteristic of such a community of faith, courage. We saw that Paul believed that, no matter what the circumstances, those who have been called to be the body of Christ are to be a courageous-hearted people. Today, we look at the second of Paul’s characteristics which makes the ideal community of faith, the unity of love.

A. LOVE

But what does Paul mean by love? What do we mean when we use the word love? We use the word in so many different contexts. We say we love our dog or our cat; we love that new hat or that new car. But do we mean the same thing when we say we love our children, we love our spouse, we love the view?

We are told by Christ that we should love one another. But is loving a friend, loving a stranger, loving an enemy, the same thing? The Christians of the first century were noted for the fact that they loved one another. What the pagan world was seeing was surely a reflection of the love those first Christians had received from God through Christ. It must have been different from the love pagans expressed in their relationships. John Fawcett, the hymn writer, put it this way:

*‘Blessed be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.’*

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, described Christian love as:

*"Love is patient; love is kind and envies no one.
Love is never boastful, nor conceited nor rude,
never selfish, nor quick to take offence.
Love keeps no score of wrongs; does not gloat over other men's sins
but delights in the truth. There is nothing love cannot face,
there is no limit to its faith, its hope and its endurance."*

While the writer of John's gospel tells us that, "God so loved the world that He gave his only son.." And so it was, as Jesus lived among the people of Galilee, he said, "Love one another as I have loved you." But nowhere do we find Jesus or Paul giving a simple one sentence definition.

As we study what is said about love in the Bible, we discover that this Agape love, Christian love, God's love, which followers of Christ are called upon to express, not only to one another but to all whom we meet along the road of life, has nothing to do with physical attraction; nor has it anything to do with being in the same genetic family or having the same blood line. It has nothing to do with the length of time we have known a person. It has little to do with liking the person we are called upon to love. Agape love is the unconditional caring for one another and it is this that holds the community of faith in the unity of love. Agape love is not a feeling, it is a decision we make; it is an attitude we decide to take; it is a position we choose to support; it is a commitment we have decided to make, to care unconditionally for every member of the fellowship.

In the final analysis, the love the Bible is talking about is the willingness to be responsible for others, for oneself and for the world in which we live, even if that responsibility is onerous and makes inordinate demands. True, that is much easier to say than to do, but if that is what God in Christ is calling us to do, and if we commit ourselves to follow Jesus the Christ, then we ought to seek to live this unconditional caring day by day.

B. THE SOURCE OF LOVE

But how is that possible? Do we possess the ability to love this way? Are we born with this capacity? Is it inherited? Where does it come from? There is only one source for such love, and that is God as revealed in Jesus the Christ. We are able to love in this way because God first loved us in this way. Therefore this way of loving and living is not something we are born with; we do not inherit it from our parents as we do blue eyes and blond hair. It is a gift from God, freely given. It is a gift from God mediated to us through another person. That is why God in Christ came, as Christina Rossetti put it:

*"Love came down at Christmas
Love all lovely, love divine*

*Love was born at Christmas
Stars and angels gave the sign.*

This means that though the source of this love, this unconditional caring, is God, that love is mediated to us, channeled into our lives, through other people - that is, through relationships. As we are loved unconditionally so we are able to love others unconditionally. One of the purposes of the community of faith is to be that group of people in which unconditional caring is both given and received. That is why the development of fellowship within the community of faith is vitally important.

We have discovered that an infant can die if it does not receive love. We can feed and clothe and keep the infant dry and warm, but without the touch of love, the touch that communicates that someone cares unconditionally, that infant will die. I suspect the same may well be true for our spirit, the image of God in us. If the unconditional love of God is not mediated to us by someone, our spirit will remain undeveloped. Without the nurture of unconditional caring, the spirit of God in our life can shrivel and die. Oh, life continues physically but there will be that part of us, that which was made in the image of God, that will not be able to function.

C. CHRISTIAN UNITY

Now Paul believed that when this unconditional caring is expressed, lived out, within the Christian community of faith, there will be unity. But what does this UNITY IN LOVE look like? Does it mean that all Christians should believe the same set of dogmas? Does it mean that all Christians must think alike, act alike, dress alike and worship alike? That has been the view of some Christians and it has given rise to a multitude of denominations. It has caused division, anger and violence as each group tries to convince the rest of the world that they alone are the upholders of the One True Faith.

Jesus prayed that all should be one as He and the Father were one. But God also made us so that no two are exactly alike. Each one of us is a unique individual. Diversity is one of the hallmarks of God's creation. Nevertheless, throughout nature there is an underlying unity; the pieces fit together, the whole works in an orderly fashion, not chaotically. All humanity, both male and female, were made in the image of God. This says to me that, while there will always be a great deal of diversity among Christians, there ought always to be that underlying unity. The World Council of Churches recognizes this fact and permits any Christian Community of Faith to become a member if they agree with this simple statement, "Jesus is Lord."

If we love one another, if we care unconditionally for one another, does it really matter whether we agree on every issue? That is not to say that what we believe or think is unimportant. What we think and believe is vitally important because our thinking and believing determine how we will act and the attitude we will take to all that happens to us. Therefore it is vitally important that every Christian, every disciple of Christ, come to a clear understanding of

what he or she believes, and why, and also when we differ from others in the fellowship, the reasons for these differences.

But it is equally important that we live what we believe. Given our basic belief and commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord, none of us has the right to impose our beliefs on someone else. When united action is called for, we should seek consensus. But that is not always possible. This means there can be a majority position and a minority position. But if Jesus is Lord, then we are in fellowship with Him, whether we happen to hold with the majority or the minority, on any given issue.

If we are in fellowship with Christ, we can enjoy fellowship with one another. If Jesus is Lord, the One around whom our life revolves, the One who is the authority in our lives, then we are aware of God's unconditional love in Christ, our lives are open to the inflowing of that love, we can then, if we so choose, care unconditionally for each other. Therefore, to disagree on any issue, should not mean the end of a relationship. To hold contrary opinions does not signal the end of a relationship, so long as Jesus holds the central focus of our life.

CONCLUSION

We are members of a Church with has as its motto these words of Jesus, "that all may be one". We are all members of a Church that has struggled and will continue to struggle with difficult and controversial issues. We are also members of a Church in which there are diverse views and opinions on many subjects. But we are also members of a Church which believes that Jesus is Lord, by which I mean he taught a way of life we seek to follow. It is not an easy road. As a congregation we have shared those national struggles, and have shared our own internal struggles. Individuals have been hurt. The time has come, in fact it is high time, for personal hurts to be put aside and for focusing afresh on the only One that matters, the God who revealed the true divine nature in the man Jesus.

As you prepare to enter a new pastoral relationship with one who will seek to guide the life and work of this community of faith into the future, I hope and pray that you can let go the past and so love and care for one another unconditionally so that the future may be one in which, united in love, you may place the resources God has entrusted to you, the resources of time, talent and money, in the hands of our Master who wishes to be at the heart of this community of faith, that the Mission He gave His followers at the beginning may be lived out so that the unconditional love of God may be experienced through this community.

3. THE CHURCH – A COMMUNITY POSSESSING KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM

Text: *“to come to the full wealth of conviction which understanding brings, and grasp god’s secret. That secret is Christ Himself; in Him lies hidden all God’s treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:2)*

INTRODUCTION

For the last two weeks we have been considering the positive way in which Paul in his letter to the Colossians deals with some of the potential pitfalls that lay in wait for the struggling Christian Community of Faith in Laodicea. He was well aware of the wealth of that city, and the comfort and ease such wealth makes possible. He knew how easy it would be to give in to the temptation of such an environment, and become indifferent to the challenge of Christ to take up one’s cross, leave self behind, and pour one’s self out in selfless service. And so he called the church to be a community of courageous hearts.

He was well acquainted with the fact that people often differ from one another. Every human being is a unique individual with his or her own likes and dislikes, opinions and understanding. And so he calls the church to be a community united in love.

He was well aware that in the world of the day there were many different philosophies seeking to win the hearts and minds of men and women. There were those who taught that human salvation lay in obtaining access to secret knowledge. They were known as Gnostics. They were opposed to the idea that one could be saved by faith alone. To combat those who were proposing that faith in Christ alone was insufficient for salvation, he calls the church to grasp the secret of God which is in Christ. And so he writes, “For in Him lies hidden all God’s treasure of wisdom and knowledge.”

A. KNOWLEDGE

All the knowledge we need for salvation, for wholeness of life, is to be found in Christ. But what did Paul mean by knowledge?

When we use the term today we are usually referring to factual information. To know the creed is to be able to recite it. To know a scientific formula is to be able to repeat it without error. To say we know another person usually means that we have stored in our brain, their name, where they live, some of their likes and dislikes, their hopes and dreams.

The Bible also uses the term to know in this way occasionally. For example, Paul writing to the Community of Faith in Rome says:

“For all that may be known of God by men lies plain before their eyes, His invisible attributes, that is to say, His everlasting power and deity, have been visible ever since the world began, to the eye of reason, in the things He has made.” (Romans 1:19-20)

There are facts about God, as creator and director of history, and concerning God’s presence in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, which need to be known. But to limit our understanding of the word “knowledge” to the mental storing of facts is to miss the Biblical insight. In the Old Testament the word “to know” also means “to experience something”, to share an experience. Thus they speak of to know the loss of a child, meaning to have experienced the loss of a child. They speak of to know suffering and sickness, meaning to have experienced suffering and sickness. They speak of to know the power of God, meaning to have experienced the power of God. When the Old Testament writers speak of a man knowing a woman, it is usually in the context of conception, “Adam knew his wife Eve and she bore a son.” Therefore, when the biblical writers speak of knowing something or someone, they are not referring just to the possession of certain intellectual facts, but to having experienced the person or thing, to having been involved with that person or thing in a very direct and experiential way.

The Biblical writers also understand the term “to know” to involve some level of commitment. We can see this in the life of the prophet, Hosea, whose wife had been a Temple prostitute. Their relationship is understood to be a parable of Israel’s relationship with God. Hosea knew Gomer, therefore he was committed to her despite her unfaithfulness.

Similarly, for Israel to know God, was not simply to believe in the existence of God; it involved being a People of God. For God to know Israel meant that God was committed to them – they were God’s people, He was their God despite their unfaithfulness. Therefore what Paul is suggesting in this passage when he speaks of knowledge is not information about who people think Jesus is, but an experience, a living relationship with this Jesus. To know God in Christ is not simply to believe intellectually that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” but it is to have experienced that reconciliation, and to be committed to Christ’s ministry of reconciliation in the world.

B. WISDOM

But Paul also tells us that all wisdom is to be found in Christ. The possession of wisdom is not something anyone claims easily, if at all. Wisdom, we like to think, is to be found in the older, mature person, not often in the academic, occasionally in the very young. Reuel Howe has said that:

"Wisdom is the ability to discern inner qualities and essential relationships, an ability which requires time to simmer and distill the essential meaning of experience."

Old Testament writers were of two minds as to whether people were capable of wisdom at all. Some believed wisdom to be the prerogative of God. God alone was wise, and they saw God's wisdom in the wholeness, in the perfection of God's knowledge. God is the all-knowing one. "Yet does not God himself see my ways and count my every step." (Job 31:4)

The wisdom of God is understood to be revealed in the creation of the world. It can be seen in God's involvement in history. But there are hints that this wisdom is not for people: the fact that Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil so that they could become wise like God. Job hints at it in one of his conversations:

*"Can you fathom the mysteries of God?
Can you fathom the perfection of the Almighty?
It is higher than heaven; you can do nothing.
It is deeper than Sheol; you can do nothing"* (Job 11:7)

But Job resolves the problem by coming to the position that the only wisdom available to people is that of submission to God and the hatred of evil.

In the New Testament wisdom is seen as being in Christ. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 1:30, says, "You are in Christ Jesus by God's act, for God has made Him our wisdom." He goes on to say, "I speak of God's hidden wisdom, his secret purpose framed from the very beginning to bring us to our full glory" (1 Corinthians 2:7). In other words, wisdom is not something to be learned, but received. It is a gift of the spirit that enables us to grasp the truth of the Gospel. That is, having heard the message, having heard the story, having heard all the facts concerning the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, to be able to put two and two together and to say with Peter, "You are the Christ, Lord of my life".

For Paul, wisdom is to be able to see the truth in the story of Jesus in such a way that we are persuaded to live a new life in the Spirit. It is the ability to account for the hope that is within us. When we live the Christian life and someone asks why we go the second mile, turn the other cheek, love unconditionally, wisdom not only enables us to do those things but enables us to give the reason why, positively and joyously.

James writes,

"But the wisdom from above is in the first place pure; and then peace-loving; considerate and open to reason, it is straight forward and sincere, rich in mercy and in the kindly deeds that are its fruit." (James 3:17)

C. ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM

If we would grasp the secret of God, and receive in some measure some of God's treasure of wisdom and knowledge what are we to do?

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, expresses the belief that every Christian has been given some gift by God's spirit. Some are given the gift of wise speech. While James says, *"If any of you fall short in wisdom, he should ask God for it and it will be given him"* (James 1:5).

But if knowledge, as Paul is using the term, is essentially experience, and wisdom, the ability to speak about that experience at the appropriate moment, and they are in turn gifts of the Spirit that come when one is in Christ, then we need to discover how we come by this experience of being in Christ. As we have seen, it is not sufficient to simply say, "I know that God exists," or "I know that Jesus lived," or "I believe that Jesus is the Saviour of the world." We need to experience God's love in Christ. We need to experience being in a right relationship with God. We need to experience the wholeness of life which is salvation.

But how is that possible? There are three ways:

- **Firstly**, in and through the fellowship of God's people. Scripture tells us that where two or three are gathered in Christ's name, Christ is present. The Church, the community of faith, is the body of Christ. As we experience the unconditional caring of the fellowship, as we experience the carrying of one another's burdens, as we experience the love, the support, the trust of the fellowship, we can come in contact with God in Christ and enter into this life "in Christ".
- **Secondly**, we can experience Christ in the person in need. Jesus said that as we did the deed of kindness unto one of the least, we were doing it to him. Christ is present in the person who is in need. As they reach out to us, so Christ may be reaching out to us. When we seek to meet the person's need, whether they are of this fellowship or not, we are ministering to Christ, we are entering a relationship with Christ, we are experiencing the living Christ.
- Then **thirdly**, it is possible as we mature in our faith and our life in Christ that we can come to that place where we can be aware of Christ's presence, though there is no physical being near us. The Spirit of God in Christ, the Holy Spirit can meet us and can become known to us, but normally only after we have experienced His presence in and through others. As we learn to live in relationship to other believers, through our fellowship one with the other, we can grow to that deeper relationship which assures us of Christ's presence no matter what.

In other words, Christianity knows nothing of solitary believers. This means if we would truly enjoy God's treasures of wisdom and knowledge, we are required to commit ourselves to God

in Christ, that is become part of Christ's continuing earthly presence, that is Christ's body, the Church, which involves commitment to an organisation, commitment to a group of people, commitment to a fellowship, commitment to our fellow Christians. Paul appealed to the community of faith in Rome:

"I implore you by God's mercy to offer your very selves to Him, a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for His acceptance.

Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your mind be remade, and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable and perfect."

(Romans 12: 1-2).

CONCLUSION

The Church as the possessor of God's treasure of knowledge then, is called to be a community that knows God in Christ, that has experienced God in Christ, and continues to experience the presence of God in Christ. The Church as the possessor of God's treasure of wisdom is called to be a community that is able to speak, at the appropriate moment, of the hope that they have experienced in Christ. The Church is to be a community, a fellowship, that witnesses to her Living Lord, first by what they do, by the way they behave, by the way they live their lives daily, at home, in the community as well as in the fellowship, and only secondly by what they say.

The Church is called to be a community that does not first proclaim by word that she is the hands and feet of Christ her Lord, but becomes the hands and feet of Christ in the community in which she is situated. It is only when the community or an individual asks the question why –

- why do you care unconditionally?
- why do you love, why do you pour yourself out in service,?
- why do you turn the other cheek?
- why do you go the second mile?
- why do you forgive without keeping count?
- why do you welcome the prodigal?

that we have the right to declare to them the good news of the Gospel. We are the Body of Christ. The Christian Faith is a life to be lived, a faith that must first be proclaimed by deed and only then by word. Ideally deed and word should be one.

May God grant to each of us the wisdom and the knowledge to be able to proclaim our faith by the life we live.

4. THE CHURCH – A COMMUNITY ABLE TO RESIST SEDUCTIVE TEACHING

Text: *“I tell you this to save you from being talked into error by specious argument”* (Colossians 2:4)

INTRODUCTION

Do you remember the way things used to be? The days when the whole family went to church in the morning, the Sunday school in the afternoon and back to church again in the evening? Those were the days before television and Sunday shopping.

Times have changed. Our society has changed. People’s attitudes have changed. Those were the days when professional people were looked up to; they were expected to set an example, be role models for the young people. Teachers, doctors, lawyers and even clergy are now saying that the way I live my life is my own business; it has no effect on my professional life.

Values are changing. Traditional morality has taken a back seat. The changes that are affecting the home, the school, the business community, are also affecting the church. We struggle with what it means to be a Christian in a secular world. Paul, writing to the community of faith in Colossae, speaks to us from across the centuries. We have heard his call to us to be courageous, united in love and in the possession of the wisdom and knowledge to be found in Jesus the Christ. He goes on to declare, “I tell you this to save you from being talked into error by specious argument,” (Col.2:4). That is to say, one of the reasons for his suggestions so far is to prevent the faith community at Laodicea from being led astray by false and seductive reasoning.

The need then, as it is today, is for any faith community to be able to resist being led astray by false or seductive teaching. False and seductive teaching has been a problem for the Christian Church from the very beginning. The historic creeds and our own basis of union are intended to keep our faith on the right track. But in Paul’s day such things did not exist. There was not even the New Testament, as we know it, to refer to. The Old Testament was their only authority, along with possible collections of sayings and parables that Jesus told.

The faith was simple. For Paul and the early church leaders, Jesus was the Christ, the author and finisher of their faith. Christ was Lord and Master. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. But everyone did not agree.

A. FALSE TEACHING IN THE PAST

In the beginning Christianity was rooted in Judaism. Therefore for a number of early Christians, the Jewish Law was part of their life. Though they had come to accept Jesus as the Christ, nevertheless they felt compelled by their upbringing to keep the Jewish law, especially the food laws. Paul was concerned that if his Gentile converts were compelled to be circumcised and keep the Jewish law, they would miss the heart of the Gospel which was that one is saved by faith in the person of Christ. It would also mean that Christianity would be a sect of Judaism.

Then there were those who had a much more serious disagreement. They believed that Paul was an enemy of God because of his teaching concerning the divinity of Christ. They insisted that Jesus was only a prophet and a teacher. There was no way that God became a person in Jesus of Nazareth. It was not possible for God to die on a cross.

There were those who rejected the Old Testament completely, and insisted that only the writings of the early church were authoritative guidance for the faithful. Still others denied the authority of anything written, and believed that the Holy Spirit was all the guidance they needed. Then when persecution came upon the Church, many renounced their faith in order to save their lives. Once that time had passed they sought readmission to membership, which some found unacceptable as they believed that to renounce one's faith was an unforgiveable sin.

The nature and person of Christ, and his relationship to the Trinity, was an ongoing element that caused division. Then Augustine believed that people were totally depraved, totally evil, and could only be saved by an act of irresistible grace, while Pelagius believed that there was some good in each person and that God's grace assisted a person to be good, but did not compel them.

Because of such controversy, the creeds were designed to define as clearly as possible what the orthodox faith was, so that the faithful followers would not be led astray. The Reformation was the result of more controversy over teachings and practices that the Reformers believed were contrary to the pure gospel of Christ. Protestantism has continued to be divided by doctrinal controversy as individuals seek to establish a church of pure New Testament faith.

B. FALSE TEACHING TODAY

Even though the ecumenical movement is well established, doctrinal controversy continues. The World Council of Churches has been accused in the past of being a supporter of violent revolution and currently encouraging pagan ceremonies. There are those who call themselves conservative (with a small "c") Christians and who believe that those they label liberal (with a small "l") are leading the church astray with their concern for political, social and economic

issues, as well as by their raising questions about the resurrection, the virgin birth and the miracles of Christ.

Those who are Fundamentalists affirm that they have the whole truth and that every word of the King James Version was written by God; anyone who differs from that position is leading people astray. Charismatics stress the speaking in tongues as the primary sign of the Spirit's presence in a person's life. At times they seem to imply that those who have not experienced this and who teach that it is not essential, are leading people astray. However, biblically, to be a charismatic, was simply to be filled with the spirit, to be led by the spirit as Jesus was. A charismatic was able to do the will of God, was able to love God with all their heart, mind and spirit, and their neighbour as themselves. The Spirit gave a variety of gifts. Speaking in tongues was only one of the many and, according to Paul, it was low on the list. Love was a far more valuable gift.

The gifts of the spirit were given for the building up of the body of Christ; the spirit of God is not a spirit of division. Division in the Church over the Charismatic movement has taken a back seat in recent years to the sexual orientation issue, which has been even more divisive. It has two aspects, the place of authority and interpretation of scripture in deciding ethical and moral issues in the life of the Church, and the continuing need for role models as we seek to live out the teaching of Jesus our Christ.

Historically, the temptation for the church has always been to give in to the demands of society, to do what people want. Go with the flow. Arguing that the majority must be right. If people don't like the implications of a particular doctrine or biblical passage, if Christ's requirements for discipleship are too difficult, then we are at liberty to ignore them, to change them, do whatever has to be done to keep people happy and comfortable in the church.

That is one way to avoid division and it is very seductive, but is it Christ's way? How do we hold fast to the essentials of our faith that have been handed down to us from generation to generation, while at the same time avoiding setting one Christian against another over issues that may often be simply a matter of personal opinion, personal interpretation or personal emphasis?

C. RESISTING SEDUCTIVE TEACHING

We live in an age when the simple imposition of a creed, or some other doctrinal statement, has lost its power to hold a community of faith together. Creeds and doctrinal statements that are imposed as THE TRUTH can stifle questions as well as discussion and can prevent any real attempt to come to grips with what our faith means in terms of the life and times we are called upon to live in.

In the past, attempts to do this led to the burning of heretics by both Protestants and Roman Catholics – hardly an action that Christ would have approved of. As Jesus taught, he never

presented dogmas that had to be rigidly adhered to. He talked about life. His concern was for those who refused to see the truth, that is, the individual's need for God and their inability to see the activity of God in life. Paul was concerned about teaching that might lead his young Christians in Colossae and Laodicea to deny that Jesus was the Christ, that Jesus was one sent by God, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.

As we saw last week Paul believed that, all the wisdom and knowledge we need to receive the gift of wholeness of life, that is salvation, is to be found in Jesus who is the Christ. Christ and Christ alone has the right to be the Lord and master of our lives. Here we see the beginnings of a doctrinal statement that the early Church believed was basic to the Christian faith. As you read the gospel story, Jesus makes no dogmatic statement about his birth. While he did speak about his relationship to God and the fact that the spirit would be sent to take his place, he usually left people with the question, "What do you think?" His message was not that one should believe this or that, but that one should follow Him and so discover a life filled with love and joy.

Thus the power to resist seductive teaching, that is teaching that would lead us away from Christ, is not to be found in simply imposing ancient creeds, or even more modern statements of faith. Rather it is to be found in seeking to ensure that our lives, personally and collectively, are firmly grounded in Christ. If Christ is the author and finisher of our faith, then we study the Scriptures in the light of that fact. We are not slavishly bound to take literally everything that the Bible says. There are a number of versions in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and many in the English language. There is no agreement on one original text, let alone which is the most accurate translation.

But if Jesus the Christ is the central reality of our faith and we know that the scriptures declare in broad sweeping strokes the activity of God as understood by the Hebrew people and the first followers of Jesus, then if we have the ears to hear, it can speak to us about life as we ought to live it today. What we believe about God, about Christ, about sin and salvation is important. For our actions will flow from what we believe. But differences in our understanding of such dogmas should not be grounds for division provided we share in the one foundation of Jesus the Christ. For we are committed to following where Christ leads.

Creeds, statements of faith, are always attempts to capture in a few memorable phrases what the core truths are. As language changes, so the core truths need re-stating. Any new teaching, any new interpretation of doctrine, must be brought under the light that Christ sheds. Questions need to be asked. Genuine doubts need to be voiced. We can listen to those of other faith communities and we may even discover new truth from such listening.

New truths cannot displace old truths. Truth is truth. All truth will have its place in the overall picture. Therefore we need to listen to those who see things differently. We don't have to agree with them, but we need to listen and ask ourselves whether their experience, which is different from ours, could also be an actual experience of the living God.

Is there anything in the life and teaching of Jesus that declares that any particular human experience of the living God is invalid? Mark, in his gospel, tells the story of John coming to Jesus, concerned about a man who was not one of the disciples but who was casting out devils in the name of Jesus. He had tried to stop him. Jesus said to John, "Do not stop him; no one who does the work of divine power in my name will be able in the next moment to speak evil of me. For he who is not against us, is on our side." (Mark 38:40).

CONCLUSION

While there are those among us who have never known any other faith community than this one, there are others who have grown up in other Christian traditions. There are also those who have come with little or no experience of the Christian faith. Then every family has by deed and word demonstrated their own particular understanding of what it means to live the Christian faith in daily life. The traditional teachings and dogmas of the Church are not all given equal importance by all of us. We each, I am sure, have decided which are essential for us and which we have some doubts about and have set aside for the time being. But what holds any community of faith together is a shared commitment to Jesus the Christ in whom we have sensed the very being of God and, because we share in varying degrees, commitment to His mission of bringing wholeness of life to all people.

But the temptation to baptize the values, the goals, the life style of the secular community in the hope of bringing more people into the church, is a constant reality. There are those who call us to change with the changing times; to adapt ourselves to the new morality, the new political and economic reality, to stop standing with the powerless and side with the powerful in order to survive.

It is not easy to stand against the tides of our times. It is a constant battle within ourselves and within any faith community, to keep the cross of Christ central in our thinking and our being. If we hold fast to Christ in whom is all wisdom and knowledge, we will have an understanding of life and faith against which to measure new ideas, alternative life styles, new views of morals and values. As we wrestle with alternatives in the light our Christ sheds on our life, we will grow in our grasp of God's truth and God's will as it is revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ who is the author and finisher of our faith.

5. THE CHURCH – A DISCIPLINED COMMUNITY

*Text: “For though absent in body, I am with you in Spirit
and rejoice to see your orderly array,
the firm front which your faith in Christ presents.”*

(Colossians 2:5)

INTRODUCTION

“Faith in Christ” is one of Paul’s favourite expressions. It is through faith in Christ that we are saved, not by anything we do – it is Christ who is the author and finisher of our faith. As we read Paul’s writings we can get the impression that this relationship “in Christ” comes easily. It is true that, as Paul understood it, the first step at least was simple. But the relationship into which that first step leads us, which is discipleship, is far from easy. The call of Jesus is to deny self, take up our cross and follow him. This should never be attempted thoughtlessly. It is not something anyone should do lightly. It is a relationship that involves some effort on our part. It will require discipline.

When we hear the word discipline we may think of such sayings as *Spare the rod and spoil the child*. That is, the initial thought that comes to mind when we hear the word discipline is some form of punishment. Discipline is what is exercised when rules have been broken. But there is another meaning which Neil Street described as:

“The extra ingredient in the person who succeeds. Disciplined living and working takes a person onward towards their goal. Life needs some force to keep it from becoming mediocre, and discipline can be that force. Discipline holds life to its agenda, when the tempting thoughts invade and easier things are inviting.”

Every successful athlete knows the important role this type of discipline plays in their life. Every successful musician, artist, student, knows the important role discipline plays. Why should it surprise us that it is also a necessary ingredient for living the Christian life? To hold fast to Christ, to live the life of a Christian disciple, requires the acceptance of some form of discipline. John T. McNeil writes, “If discipline should disappear to the point at which the manner of life of Church people is not distinguishable from that of persons who make no religious profession, the Church would have lost her significance.”

This had not happened to the community of faith in Laodicea, for Paul is able to say, “For though absent in body, I am with you in spirit and rejoice to see your orderly array, the firm front which your faith in Christ presents.” Order and firm front are terms Paul drew from the military jargon of his day. Paul is saying that the community of faith in Laodicea is like a well ordered army, with everyone in their appointed place, ready and willing to obey the word or

command. They give the appearance of an unbreakable army square, solidly immovable against the enemy's charge. In other words, Paul's view, a community of faith, should possess the order and steadiness of a well-disciplined body of troops.

What is the Christian discipline that keeps the community of faith steadfast and sure, its anchor firmly held in the midst of the storms of life? Two thousand years of Christian history suggests that there are at least three basic ingredients – faithful worship, ongoing fellowship, and the service to others.

A. FAITHFUL WORSHIP

While worship in its fullest and completest sense is an attitude towards the whole of life, for Christians the foundation of that attitude lies in gathering together for the worship of God. The gathering for worship has been an essential aspect of Christian communities of faith since the very beginning. It has been maintained even at the height of the worst persecutions during the Roman Empire and, in more recent years, in Communist Russia and China. Church buildings may be turned into museums but the church, as the community of faith, continued to gather.

Jesus himself worshipped regularly in the Synagogue. It was not something he or his disciples believed they could get along without. But like so many other good things, to be enjoyed to its fullness it requires commitment. Regular worship is a discipline. Perhaps some of the problem some have with gathering for worship is that it can so easily be divorced from everyday life.

Worship should grow out of experience of God in the midst of our life. As we become aware of God's presence in the world around us, in the starry sky above, in the glittering snow that covers our landscape, in the chatter of birds with the approach of spring, in moments of great joy and moments of deep sorrow, in the faces of the needy, and in the love we experience from family and friends, we will be able to gather for the worship of God out of a deep sense of gratitude to God who has the whole world, the whole of life, in His hands.

But such an attitude is not achieved in a moment of time. Fosdick tells of an American in the Rembrandt room of the Amsterdam gallery who, looking around, said, "I wonder if there is anything worth seeing." If one has not developed an understanding of such art form, it is not likely that one will appreciate what hangs in such a gallery. Then there is the story of some folk who climbed an alpine height on an autumn day when the riot of colour in the valley sobered into the green of the pines upon the heights, and over all stood the crests of eternal snows, and who enquired in the full sight of all this, "We heard there was a view up here; where is it?" If we have no sense of the presence of God in the world in which we live, if we have not taken the time to discover God out there, how will we find God here?

To saunter into God's presence occasionally, with little or no preparation, will most likely mean that we will become bored with what the community of faith tries to do here on a Sunday morning. Worship is not an activity for spectators. Worship is work, not a spectacle to be

observed. Nor is it an entertainment put on by clergy and choir. It is a drama to be entered into. It requires our participation. We must enter into the mood, the movement of the drama as it unfolds. As we approach God we need to remember who God is, and who we are in relationship to God. Confession is the reminder that we have all missed the mark of our high calling, we are all in need of God's forgiveness and God's acceptance. Then we are all called to listen to what God may be saying to us through congregational activities and needs, through Scripture readings, through music and the sermon.

The final act of the drama of worship is our response to what we have heard of God, through the offering of money, a symbol of our selves, through prayers and a hymn of commitment. Having worshipped God with body, mind and spirit, we are sent forth to be God's people in the world. Hopefully we leave our worship with the question – what difference will my having worshipped God make on my life this coming week? What am I going to do?

We may enjoy the music. We may enjoy the fellowship with friends and neighbours. But if our being here makes no difference upon our life at home and in the community, then we should seriously question whether we have worshipped the God revealed in Jesus the Christ. There can be times when our worship makes no difference because we don't want it to make any difference. We can be present in body, but we tune out, we don't want our lives to be disturbed. For God can be a disturbing influence in our lives. To receive God's unconditional love into our lives involves us in a life of unconditional caring for others. A caring that has no end. Worship is and always has been one of the foundation stones of the Christian life.

B. FELLOWSHIP

While worship is of the utmost importance, it alone is not sufficient to keep us steadfast and firm in our faith and life. Worship is one leg of a three-legged stool. Have you ever tried to sit using only one leg of a three-legged stool? The Christian who only worships has an unbalanced life.

The second leg, which can bring a measure of stability to our Christian life, is fellowship. Fellowship can take many forms. However, its essential ingredients are growth in one's faith and life, interaction with other members of the fellowship, interaction with God. While some of this may take place in worship, it happens more often in small groups. The purpose of such small groups may vary from those engaged in the business of the congregation, to those who study the scriptures or study some aspect of life, to the fellowship of prayer. The serious study of our faith and the regular practice of prayer, whether alone or with a group, are two of the more neglected aspects of fellowship in many Christian churches.

A committee of the congregation can meet for business and there may or may not be any Christian fellowship and growth. It depends upon the group. To take growth in the Christian faith seriously, usually requires a disciplined approach. Time needs to be set aside on a daily basis for personal prayer and Bible study, and the reading of good devotional material. It may

mean setting the alarm clock half an hour earlier to give you time. But it can be well worth while if our goal is to hold fast to Christ. But for any congregation to become a true community of faith, members will need to be part of some small group fellowship, where they study together, pray together and learn to share one another's burdens.

Those who do this find that Sunday worship takes on a new dimension of meaning. In the small group we can experience the presence of God in and through our devotional life, we can become more aware of the God who meets us in the midst of daily life. All of which prepares us for the weekly gathering of God's people and opens us for the invasion of God into every aspect of our life. We are now on a more solid foundation. Our lives resting on two of the three legs. But that still involves a bit of a balancing act. To be firmly planted in the faith requires the activating of the third leg.

C. THE SERVICE OF OTHERS

Our worship and our fellowship should lead us to some form of service for others or our Christian life is stillborn. All the worship in the world, all the fellowship in the world, will not make our faith living and vibrant unless we do something for others. It would be like the soldier who never leaves boot camp, or the athlete who spends his or her life preparing for the contest but never actually entering any contest.

There is something sad about the person who spends a lifetime learning a skill, but never using it. Disciples of Christ have been called to act. Jesus having called his first disciples and given them some basic training, sent them out two by two, to preach and to heal. They went out but returned again and again to sit at their Master's feet. Jesus did not send out his disciples so that the Temple could be filled on feast days and the Synagogue would have a good attendance each Sabbath. Both had their place in his life. His primary purpose was different. He called disciples and sent them out so that His mission of reconciliation could be fulfilled. Christ's call was a call to service. To love God, yes, but to love one's neighbour as oneself. To do that requires action. Edward Schillebeeckx writes, "the individual human being only becomes a person through self-giving to his fellows in a world which he has to humanize." Jesus put it this way, "I have not come to be served but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many."

We live in a world, we live in a community where human need is endless. There are physical needs of those who depend on the Sharing Place for supplementary food. There are those who will be helped by the soup kitchen when it gets going. There are those who through no fault of their own are laid off and, because of the extended waiting period for benefits, are in financial difficulty. But the emotional and psychological needs of those out of work, those living alone and those shut in, are even greater. We are seeking to set up a pastoral care committee to meet some of the needs. Who will give of their time and energy in this way?

We have new families in our congregation who need someone to befriend them, introduce them to others and encourage their involvement. Who will do this? There are boys in our

community who need a big brother. There are girls who need a big sister. Every volunteer agency is in need of help. The opportunities for service are endless.

To find time for this third leg in building a firm foundation for our life in Christ will most likely require some reconsideration of our use of time, and the priorities we have set ourselves.

CONCLUSION

Elizabeth O'Conner in her book *Inward Journey/Outward Journey* suggests that this is the rhythm of the Christian life. It is the rhythm of the athlete's life, periods of training followed by competition. It is the rhythm of the student's life. Weeks of study and then examinations. There is a rhythm to any discipline if it is to bear good fruit. So too we need a similar rhythm in our Christian life. To hold fast to Christ we need to grow in that relationship and live out that relationship in practical ways.

We gather for worship and fellowship so that we can go forth to serve. Surely we should treat the development of our Christian life as seriously as the athlete, the musician or the dedicated student does theirs. As disciples of Christ let us adopt that discipline which will enable us to stand firm in our faith, deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Christ that he may lead us through all the experiences of our daily lives.

6. THE CHURCH – A COMMUNITY “IN CHRIST”

Text: *“Since Jesus was delivered to you as Christ and Lord,
live your lives in union with Him.”* (Colossians 2:6)

INTRODUCTION

If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? What sort of evidence would have to be gathered? In what way are Christians different from other members of our Society? Arthur Gish writes,

“To be a Christian is to be a subversive, or at least that is how he or she will be viewed by society. Since the Christian’s loyalty is to One who is beyond history, he or she cannot give their ultimate allegiance to any government, business, class, or any other institution.

The Christian’s views cannot be expected to coincide with the majority view around them. The Christian can be expected to be in continual conflict with the structures of society, for to be at peace with God means to be in conflict with the world.

When a Christian is faithful to Christ and refuses to compromise with the demands of society it is almost inevitable that he or she will be looked upon by the power structures of that society as being disloyal and subversive, and so they are. The Christian is a person who dares to call the whole society into question. The Christian is a revolutionary.”

This was true of many New Testament Christians. Their refusal to bow the knee to Caesar, their refusal to follow the social and cultural customs of their day and offer sacrifices at the local temple, branded them as being an undermining influence which threatened the *status quo*. But this was not the attitude of just a few odd-balls within the community of faith, it was the view of the community of faith.

To live one’s life in union with Christ, to be “in Christ”, was not understood as simply an individualistic relationship, as it is so often today. To be in union with Christ was to be a part of the body of Christ. That is, being a member of a community of people who confessed by deed and word that Christ was indeed Lord. D.M. Aycock writes,

“From first to last, the whole New Testament picture of our Christian existence is the picture of a corporate existence, but not an existence of independent individuals. It is the picture of an existence in which no person can be a Christian in themselves alone. No-one can be a Christian except in a vital union with Christ, and

no-one can be in union with Christ without being in vital union with all other persons who are in union with Christ."

A. ENTERING UNION WITH CHRIST

But how does one enter into this vital relationship, union with Christ? Paul says to the community of faith in Laodicea, "Since Jesus was delivered to you as Christ and Lord, live your lives in union with Him." Before we can enter this vital relationship the claims of Christ must be heard. We must experience some kind of confrontation with this Jesus who is both Christ and Lord. But that idea makes many of us uncomfortable. We would prefer to avoid such a confrontation. We are fearful of the demands this Christ might make. To be confronted by the light of Christ would compel us to say with Peter, "depart from me; for I am a sinful person."

God in Christ knocks at the door of our life but we have to open the door and allow Christ to enter our lives. We have to listen for the voice of God in Christ. We have to hear the voice of God in Christ. We have to decide whether this is the life we really want to live. Do we wish to live our life in union with Christ or do we opt out and drop out?

I believe that God in Christ confronts us in many different ways and at many different times in our life. God can confront us in and through the love and care of our parents. God can confront us in and through our relationship with Sunday School teachers and mid-week leaders. God can confront us in and through each and every crisis in our lives. God can confront us in and through our service to others. At the same time we can go through all the right motions – confess our faith before the congregation, be baptized, partake of the Lord's supper, participate regularly in worship and fellowship and give of our time in services to others, and still not be in union with Christ.

Whether union with Christ is experienced depends upon our attitude. Do we do what we do because we feel obligated? Because it is our duty? Or do we do what we do in joyful response to what God in Christ has done for us? As disciples of Jesus, he is not only our teacher, our authority, but also our role model. By that I don't mean that we should wear sandals and long robes as he did. Nor do I mean that we must all become wandering preachers with nowhere to lay our heads. As Christ's disciples we learn from him how to relate to others as he did. How to forgive as he forgave. How to love unconditionally as he did. How to give of ourselves as he gave himself. In other words, discipleship, being in union with Christ, is learning how to live in community, learning how to live with others and for others.

B. THE LOOK OF A CHRISTIAN

What might such a life look like? Paul Tillick in his book *The New Being* tells the story of Elsa Brandstrom, daughter of a former Swedish Ambassador to Russia. At the beginning of the First World War, Elsa was in St Petersburg and saw the German prisoners-of-war being driven

through the streets on their way to Siberia. She could no longer endure the splendour of diplomatic life. She became a nurse and began visiting the prison camps. There she saw unspeakable horrors and she, a girl of 24, began almost alone the fight of love against cruelty, and she prevailed. She had to fight against the brutality and lawlessness of prison guards, and she prevailed. She had to fight against cold, hunger, dirt and illness, against the conditions of an undeveloped country and a destructive war, and she prevailed.

Love gave her wisdom with innocence, and daring with foresight. And wherever she appeared despair was conquered, and sorrow healed. She visited the hungry and gave them food. She saw the thirsty and gave them drink. She welcomed the strangers and strengthened the sick. She herself fell ill and was imprisoned, but God was abiding in her. The irresistible power of love was with her.

After the war she worked with the orphans of German and Russian prisoners-of-war. With the coming of the Nazis she and her husband left Germany and settled in the U.S.A. There she became the helper of innumerable European refugees. For ten years Paul Tillich was able to observe the creative genius of her love. He says they never had a theological discussion. It was unnecessary. She made God visible in every moment. "For God who is love was abiding in her and she in him." That is every Christian's goal – that, in some small way, God may be made visible to others through our life. Roy Fairchild shares his personal experience in his book *Finding Hope Again*. He writes:

'I had come to Vienna after a two-week illness in a little Austrian village. I had spent most of my travel money on medicines and doctors and used my last bit to take a train to Vienna. I had no clue as to where I could find my friends who had been waiting for me earlier. I was lost, hungry and depressed. As I was standing in one of the streetcar stations in the centre of the city, tired, discouraged and trying to figure out what to do, a little old wrinkled woman, whose job it as to sweep out the station, came over to me and asked if I was hungry. Even before I could answer, she took her lunch from a brown paper bag and offered me half. I was moved. She not only helped my aching hunger, but lifted my spirit in an unforgettable way. I have never forgotten her – the warmth of her face, the graciousness of her gift, the youthful sparkle in her eyes.

We talked for more than an hour about her life. It had not been easy. She had been raised in the country, knowing nothing but hard work on a farm. She had lost her husband and two sons in the Resistance. Only her daughter had survived. But she was thankful, she said, for many things. She was at peace with her story.

Finally I asked her why she offered me her lunch. She said simply, 'Jesus is my Lord. God is good.' She understood and lived the story of Jesus in a way that the

most sophisticated scholars could never do. Her faith touched mine. Who was it, after all, that I met that day in Vienna?"

Being "in Christ", being a disciple of Jesus, is not to duplicate what others have done. Martin Luther King Jr did what he felt called on to do. Mother Theresa seeks to live out her calling in the slums of Calcutta. Jean Vanier lives out his Christian calling among the mentally handicapped. Elsa did what she felt called to do in her day, as did the little old lady in Vienna.

Each and every disciple lives out the practical implications of being in union with Christ where they are. So we who live in Orillia must do the same. There are hungry to be fed. There are those out of work who need to be supported and enabled to find work. There are those who are lonely, who need a friend. There are those who are shut in and need to be visited. What we do, the way we live may never be the basis of a book, a TV series, or even a sermon illustration, but that is not important. What is important is that we seek to make this community a little better for having lived in it.

C. NEW CREATURES

Then to be in union with Christ, to be a vital member of the body of Christ, is to be a new creature. That is to say, "being in Christ" is a radically different form of life than life without Christ. There is something radically wrong when the life of the Christian community of faith is no different from the life of any other secular organisation. There is something radically wrong when those who claim to be followers of Christ, who have been baptised into Christ, in whom Christ lives, are no different, live their lives no differently than those who make no such claim. The New Testament teaches that being a disciple of Jesus, being a new creature, results in newness of life. Jesus called it "being born again"

What can be so radically different? One difference is that Christians are supposed to be living in a new kind of community. The New Testament church expressed this by holding all things in common. All their material possessions were shared. They cared for one another. They supported one another. When one was hurting, they all shared the pain. When one was in trouble they all rallied around. When one rejoiced they all rejoiced. They loved one another. They went the second mile. They turned the other cheek. They forgave their enemies. Is that not a radically different kind of community life? In their personal lives, old habits were left behind, old attitudes were discarded. Old ways of relating were replaced by unconditional caring. Resentment, anger, hurts, brokenness, were all overcome through Christ. Life began again.

Being born again is the recognition that, when we say Yes to this Christ and become a disciple, life has just begun. The life of Christian discipleship is a life in which we are intended to grow towards the maturity we see in Christ. Within any community of faith, individuals are at different stages in their journey. Some are at the starting line, while others have been engaged in the faith journey for many years. As a community "in Christ", we are called to enable one

another to grow in our faith, calling forth the gifts God has given to each of us, so that individually and collectively as the body of Christ we may make Christ visible in all we say and do.

CONCLUSION

We have been called to be a community “in Christ”. We have professed our faith in Christ as Lord. We have been baptized into union with Christ. We are his hands and his feet, his living presence in the world today. May our union with Christ not be one of outward form only, but a union that can transform our inner being and our every deed and word so that, as we live our lives, at home, at school, at work, in the community organisations where we serve, as we enjoy our recreation, something of the transforming love of God in Christ will be made visible. May we be agents of God’s will and purpose, making a difference for good in our community, enabling God’s kingdom to draw a little closer.

7. THANKFUL FOR EVERYTHING

Text: *"Therefore, since Jesus was delivered to you as Christ and Lord*

Live your lives in union with Him.

Be rooted in Him; be built in Him; be consolidated in the faith you were

taught: let your hearts overflow with thankfulness."

(Colossians 2:6-7)

INTRODUCTION

Paul said to the little congregation in Colossae, "Let not your hearts overflow with thankfulness." In other words, be thankful no matter what the circumstances. Is that possible for any of us, let alone all of us? What about those who are faced with a strike and the loss of wages, what about those who have been out of work for a long time, who no matter how hard they look for work nothing seems to come along? Is thanksgiving for everything even possible for those who enjoy the privilege of regular work?

While the cost of living is reasonably stable at the moment, property taxes for many are on the rise as the provincial government shifts the cost of many services on to local government. The threat of a world economic collapse, averted for the time being, sent the stock market into a tailspin which, for many of us, meant the loss of thousands of dollars in their savings. Every charitable organisation, including the Church, seeks a larger share of our disposable income. In the face of the continual need to stretch a shrinking income to meet ever increasing demands, can we be truly thankful?

On top of our economic woes there is the dissatisfaction with our federal system in Quebec and in the west. There is the ongoing confrontation over land use and land rights and fishing rights with our aboriginal peoples. Then there are the personal tragedies of people all around us, even if we ourselves have been spared – the death of a spouse, the lengthy illness of a family member, the brokenness of many family relationships, the gradual loss of sight, hearing, increasing lack of mobility as the years take their toll.

And yet who among us would exchange their life in Canada for a life in Kosovo, the Horn of Africa, or Bangladesh? When we compare our life here with the life of the majority of the world's population, being thankful ought to be as natural as breathing. Paul believed that, as followers of Jesus, Christians not only should be thankful for everything, but can be. In our scripture reading this morning, Paul suggests that the vision can be turned into reality by following three easy steps. Live your life in union with Christ, be rooted in Him, be built up in Him, be consolidated in the faith you were taught. For Paul, being thankful for everything in all circumstances grows out of our oneness with Christ. Thankfulness ought to be a by-product of our Christian discipleship.

A. BE ROOTED IN HIM

The first step, according to Paul, is to be rooted in Christ. Today there is a great deal of interest in roots more and more people are tracing their family tree. Since retirement, Mary Ann and I have become quite interested in our family trees, visiting cemeteries in New Brunswick and in Britain, as well as visiting cousins to gather what information we can. As members of the Christian family, our essential rooting is in Jesus Christ, a rooting we can so easily overlook.

What does it mean to be rooted in Christ? When I think of rooting, I think of the slips I used to cut each fall from my geraniums. I used to set them in water, each cutting in an individual container, and hope that they would root. My success that way was not great. I discovered that a more successful method is to dip the cuttings in a rooting compound and then pot them in peat moss. There could be a number of reasons for my lack of success. The chemistry of the water, incorrect cutting, too much light or not enough. In other words, I have been rather careless about rooting my geraniums. After all, they can be easily replaced in the spring.

I suspect there may be a similar lack of care when it comes to rooting our lives in Christ. We put very little concentrated effort into insuring a proper seed bed, the right diet, or sufficient nourishment. Being rooted in Christ may not always be our top priority.

A Lutheran minister tells of speaking at a workshop in North Carolina, where he was advocating the planting of stewardship seeds. One of the farmers present insisted, "Son, you're trying to plant seeds where we ain't even ploughed yet." That slowed the speaker down a bit. But when the workshop was over the same farmer grabbed his hand and said, "Well, son, after all that fertilizer, some of those seeds are bound to grow anyway."

Jesus was very much aware of the need for ploughing, fertilizing and sowing when he told the parable of the sower. He pointed out that some of the good seed fell on the path where the birds of the air quickly gobbled it up. Some fell among the thorns and thistles and, while it rooted initially, it was soon choked out. Some, he said, fell on stony ground where once again it rooted, but with little depth of soil, it could not survive the drought. Only a small percentage fell on good ground, that is, land that had been prepared to receive it.

But rooting can also take place when a cutting is grafted into the stem of a healthy plant. For the skilled gardener, this is probably the quickest and most effective method of producing strong healthy plants. And so Jesus talked of himself as being the vine and his followers as the branches.

How then can we be rooted in Christ? By being open to him. By having prepared our lives to receive him. The seed will grow if it is given the right environment. But above all, we have to recognize our need for Christ at the centre of our lives.

Christ comes to us in many ways. As we break the bread and drink of the cup in every Communion Service, our God in Christ meets us, for the bread and the wine symbolize His presence. Our God in Christ can meet us in and through our worship, as we sing and pray and listen to the Word, God's activity in the past, and discover where and how God is active in the present. Our God in Christ meets us as we live our lives in the community, seeking to meet the needs of others, offering to all whom we meet unconditional caring.

Paul understood the church to be the body of Christ. Therefore, to be a member of a Christian fellowship is to begin to experience life in union with Christ. Rooting is the essential first step if we would grow in that life.

B. TO BE BUILT UP IN HIM

But rooting is just the beginning. It is the first step, because the root is the channel through which any plant draws its sustenance for life. But a plant is more than the root, and so Paul tells us "to be built in Him." Perhaps here we have an echo of the image Jesus used of the house built on the rock. It is when we have built such a life, then, no matter what experiences we are called upon to face, we can experience an overflowing thankfulness.

How do we achieve that impossible dream? I am sure Paul did not mean the building up of our material resources, though this is a fairly common philosophy today. It is so common it is hard not to be tainted by it to some degree. It is hard not to believe that a winning lottery ticket would be the answer to all our problems. For we are led to believe that enough money can solve every problem. But in our calmer moments we know that there are things money cannot buy. In fact the most important things in life are without price, at least in dollars and cents.

Many couples work hard all their life, saving and planning for retirement, putting off so many things, saving them for retirement. But then at the moment they are ready to sit back and enjoy life, as they say, sickness or death strikes. Their dreams are shattered. The size of their pension makes no difference. Their investments in stocks and bonds does not buy health.

Then there is friendship. A wealthy person may have a lot of friends but what sort of friends are they? The prodigal discovered that, when his money was gone, so were his friends. Money cannot buy unconditional caring, something we all need.

What about happiness? Does happiness come to us as we buy the latest fashion, whether it be in clothes, or cars, or houses or TVs? Or is happiness a by-product of a life which is lived seeking to enable others to fulfil their potential as children of God?

When we are rooted in Christ, when we build our lives in Christ, we are not guaranteed perfect health, or a multitude of friends, but there is a contentment which comes which provides us with a better chance of enjoying good health and meaningful relationships. But, more

importantly, building our lives in Christ enables our lives to overflow with thankfulness, no matter what comes our way.

But how do we build such a life? I would suggest that such a life is like a piece of manilla rope. Such a rope has three main strands which are woven together for maximum strength. So our life built in Christ consists of three strands – regular worship, study and service. None of these can be done in isolation. They are best developed and maintained in a Christian fellowship.

C. BE CONSOLIDATED IN THE FAITH YOU WERE TAUGHT

The binding of these strands together can be seen as the consolidating in the faith which, for Paul, was the third step towards living a life overflowing with thankfulness. This rope is what holds us fast to our anchor when the storms of life threaten to set us adrift. As the hymn writer reminds us:

*'We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll
Fastened to the rock which cannot move
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love.'*

That does not mean that we will have no more questions, or that we will never doubt. Nor does it mean that when we have questions and doubts we have lost our faith. Nor does it mean that we have to accept without question all that the Church teaches. What holds us together is the conviction that God's love has been shown to us in Jesus Christ. To experience that love is to tap into an everlasting spring of thankfulness.

But even this love of God can be questioned. For the moment comes to most of us, sooner or later, when we feel cut adrift in the face of some tragedy, some heartache, it seems as though our anchor is dragging and we are at the mercy of the elements. But if we keep our anchor out, pay out more rope, sooner or later we will catch hold again. We can never drift beyond God's love and care. For we are surrounded by those who care. We are surrounded by those through whom God in Christ can touch our lives, if we will allow our lives to be touched.

To recognize the touch of God's love upon our lives can be the spring of an everlasting thankfulness, leading us to the discovery that all people are members of the one family, God's family. It does not matter what their colour is. It does not matter what their culture is. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female. All are one in Christ, for Christ died for the whole world. To recognize this unconditional, universal love of God, pushes us to seek the ways and means to enable all our brothers and sisters, no matter where they live, to fulfil their God-given potential, no matter what the cost.

What a time of thanksgiving would be in store, for every one if those who have differences would approach each other in this spirit. Think what might have happened in Serbia and Bosnia,

in Kosovo and Croatia, between the Serbs and the Albanians. Think what might happen between the Jews and the Arabs. Think about what might happen if both English speaking and French speaking approached the question of nationhood, believing that we are all one family. Think about what might happen if all sides involved approached the native people's land claims and fishing rights from the viewpoint that we are all members of the one family, God's family, the God who created all things and entrusted what He has created to the care of His children.

Could Paul be right?

*"Since Jesus was delivered to you as Christ and lord,
live your lives in union with Him."*

Could living such a life overcome the brokenness within ourselves, within our nation, within our world, within our Church? This was why God came among us in the man of Nazareth. Can we commit ourselves to his way of unconditional caring, giving thanks to God for everything, the whole of life?

8. ON BEING THE CHURCH – A WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY

Scripture Reading for that day: Issaiah 6:1-8.

INTRODUCTION

Do I have to go? In how many homes was that question asked this morning?

One Sunday morning, a mother knocked on her son's bedroom door and called him to get up. There was no response. She waited for a few minutes and called him again. He responded with a moan. A little while later she went into the room, shook him by the shoulder and said, "This is Sunday. It is time to get up and go to Church." Her son replied, "But I don't want to go to Church. The people are unfriendly, the singing is lousy, and the preaching is dull." His mother responded, "But you've got to get up and go to church. You are thirty-two years old and, besides that, you are the pastor of that church."

Do I have to go? A question not confined to the youngster, but one that can pop into our minds at any age, though we may not ask it out loud. The majority of Canadians have answered that question with an emphatic NO, and they stay away from worship in droves. Why?

Why do so many find the worship of God to be so unpalatable? It cannot be the idea of worship itself, because human beings from the beginning of time have always worshipped something. Every culture we have uncovered has left behind it its own peculiar symbols of worship, from Stonehenge to the west coast totem poles, from Inca Temples to the Temples of Greece and Rome. In every age people have felt the need to worship and have expressed that need in a variety of ways.

In our day many say that they have outgrown this need. There is no longer any need to believe in anything greater than Mankind. We have come of age; we can stand alone. But is this true? If it is true, why the widespread interest in astrology? Why is there a revival of Satan worship? Why is witchcraft on the rise? Why do so many travel to the lake every weekend, battling traffic going and coming? Why do so many spend their winter weekends riding snow-mobiles along country trails or riding ski lifts up the hillside and skiing down the slopes? Why are hockey, baseball and football arenas jammed week after week with hysterical fans? Why are there so many glued to their television sets?

Life for many Canadians revolves around one or more of these activities. They are the centre of many peoples' lives. They offer them their time and their money. Are they the real substitutes for the worship of God, the God who revealed himself to us in Jesus the Christ? Are they the worship of creation rather than of the Creator?

A. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY WORSHIP?

Our understanding of worship has its roots in our Hebrew heritage. For the Hebrews, one word signified work, service and worship. Thus, for the Hebrews, the worship of God and the service of God, were practically identical. Thus, in its broadest sense, worship can be understood as having to do with the living out in everyday life of our understanding of what it means to serve God.

Temple worship was not intended to eliminate this idea, but rather it was intended to gather up the people's service as a public offering to God. But as so often happens in life, the symbol comes to be thought of as the reality. Temple worship with its sacrificial system and ritual came to be seen as being all important. The Old Testament prophets protested against this perversion of the service of God, and sought to re-introduce the idea that God's people were called to serve God with all their heart, mind and spirit, through living justly and caring for the needy.

Jesus stood with the prophets. He called his followers to a view of worship which involved the whole of life. He did not abandon the Temple or the Synagogue. He taught that worship without service and justice for others was empty of all meaning. Christians have always tried to follow his lead. The Christian community has always sought to serve God through service to others and the public worship of God has always had a significant place.

In our day, with the rising influence of science, it was assumed by some that we no longer needed God. But has science answered the basic human questions in a way that satisfied the human spirit? Where did we come from? Are we the products of visitors from another galaxy or are we simply a strange aberration of nature, an irrelevant blip on the surface of life which soon will disappear and be no more? Where did evil come from? Why do the good suffer? Does life end at death?

We could worship a god of nature, a god of the gaps, a God whom we name as the answer to the continuing mysteries of our existence. To do that would mean that once all the questions are answered to our satisfaction, there would be no god! But we Christians do not worship a god of nature, nor a god of the gaps. We do not worship out of the fear of the unknown. Our worship is in response to the God who has revealed Himself to us in Jesus the Christ. Because we have been called to be God's servant people, we are a worshipping community. We worship God, not because we always feel like it, nor because such worship always makes us feel good, but because we are God's people. We gather week by week, as God's people have always done, to remind ourselves that we are the People of God and, by so gathering, we declare to our society that we are willing to be God's Servant people. Paul Johnson writes:

"Whether congregation worship means much or little depends upon the personal devotion that each one brings to invest in it. And the significance of the fellowship is a product of what the members mean to one another in all their relationships."

"If they are externally related to one another with no intimate awareness of what each is going through, and no sense of what life means to another, then the mere fact of physical proximity for one hour does little to bridge their isolation."

B. A WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY

For this reason we need to stress the fact that we are a worshipping community. This is the only hour in the week when the Christian community calling itself St Paul's United Church gathers together. Through the week we may meet in small groups, as the Official Board, as a committee, as a UCW Unit, in a Bible study, as the choir at practice, or in a Fellowship Group. Participating in some group through the week helps us to get to know some of those who worship with us on Sunday. Such participation can move us from some being in an external relationship, being simply in another person's vicinity, into a more personal relationship, which brings a sense of community to our worship.

We know this to be true in other areas of our lives. For example, if your job through the week keeps you isolated from the rest of the company work force, a company gathering, whether for business or pleasure, will be a bit of a bore. You will feel like a stranger. If you join a bowling league but choose to bowl alone at times when the other members of your team are absent, don't be surprised if, when you show up for the play-offs, you feel like an outsider.

Of course, worship is more than community. The whole of one's life can be an act of worship. We can worship at home. We can worship at the cottage. We can worship at the beach. We can and we should. But these occasions for worship do not replace the worship of the community. The Church as the Body of Christ needs to gather. It needs to take on some visible form. But, unless we get to know each other, unless we come to trust each other so that we can share one another's burdens, our worship as a community will remain for the uninvolved, cold and lifeless.

Why do you sit where you are sitting? Many sit in the same place week after week because their friends sit there, or at least they recognize the faces around them, that is, it gives us a sense of security. We are not alone. Of course, we don't have to gather at a particular time or day. In Korea and Japan, I am told, some Christian communities gather before they go to work, which is often before dawn.

Place, time or day are not sacred. What is sacred, what is of ultimate significance, is that the faith community gathers weekly for prayer and the breaking of the bread, as Luke tells us in the Acts of the Apostles. There is no evidence to my knowledge of a follower of Christ maintaining his or her discipleship apart from participation in some regular gathering of Christians. It is a fact of Christian experience that, when we seek to serve God, we discover our need for support, our need for fellowship, our need to know that we are not alone against the world. Then as a Community of Faith we need to be reminded of our calling. We need to hear afresh what God is

calling us to be and to do. We need to be reminded that our God loves us with an everlasting, unconditional love. By gathering as a community for worship we declare our commitment to God. We are God's People.

C. THE LITURGY

The form of our public worship, the liturgy as it is called, is literally the people's work. In other words, Christian worship should never be entertainment by a few for the many, neither should a congregation be thought of as spectators. As worshippers we are not watching a performance staged by others. Christian worship at its best ought to be an unfolding drama in which all of us are involved. There are no star roles. Each of us, whether we are a worshipper, preacher, singer, reader or usher, offers what we do in praise of God. Christian worship at its best should involve the total person, our minds, our hearts and our emotions.

The structure of our liturgy is determined by our understanding of who God is, and who we are in relationship to God. Let us take a quick look at this morning's liturgy...

The opening **Prelude** gives us the opportunity to prepare for worship.

Our Liturgy begins with the **Approach to God**. We are reminded that, while God did take human form in Jesus of Nazareth, God is not our buddy, our equal. So we begin with a hymn of praise to God. This morning we sang "*Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty*". As we remember God's Holiness, we are made aware of our having missed the mark of our high calling, and so we move naturally into **Confession** and the reception of God's forgiveness, our assurance of pardon.

But why have we approached God? To hear what God has to say to us. Therefore the second act, or the second movement in our liturgy is called **The Word of God**. We heard in the Work and Witness some of the events in our life as a congregation. What God is doing among us, and where God may be asking us to get involved.

Sometimes we have a time of **greeting**, a time to say hello to one another, to recognize one another as persons, each one a child of God.

This morning we heard how God spoke to Isaiah. We heard how the early church gathered for worship. The **sermon** is intended to relate the past to the present, and enable us to move into the future. God can speak to us in any one or all of these parts of our liturgy. In this second act of worship we listen. We should be asking ourselves, "What is God saying to me?"

The climax of our worship is reached in the third act, which we call **Our Response to God's Word**. But someone may be thinking, "What if there is no response?" does the worship simply fizzle to an irrelevant conclusion?

There is always a response. It may not be the response I would like to see. It may not be the response God would like to see, but there is always a response. If we don't say "Yes", we are saying "No" and if we don't say "No", we are saying "Yes".

We **respond** through our offering. The money we place on the plate is symbolic of our life. We respond through our prayers of thanksgiving and intercession. We respond through the closing hymn of commitment. We are then **commissioned**.. sent forth to be the people God is calling us to be.

CONCLUSION

Joseph Matthews, when he was Prior of the Spirit Movement, a family Order dedicated to the renewal of the Community, wrote:

"Whatever else the body of Christ is, and whatever else its task may be, it is first of all a body that gathers together to worship God in Christ. Worship is her focal activity without which all other endeavours lose their meaning, and all other missions become perverted. Any work which the Church performs in her varied ministries to the world, which does not flow out of the experience of common worship, may be good from one or another perspective but it is not Christian.

The common worship of the local congregation informs and nourishes the total programme, its common study, its life together and concerns for service to the world. Outside of common worship, study together becomes a matter of mental exercise or barren intellectualism, rather than the vital effort to understand the faith that is within us, and brings all our knowing and living into conformity to Christ.

Without common worship, life together becomes one more attempt to find security and the establishment of a mutual admiration society rather than a common loyalty to Christ through which we become responsible selves in the midst of life as it is.

The Church when it is the Church, does not come together to experience peace of mind, nor to have its ideals lifted, nor its batteries charged.

It gathers to understand itself anew before the Word of God in Christ and hence before the God who gives the Word in Christ."

9. ON BEING THE CHURCH – A NURTURING COMMUNITY

Text: “and these were His Gifts:

To equip God’s people for work in His service, to the building up of the body of Christ. So that we all at last shall attain to the unity inherent in our faith and our knowledge of the son of God – to mature manhood measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ”
(Ephesians 4:11-13)

INTRODUCTION

Things don’t just happen, we make them happen.

Bill and Mary were faced with a major decision. Mary had given birth to their first child and now they must decide where to have him baptized, Bill’s church or Mary’s church. As they discussed the possibilities, Bill suddenly said, “I don’t think we should have our son baptized. We have no right to commit him to any religion. Why not let him grow up and when he is old enough he can make up his own mind.” Mary was not happy with that decision but decided that discretion was the better art of valor and so dropped the subject. Bill and Mary never did get around to making contact with the church in their community.

Was Bill right? Should a child be left to make up his or her own mind? What would happen, I wonder, if parents adopted the same attitude to things like whether they should feed their child, whether they should bother with toilet training or bathing, education, hobbies, or social activities? At least we set the wheels in motion. We point our child in certain directions. We teach them to eat nutritious food, we teach them the importance of bathing regularly, brushing their teeth, washing their hair. We seek to give them a good education, opportunities to develop worthwhile hobbies. We encourage their social development. Of course there is no guarantee that our children will adhere to all we seek to teach them, but a parent who did nothing would be considered quite irresponsible.

Is not a person’s religious faith equally important? We bring our children for baptism just as we were brought by our parents. By so doing, we are setting them on a particular religious path. But having done that, what do we do about nurturing, encouraging them, to grow in their faith? Do we leave the growth to chance? What about the faith that was planted in us? Is the God we believe in, that is the picture we have of God, the same today as it was in our childhood?

In our prayer life, do we say the same prayer we learned at our mother’s knee? As we look back over our faith journey, can we see growth? Nurturing is one of the basic tasks of any Christian congregation. For Jesus said to Peter, “Do you love me? Then feed my lambs. Feed my sheep.”

A. WHY

Many of you are or have been gardeners. In the spring, or even last fall, you prepared the seed bed. The garden was dug and given a liberal dose of fertilizer. Then, as soon as the frost was out of the ground, it was cultivated and the final preparations made for planting. As soon as the ground was warm enough the seeds were planted. But that did not conclude your labours. All summer there was work to be done – weeds to be pulled, plants to be thinned, destructive bugs controlled. In other words, you cared for your garden, you nurtured it, and have, I hope, enjoyed the fruits of your labour.

We follow a similar pattern with our children. We prepare for their coming by buying appropriate clothes, a crib, and set up a nursery. After birth we follow a strict diet, gradually weaning them from only milk to solid food. We seek to protect them from harmful diseases by inoculations and then later teaching them some basic rules which we hope will keep them safe from the dangers of a hostile world.

But faith, our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, promised at baptism, surely needs just as careful nurturing. If nurturing is essential for our physical wellbeing, it is even more essential for our spiritual wellbeing.

While I am sure there were moments when we wished that our child would stay at a particular stage, whatever stage we found the most comfortable, I am also sure that we didn't really mean it. None of us really wants our child to remain a child, mentally, physically or emotionally, all his or her life. Why then a spiritual infant? That is not to say that growing is easy or comfortable. It isn't. As Reuel Howe reminds us,

"In order to grow, we must die to or give up, something that we already have for the sake of something more that we want to do or be."

We have to give up the security of the familiar to reach out into the unknown of the next stage of our developing life. For Christians, nurturing, growing, is essential whether we enter the life of faith in infancy or later in life. We need to grow in our knowledge and in our understanding of God that we may fulfil our calling to be His servants. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, tells us that God gave gifts to those whom He calls to be His Church, that His people might be equipped for Service.

Initially we are no different from the armed services recruit. We have been committed, through our baptism, either conscripted when baptised as an infant or volunteered when we join the church of our own free will. Either way, we need to learn what it means to live a Christian life, what is expected of a servant of Jesus Christ. If Christ is to have any impact on this world, the spirit of Christ must take on flesh and blood as he did 2,000 years ago in Galilee. The only way that can happen today is when his spirit takes on our flesh and blood. The Body of Christ, the community of faith, the congregation, all members, young and old, need to be strengthened, nurtured. Before an army is ready to confront an enemy, there has to be a period of building

up, recruiting, training, the gathering of supplies. Similarly, the body of Christ, before it can impact the world in any meaningful way, must be nurtured, enabled to grow, to develop at least to a measure of the maturity that we see in Jesus our Lord.

The mainline churches in our society are in decline because we don't know how to offer the good news of Christ to a hungry world. I also suspect that a goodly number are not even sure what the Good News is, and the nurturing and living of the Christian faith is low on the totem pole of life's priorities. It is only as we are in the process of becoming mature Christians that we can fulfill our commission, to teach, to preach, and to heal, to proclaim God's love in Christ to a society in desperate need.

B. HOW

But how are we nurtured?

Nature is a good analogy. We know that a seed planted in the ground needs good nourishment if it is to grow. So does the child. At every age we know we need a balanced diet if we wish to be reasonably healthy. Just as you don't feed a newborn baby steak, neither do you normally feed the mature person Pablum. This tells us that what is needed for nurturing at different stages, what is adequate in the nursery and kindergarten is not adequate in grades 4-8. What meets the needs of a teenager is different from what meets the needs of an adult. Our aim ought to be that at every stage, from nursery through adulthood, every individual should have the opportunity to come to know, love and serve God who has come to us in Jesus our Christ.

While curriculum is important, what is more important is the faith of the teacher. More faith is caught than taught. As a congregation we are responsible for providing nurturing programmes for the whole congregation. Nevertheless, the basic responsibility for growth in the faith has to lie in the home. If all we and our children are getting is the occasional hour on Sunday morning, then our spirit is starving and the possibility of growing to a mature faith is being denied.

It will be in our homes that we ought to learn the reality of unconditional love, forgiveness and the caring more for others than for ourselves. It ought to be in our homes that our basic understanding of God and His expectations should be made clear. It is in our homes that the meaning of following Christ should be made visible by the way we live.

To be effective, Christian nurturing should be a lifelong involvement. But the reality seems to be that the older we get, fewer and fewer participate at least in the church-centred nurturing programmes. Of those who are brought for baptism, a fraction arrive for confirmation and even fewer follow a course of bible study, prayer, fellowship and service through their lives. I don't know how many of you maintain a time for personal bible reading and prayer. I suspect there are more here than in some churches. But even so, it is fraction of the total membership.

According to the promises we make at confirmation, all members besides worshipping regularly should be studying their bible, both alone and with others, praying daily and giving of themselves in some loving service. For good physical health, participation, active involvement is essential, so for good Christian development the muscles of faith need to be exercised.

The history of the church tells us that the small group is the most effective way for these things to happen. For it is in the small group that we can most comfortably share our victories and our defeats in life. In the small group we can learn that there are those who really care, who will support us when we have to make a stand. It is in the small group that we can engage in the sort of activities that will enable us to grow to maturity. George Sweezy writes,

“Those who attend church only as an audience attends a theatre are missing many of the essentials of Christian growth and health. The failure to make friends in the church is a chief reason for the appalling falling away from it. Members grow as Christians through classes, groups and church work.”

If you wish to grow in your Christian Faith then you need to take stock of where you are in your faith journey at the moment, and what needs to happen to enable you to reach that maturity we have seen in Christ. Morton Kelsey, in his book “The Other Side of silence”, writes,

“So long as a person thinks that life cannot be lived without someone or something, perhaps father or mother or parent substitute, or that life will fall apart without the accustomed indulgences or round of activities, that person has not approached psychological maturity but is living a dependent existence rather than becoming a self-contained individual, a person in his own right WHO CAN LOVE WITHOUT STRINGS ATTACHED. The ability to give love without expecting anything in return is one expression of maturity. The mature person is also able to be alone and silent and the effort to turn inward in silence leads towards this detachment and the maturity that goes with it.”

You have tremendous resources and opportunities for growth in the faith here at Collier Street. Your library has a variety of books, audio and video tapes. You have the opportunity to participate in the Bethel Bible Study programme, the School for Adult Ministries, Life Groups, the UCW, Alpha Group, a Christian Basics Course, to name just a few. There are opportunities for the Youth of the congregation, through the Junior Choir, the Senior and Junior Youth Group, as well as Cubs, Beavers, Scouts, Brownies and Guides. More information on the variety of opportunities can be obtained by contacting Art for adult opportunities, and Steve for youth opportunities. You are truly a blessed congregation, having such a rich supply of resources and capable leadership. Growth comes more quickly through participation.

Teaching others is one of the fastest ways of growing oneself. Any professional person knows that to grow in his or her professional field requires that he or she keep up with the literature in the field, attend seminars and generally keep themselves tuned in. Christian faith is our life, it is our foundation, and surely needs similar attention to keep it from crumbling.

Could there be a connection between the fact that our society is breaking down, increasing numbers of violent crimes, violence to children and women, the reduction of services to the needy in order to avoid higher taxes which would anger those who have; the drop in the number of volunteers willing to work for charitable organisations, both in the church and in the community' and the Christian communities' failure to take seriously the need to nurture the life of faith?

CONCLUSION

I have a dream. That a day may come when every member of the church would be participating in a fellowship group involving study, prayer and community service. It's a very old concept. It was the way in which the Church began. Wesley re-introduced the idea to England over 200 years ago and what he called the "class meeting" was the backbone of Methodism which changed the social face of England. The concept fell out of favour in the Church. The communists adopted it and for many years it was an effective tool, changing the face of many countries.

Today the concept has been revived in South America under the name of Base Communities. There are 70,000 such groups in South America. There too they are beginning to affect the societies in which they live.

When I contemplate the possibility of a group involving Christians of every denomination meeting regularly for prayer, study and community service in every neighbourhood, or every block of a town such as this, I know that any community would be changed for the better. And it could happen if enough people decided that their Christian Faith deserved that kind of investment.

Things don't just happen. WE MAKE THEM HAPPEN. We could be the instruments of the eternal God if we opened our lives to His spirit and allowed Him to have His way with us.

10. ON BEING THE CHURCH – A HEALING COMMUNITY

Text: "Is one of you ill: he should send for the elders of the congregation to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer offered in faith will save the sick man." (James 5:14-15)

INTRODUCTION

When you are ill, do you send for the Church elder? Bill had been feeling under par for some time. He had no specific pain, but just a general feeling of being unwell. He called his doctor and made an appointment for a check-up. Following his examination the doctor advised Bill to check into the hospital for a series of tests. After several days of anxious waiting his doctor came into his room to give Bill his diagnosis. If you were Bill, what would you do next? With whom would you share the doctor's diagnosis? To whom would you turn for support? But, you say, that all depends on what the doctor's diagnosis is.

But should it? If the doctor's diagnosis is that our sickness is incurable, would that cause us to turn to God for help more quickly than if the doctor gave us a prescription saying, "Take this and you'll be fine in a few days' time." What do you believe God's role to be in sickness and in health? What is the role of the Christian community, our community of faith, the Body of Christ?

The New Testament writers suggest that the Body of Christ, the community of faith, is intended to be a healing community. The Gospels state very clearly that Jesus healed the sick. The Gospels also tell us that this same power was given to the disciples. Matthew tells us that when the disciples were sent out, they were commissioned by Jesus to "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils. You receive without cost, give without charge," (Matthew 10:8). The early Church include healing as a part of its ministry, as the letter of James tells us: "Is one of you ill? He should send for the elders. The prayer offered in faith will save the sick man."

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that healing was intended to be part of the ministry of the servant people of God. We have been called to be a healing community. Does this mean that we ought to dispense with doctors?

A. HEALING – WHAT DO WE MEAN?

By no means. The Christian ministry of healing does not seek to compete with the physician. It is a ministry which is intended to work in cooperation with the medical profession. A study on the Church and healing published by our denomination some years ago says,

“Salvation means healing, and to be saved means to be made whole. But the healing of salvation is ordinarily to be understood in a more ultimate context than the healing of medical science. It refers to the integration of life’s brokenness at every level, the reconciliation of alienated man in every dimension of his being. It includes the healing of what we call sickness, but it signifies also the restoration of the whole of life in the fullest possible way.”

In Old Testament times bodily sickness, infirmities and accidents were seen to be the ordinary lot of sinful man. In their acutest form, they are seen to be signs, direct or indirect, of sin and of the curse of punishment which sin brings. Paul Tournier, a Swiss medical doctor, writes:

“Many functional disturbances and, in the long run, many organic lesions as well, are the direct consequence of unresolved remorse. That this is so is shown by the fact of their abrupt disappearance or reduction after confession. One has seen, for instance, cases where long-standing insomnia, palpitations, headaches, disorders of the digestive organs or of the liver, have disappeared overnight after the confession of a lie or of an illicit love affair.”

While Carl Jung observed:

“Among all my patients in the second half of life – that is to say, over thirty-five – there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost what the religions of every age have given to their followers, and not one of them has been really healed who did not regain his religious outlook.”

However, when we speak of healing and health in a Christian context, we are not suggesting that the goal of our faith is to be free from colds, flu, mumps, cancer or broken bones. According to Howard Clinebell,

“Health is much more than the absence of illness, it is the presence of ‘high level wellness’, a concept akin to ‘life... in all its fullness’. There are as many degrees of wellness as there are sickness.”

High level wellness involves wholeness in all six interdependent dimensions of people’s lives – physical, psychological, interpersonal, environmental, institutional and spiritual. The two major determinants of levels of wellness or sickness are one’s lifestyle and the level of chronic stress in one’s life. The two keys to maintaining high level wellness are wellness awareness, understanding and self-responsibility, meaning accepting primary responsibility for living in ways that enhance one’s wellness.

We say that Jesus came to bring salvation. He spoke in terms of enjoying life in all its fullness, or being in a right relationship with God, with the world, and with all people. Therefore our goal as a healing community is wholeness of life for all, wholeness of the total being, persons who are

at one with themselves, at one with their neighbor and at one with God. To have achieved in some measure that sense of wholeness may result in a better health record, in fact some statistics would support that view. Nevertheless perfect physical health is not the primary goal of the Christian life, being at one with God is.

Good health, the wholeness of body, mind and spirit is always the gracious gift of God. The medical profession never claims to heal. A doctor prescribes a course of treatment. A diseased organ can be removed, a cut sewn up, a particular drug prescribed, but whether the patient achieves perfect health, or partial health, or dies, is not ultimately decided by the doctor. The healing of a cut, the removal of the symptoms of a disease, health and wholeness are brought about by the power of God.

B. THE CHURCH – A HEALING COMMUNITY

What then is the Church's role?

Our denomination's report on Healing says:

"The healing ministry belongs to the Church as a whole and to all its members. Whatever special function may be assigned to individuals, this overriding truth needs to be clearly realized. The Church is not so much a community of healers as a healing community through which God's love is channeled and in which God's love becomes incarnate. The Church fulfils her healing ministry to the extent she becomes a community of love and unconditional acceptance. George McLeod speaks of 'the costly practice of Christian Fellowship, the ongoing work of the Christian congregation is suffering long, and being kind, envying not and rejoicing in the truth' and adds, 'it is the love that never fails this corporate ministry; that is the real healing power'."

While Dr Bernie Siegel in his book 'Love, Medicine and Miracles' says,

"I am convinced that unconditional love is the most powerfully known stimulant of the immune system. If I told patients to raise their blood levels of immune globulins or killer T cells, no-one would know how. But if I teach them to love themselves and others fully, the same changes happen automatically. The truth is: love heals."

In other words, to be in a healing community requires that we be a loving, caring community.

How are we to achieve that? It is hard to achieve if the only time we meet is for an hour of public worship on a Sunday.

Our denominations report on Healing reminds us that it is in the small group, whether we gather for study, prayer, fellowship or recreation, that we learn to trust one another, and we

may come to share our burden with one another, and then we begin to experience the church as a healing community. For in our worship we can confess our brokenness, we can receive God's forgiveness, we can decide to face in a new direction, we can decide to take a new attitude to life, we can decide to lead a new life. Through our prayers of intercession we can surround individuals with our love and our concern. Anyone who wishes can be remembered in this way.

Some years ago the Reader's Digest carried the following true story.

On February 6, 1951 a New York commuter train was wrecked and among the seriously injured was Bob Stout. He was at death's door. However a neuro-surgeon decided to operate, though he told the family there was little hope. The news came to Bob's minister just before the morning service. Bob's wife was the only one who believed he would live and she kept saying, "I've put my trust in Him..."

During the service the minister felt compelled to leave the pulpit and do something he had never done before. He told his congregation that it was 11:15 and that Bob Stout was in a critical condition and that he thought both Bob and Mildred would like to know that the whole congregation was praying for him. The minister prayed... "O Master, we beseech thee to go with us now to the hospital at Perth Amboy; to walk up the stairs, down the hall to room 248, to enter and stand by the bed. Now Master..." the minister's voice faltered, "lay your hands on Bob's head and heal him." It was 11:20.

Following the service, the phone rang in the study. It was Mildred, Bob's wife, to say that the operation had been called off and that Bob was recovering. At the moment they thought he was gone, pulse and respiration non-existent, he opened his eyes. The time was 11:20.

We can exercise our ministry as a healing community through the laying on of hands, which is what the letter of James recommends. It is a practice that is being revived in the church today. The order of St Luke is one such movement. It can be done publicly. But it can also be done privately.

I have been asked to do this once. An elder of a former congregation had a serious heart condition. It was before open heart surgery was as common as it is today. He came to the house one morning. We prayed and I laid my hands on him. Twenty years later he was still going strong.

Prayers for the sick are a regular part of our worship. It is helpful whenever possible, to picture the person and try to picture the hands of our Lord being laid upon them. While there is still a great deal we do not understand, there is a growing body of information to suggest that the mind has a great deal to do with sickness and health.

Of this I am sure, we are called to be a healing community, to bring wholeness of life to individuals and to society.

C. PRE-REQUISITES FOR WHOLENESS

If we believe we are called to be a healing community and if we wish to take this responsibility seriously, the first step is to accept the fact that there is a power greater than ourselves who loves us and who desires wholeness of life for each one of His children. We need to believe that this God is not aloof from life, but is involved with us. We then approach our healing responsibility with faith and with love. To pray for someone with love is bound to have an effect.

A man constantly apologized for his wife's neurosis until, one day, a blunt doctor suggested, "If you would stop telling her to snap out of it and would show a little more patience and consideration, your wife might not be a neurotic." If such a man prayed for his wife's health and did not want to be hypocritical about it, he would feel compelled to root out his little moods and discourtesies that were adding to the woman's burden.

When we pray for others with love, we change and then we can become part of the answer rather than continuing to be part of the problem. We need to come to our healing task with as much knowledge and understanding as we can muster. We will need to know the person, their particular need, their particular situation, and the change which is needed. We need to visualize the situation and make our prayer as concrete as possible.

But we need to approach our healing responsibility with common sense. To have flouted all the rules of good health, to have abused the body mercilessly and then to ask God to restore you to full physical health is to have unreasonable expectations. We need to come to God, willing to be at one with Him, willing to admit that we have missed the mark, willing to admit our need, our utter dependence upon Him willing to let go and trust God completely. We must also approach our healing ministry willing to accept whatever God's will may be.

CONCLUSION

But if God's will is that all His children be whole, and if the prayer offered in faith will save the sick man, why do so many die, in spite of all the prayers that are uttered? I have offered prayers for children, for mothers and for fathers, to no avail. Why? Was God too busy to hear those prayers? Was our faith too weak?

At the same time, I know of many individuals who have been prayed for and have been restored to health and strength. I don't know why some are healed and some are not. But I do

not now that, in Jesus, the Kingdom of God was present. Therefore all whom he touched were made whole.

But we are not the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God was present, yes, but it has not come in its fullness. All we get in this life so far, is an occasional glimpse of the wholeness that will be. Being a Christian a member of a healing community, does not require the possession of miraculous powers. But it does mean being a person of faith, living in a meaningful relationship with God who has been made known to us in Jesus, and who lives with us, enabling us to be a healing community through the power of His spirit. Being a member of a healing community means that I trust my life to God's care and keeping believing that God will do what He in His good time and His love deems best for me and for those whom I love. I know that God seems to love us most when we need Him most. God is closest to us when we are broken and feel abandoned.

Therefore there can be grace in our sickness, in our pain and in our suffering, as well as grace in and through the gift of healing. We can exercise our ministry as a healing community when in a person's darkest hour as well as the times of great joy, we become the everlasting arms of God, caring for, upholding, keeping the light of God's presence burning brightly, despite the darkness.

11. ON BEING THE CHURCH – A SERVANT COMMUNITY

Text: *"... he did not come to be served but to serve
And to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Matthew 20:28)

INTRODUCTION

Theodore Wedel tells the following parable:

"On a dangerous sea coast where shipwrecks often occur there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea and, with no thought for themselves, went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost.

Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved and various others in the surrounding area wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and effort and money for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put in better furniture in the enlarged buildings. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely because they used it as a sort of club.

Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired life boat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in this club's decorations and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club installations were held.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet and half-drowned people. They were dirty, sick, and some of them had black skin and some yellow skin. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where the victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were

finally voted down and told that, if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by the new station experienced the same changes as had occurred in the old it evolved into a club and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself and, if you visit that sea coast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along the shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most people drown."

A. SAVED TO SERVE

Where do you see yourself in that parable? Where do you see our congregation? Such a parable should raise such questions as: What is our purpose? Why am I here? Why did God call me to be a member of His servant people? Why do we bring our children for baptism: why do we bring our children to Sunday School? Is our reason for coming simply to gain knowledge? Is our reason for coming simply habit, a habit ingrained in us from childhood? Do we come to please family, friends, neighbours? Do we come to insure for ourselves life after death? Do we come to make friends, to find a safe social setting for our lives?

I have shared this parable with you and raised these questions because I am concerned about the life and work of Christ's church, the life and work of this congregation. I am concerned that only half the questionnaires distributed to every family have been returned. I am concerned that the retreat for the elders had to be cancelled because of low registration. We can plan the best programmes, provide good leadership and high quality materials, we can enjoy our Sunday fellowship together, but unless we fulfil Christ's mission, unless we are a serving community, we are not Christ's church.

We have been saved to serve. We have been called to seek and to save those who are lost. If we do not serve, then we must face the awkward question, have we been saved? Are we in a right relationship with God through Christ? Are we experiencing wholeness of life? Robert Raines writes:

"We have sent unconverted people to convert others. We exhort our people to win others to Christ while they themselves have not been won.. only a disciple of Christ can be an Apostle for Christ. Genuine disciples of Christ inevitably want to take up their ministry. They do not have to be exhorted; they only need guidance and opportunity."

Jesus, so the scriptures tell us, came not to be served, but to serve. The genuine disciple inevitably wishes to be like his or her master, they wish to exercise the ministry Jesus has entrusted to them. To be called to be a follower of Jesus is to know we have been called into a life of service. We are called to share our time, talents and resources, not out of a sense of

duty, but with joy and thanksgiving. We should see being Christ's servants as a privilege, not an onerous duty.

Service, our ministry as Christians, flows out of our relationship with God in Christ. It is to be enjoyed, not endured.

B. HOW

Having responded positively to God's call in and through Christ, to be a disciple, having made our initial commitment, "I am thine, O Lord, I have heard thy call. Have thine own way with me. You are the potter, I am the clay", we serve by sharing, sharing the things that God through Christ has given us. We cannot give what we haven't got.

We can serve by sharing our time. But, you say, everyone has time. Is a Christian's time different from other people's time? Surely time is time. True. What ought to be different is our attitude towards time and therefore the way we use time.

As Christians we believe that life is a gift from God. That surely means that time is not ours to do with as we please. It is also a gift from God, no matter how little or how much we have, and it ought to be used as God directs. I am accountable to God for the way I use the time He has given me, accountable for the way I use the moments, the hours, the days, and the weeks. Time is one of our most precious commodities. We only have one chance to spend each moment. The present moment never returns. I can serve by the way I use the time God has given me.

I can also serve my God by the way I use the talents, the abilities God has given me. Each one of us has some gift. Gifts do not come fully developed. They are a buried potential which needs to be called forth, developed and used in God's service, to bring wholeness to a broken world. Sometimes we are unaware of our particular gift until we take up some responsibility for which we feel incapable and then, discovering in and through our relationship with God that, with the challenge, God also gives the ability to meet the challenge. As with time, so with talents, we are accountable to God for our use, our misuse or lack of use, of the abilities He has entrusted us with.

But I can also serve through sharing my financial resources. As a Christian I see my financial resources as a gift from God. Our money, as we often call it, is not really ours. It is God's and we are accountable to God for the way we spend it. Money, like time and talents, comes to us that we may serve God as effectively as possible. As a Christian, I am called to justify the spending of my money, not before the community, but before God.

We are a people who have been saved to serve, we are a people who have been called to seek and to save those who are lost. We serve, we exercise our ministry through sharing what God has given to us.

At this point we may have a major decision to make. Is God calling me to serve through a full-time ministry in the Church or is God calling me to exercise my ministry in the secular world, and perhaps as a part-time ministry in the church? As a Christian, I have no choice about ministry itself. My being a Christian commits me to a full-time ministry, for Jesus said, "No man can serve two masters." The only issue for the Christian is whether one's ministry will be exercised primarily within the church structure or primarily in the world.

The ordained ministry in the church is one we enter when we are driven to it by the Spirit of God. For the majority of Christians, God calls them to exercise their ministry in the world, and to the world.

C. THE WORLD

The call to servanthood, ministry, a life of service to and for others, is often misunderstood. Ministry, servanthood in the pattern of Jesus Christ, is not to be servant of the world, nor the servant of the congregation. It does not mean being at the beck and call of everyone. We are called to be servants of God through Jesus Christ. We are called to do God's will, not the will of society.

A serving community, a servant community, is a caring community. But caring in the pattern of Jesus' ministry is to seek what is best, what is God's will in whatever situation we find ourselves. What people want and what God wills for them does not always coincide. This means that congregations don't always hear what they want to hear. The church sometimes says and does things that offend society. Just as in the medical field, so in the church – the necessary treatment for the diagnosed disease can be very unpalatable, even painful.

Caring is also sharing. All of us, as members of the body of Christ, ought to share one another's struggles in the faith. We need to share the way God has led us. We need to share the gifts God has given us. We need to share the insights God has revealed to us. We need to share the pain as well as the joy of living in the real world. Then we have all been given some gift. We need to recognize our particular gift, develop it and use it in the service of God. We need to ask ourselves, what is God calling me to do? What do I enjoy doing? Where am I needed? What training do I need?

The needs are legion. If we are to take seriously our calling to be a serving community we will need to take seriously the promises we make when children are baptized. We need to care for our young parents, get to know them, supporting them, enabling them to become active members of the congregation. We will need to take seriously the pastoral care of couples who are married here and the families of those we bury. We need to care for those who drop out, for whatever reason, remembering that Jesus came to seek and to save the lost sheep of the house of Israel. The eldership is a vitally important to the fulfilment of our caring ministry.

But this ministry to which we are called is, or should be, exercised wherever life takes us. Wherever we find ourselves, we are to seek to bring wholeness of life to as many as possible. As members of a serving community, we live out our commitment as parents in the home, as bank tellers, teachers, nurses, doctors, dentists, lawyers, waiters, waitresses, store clerks, office clerks, wherever we live out our lives. All that is needed, says Reuel Howe, "is the sensitivity that allows one to be an instrument of healing to those who are hurt, or of reconciliation to those who are alienated and thus to affirm and restore them by giving them courage for a new "go" at loving."

Wherever we go, in whatever group we find ourselves, we are always God's servant community and so our ministry can be exercised in and through Telecare, Meals on Wheels, The Hospital Auxiliary, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, wherever the needs of people are being met. Our problem is that the needs are so many, we can care so deeply, we can want to do so much, that we spread ourselves too thin. No-one can do it all. We have to decide in the light of our understanding of God's will and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, where we can do the most good. When every Christian does something, the majority of needs will be met.

Being a serving community involves both the inward journey and the outward journey. In order to serve, we must also be nurtured. The congregation is like a base camp. It recruits, trains, provides the nurturing necessary for each and every individual so that they may grow in life with Christ and be enabled to exercise their particular ministry in the community.

As a serving community, we are called to witness to the world both through meaningful public worship and by relevant action in society. We are called to call forth the gifts of every Christian, enabling these gifts to be developed and sending our members out into the world to live for Christ.

As a congregation, part of the body of Christ, we are not an end in itself. We are a lifesaving station, yes, but more than that. We are not only here to rescue those who are shipwrecked in the storms of life, we recruit, we train, we go forth to serve. We pick up the pieces of those who return broken and battered, so that they can go forth once more.

And when someone is overdue, we don't simply place "missing" beside their name, we go looking for them. The congregation has a revolving door we enter to be made whole and we go forth to share in the ministry of God in Christ.

CONCLUSION

But some will say, "Is there no end? I have served faithfully for 20, 30, 40, 50 years. I have done my share." Can a Christian ever retire from Christ's service? We may get tired, but Christians don't retire. We have been saved to serve for a lifetime. For no matter what our age, no matter what our physical state, there is always some service we can render. The form of our ministry,

our service, will change, and it should. No-one is bound to serve in the same area of community or congregation for ever.

Change enables us to grow and growing keeps the spirit fresh and alive. For many years our form of service may involve physical activity. But the day comes to most of us when some form of non-physical service is necessary. A person confined to their home can still use a telephone to keep in touch, to express their caring concern for others, assuring the lonely and the shut-in that they are not forgotten, to be a vital link in a serving community.

When even such activity is impossible, such a person can become a powerhouse in any congregation through praying for the life and work of the congregation and God's mission in the world. For to be one with Christ is to seek, in whatever state we find ourselves, to serve the God who has given us life and who has called us to be members of a serving community for as long as we live.

12. THE FAMILY AND HOUSEHOLD OF GOD

*Text: "Thus you are no longer aliens in a foreign land,
But fellow citizens with God's people,
Members of God's household" (Ephesians 2:19)*

INTRODUCTION

Has the family a place in modern society? It may seem incredible to some that such a question should even be asked. But the reality is that we are living in an era when the traditional concept of the family is undergoing changes. Could the concept of the family, as Christians have understood it, be in danger of becoming extinct? From the beginning of human history the family in some form has been in existence. A baby cannot survive without someone to love and care for it. From the earliest days of the Church's existence the family was a vital part of its life.

In the Acts of the Apostles we are told that when the Philippian jailer accepted Christ, he and his whole household were baptized. Entry into the community of faith was seldom the act of a lone individual. Even if one's spouse was unable or unwilling to make a commitment, Paul believed that the faith of the believing wife or husband was sufficient to ensure the acceptance of the partner into the Kingdom of God (1 Cor. 7:14). But more than that, Paul also believed that as Christians "we are no longer aliens in a foreign land, but fellow citizens with God's people, members of God's household" (Ephesians 2:19).

It may be helpful to remind ourselves that a family is also a household. In our society there are growing numbers of single parent families, there are common-law relationships and many other combinations. Whatever the relationships, they are all households into which children are born and in which children are cared for. Therefore, the question we need to ask is in what way is the Christian family, the Christian household, different from the non-Christian? Has the Christian family/household any distinguishing marks, any distinctive features? What effect does the faith we profess when we join the Christian Faith Community have on the way we live as families, whether our family be a single-parent, a common-law, or a traditional husband/wife and two children?

A. A CHRISTIAN HOME

Today, as on other baptismal Sundays, parents bring their children for baptism. They profess their faith in Christ as Lord, and they promise among other things to make a Christian home for their children. We believe that, in this way, a solid foundation can be laid for a life of faith for those baptised. Through our profession of faith we are saying that, as Christ is our Lord and Master, he will be part of the atmosphere of our home; he will be the unseen guest at our

table, the centre of our life. But our acceptance of the Lordship of Christ, our struggle to live the life of faith, can be sorely tested when sickness comes, or redundancy in the work force, or longer hours of work gives us little time for the building of family relationships. The way we react to these experiences, how we cope with them, will teach our children a great deal about the reality of our faith in God and Jesus Christ as Lord.

Some years ago one of my daughters gave me a wooden plaque on which there is a picture of a parent with a child sitting on his shoulders. Beneath the picture are these words:

*"Blessed is the man
To whom his work is a pleasure
By whom his friends are encouraged
With whom all are comfortable
In whom a clear conscience abides and
Through whom his children see God."*

I have treasured it, not because I believe it to be true of me, but because it holds before me the expectations of not only my daughter, but the goal for every Christian parent and every Christian pastor. Unless our children see something of God in us, they may never be able to see God.

This means that, as Christian parents, we have the responsibility to live love unconditionally. We need to live in such a way that our children learn patience, learn to hope, and learn to relate in wholesome ways to other human beings. In the Christian home they should learn how to forgive and accept forgiveness. How to accept others, no matter how different they appear to be. In the Christian home they should learn faithfulness, loyalty, and above all to trust in the ultimate goodness and purposefulness of life. They should learn what behaviour is acceptable and is unacceptable and that real freedom is only to be found with the acceptance of limitations. Ruel Howe put it this way, "Parents are the anvil against which young people hammer out their own personalities, and it takes a certain amount of strength and endurance to be an anvil."

We need to remind ourselves of the old adage, what a man sows that will he also reap. For Christian parents there should be no random harvest. For our children to have the possibility of enjoying Christian discipleship, we must sow the right seed, provide the right environment, spend time cultivating the soil. Barbara Pittard writes, "Daily relationships and family situations form the roots of religion for our children. It is the daily experience in the relationships with mother and father and with other adults, that children get their ideas of good and bad, of the power and love greater than themselves. For a while, we are all the God our children know."

What we do or don't do can either distort or obscure the truth about God, or mediate the meaning and power and love of God. All too often we sell our children short. We think they cannot understand, therefore they cannot learn or experience. Ed Johnson believes differently:

“Every Sunday morning at 11:00 a.m. he is in Church with his three-year-old daughter on his lap. The little girl does not understand the service. But she does understand that this is important to her daddy. She knows the quiet and security of an hour spent with him in this special place. This is an important time for her. While Ed’s relationship with his daughter prepares her for a strong faith, he is also witnessing to all who worship with him.”

As we parents demonstrate and share the love we have received from God with our children, our children will become aware that their parents know someone greater than themselves called God, and that they live in fellowship with God. Our reverence, our obedience to God, our worship of God which can stir our children’s sensitivity is the beginning of their religious experience, their rooting in the faith.

B. THE FAMILY AND HOUSEHOLD OF GOD

As we seek to fulfil our responsibilities as Christian parents building Christian homes, we need to know that we are not alone. We are, as Paul reminded the Ephesians, “no longer aliens in a foreign land but members of God’s household.” We are part of a family fellowship which stretches around the world. We experience this fellowship in a local setting.

As we participate in our local community of faith, we ought to experience something of what it means to be a member of the family and household of God. This means that, as members of this community of faith, it is our responsibility to enable this experience of fellowship to happen. Together we share the responsibility for enabling Christian parents to establish Christian homes, to be Christian families, so that they fulfil their responsibilities as followers of Jesus Christ. For as a congregation, at each baptismal service we agree to receive the children about to be baptized, supporting them with constant love, wholesome example, Christian teaching and faithful prayer. We are the family and household of God for all who worship here.

To be a family involves knowing as many other members as possible. Being a family involves caring for the individual members. When one is absent, we should care enough to let them know they have been missed, we should care enough to be willing to share their burden. When a member of the family is not known, they are not missed when they are absent from the family gathering. We may notice empty seats, but we don’t know who could be there. As a family we need to support one another in our struggle with the faith, in sickness as well as health.

We will need opportunities to discuss our faith, to come to a clearer understanding of how faith is related to daily living, so that we can teach our children and our grandchildren. There are those who have lived a large piece of life with all its ups and downs and have found strength in their faith. We need to find ways and means of sharing that experience with those who are at the starting line. The experience of Christian veterans ought to be utilized in the educational and fellowship opportunities provided by the congregation. But the major responsibility for the

Christian nurturing of children rests with the parents. We depend upon the family to introduce their children to prayer, worship, the meaning of the sacraments, and moral values, as well as the basic teaching of the Christian faith. This assumes that Christian parents are themselves familiar with all of this. This may not be as true as it once was. Therefore, it is our responsibility to provide the opportunities if this knowledge is to be acquired.

I have always assumed that Christian parents read their bibles, said their prayers, and so I have never made it a practice to remind people of this responsibility from the pulpit. I assumed that, just as a child grown to maturity would not appreciate being reminded to brush their teeth and say their prayers at bedtime, neither do we. Then one day a member of the congregation asked me if I believed in personal prayer and bible study, as they had never heard me mention it from the pulpit. I do believe that Christian parents should make time to read their bibles, preferably with a good commentary beside them. They should pray and teach their children to pray. To make such practices as meaningful as possible, most of us find it helpful to be involved in group Bible study. My dream has always been of a congregation in which every member participates in some form of Bible Study or fellowship group, appropriate to their age and stage in the Christian life.

CONCLUSION

While society is changing and the traditional family is not always possible, single-parent families are on the rise, some by deliberate choice, nevertheless the family in some form will continue to have a vital role to play. Such changes may provide the Church an expanding role as the family and household of God. We could become the extended family in which those who are experiencing brokenness in their own family life can find the support they need. It could be that in the church as the family and household of God, children who have lost a parent for whatever reason, may find the love and acceptance of other mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers.

In a few moments mothers and fathers will bring their children for baptism, that they may be received into the family and household of God. Once again we have the opportunity to reach out to them and to all others who, by their coming to us, have reached out for fellowship with us, so that they may know, as Paul put it in his letter to the Ephesians, that they are “no longer aliens in a foreign land, but fellow citizens with God’s people, members of God’s household.”