

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 23, 2014**

BEING THE CHURCH (6)

Romans 12:9-16

I love the church. I don't say it lightly or flippantly. I really do love the church. Lots and lots of people today, including an increasing number of professing Christians, have given up on the church. They have decided that the church as we know it is irrelevant to life as we live it in the 21st century. I hope you don't feel that way. But even if you do, or if you're not sure what you think of the church, I'm glad you're here this morning. I'm glad you're open-minded enough to give church a chance.

I love the church because it belongs to God. I love the church because Jesus loves the church. I love the church because, to use the apostle Paul's analogy, the church is like a body, a living organism, with Jesus Himself as the head. I will not give up on the church, in spite of all her weaknesses, shortcomings, flaws, and failures to live up to her holy calling, because Jesus has not given up on the church. Nor will He ever.

One reason I love the church is that it was in church that I first heard, understood, and believed the gospel as a boy. It was in church – a small, country church in the village of Rockland, Pennsylvania, three miles from the family homestead at Smith's Corners – that I was introduced to Jesus, my Savior and Lord. It was largely through the fellowship and influence of God's people in that church that I was encouraged to live my life as a fully-devoted follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is one reason I love the church.

I love *this* church. I love *Faith Church*. This church holds a special place in my heart. I do not love it because it is a perfect church. (You can't have a perfect church when you have such an imperfect pastor.) I love Faith because this is God's church. I love Faith because, despite our imperfections as a church, Jesus loves this church. He loves every member of His body here at Faith. Including you. And me.

You and I may get discouraged about the church at times. I do. We may wonder if our labors in the Lord will have any effect in the end, or if they are all in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58). Not Jesus. He knows what is going on in the church. He knows what is going on in the world. He knows what He is doing. He knows our labors, our service, our witness, and our acts of love and compassion done in His name, are not in vain. He knows. He sees what we cannot see. His sovereign plans and purposes for His church – including *our* church – *will* be carried out, and not even all the forces of hell put together will prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).

Let's not give up on the church, dear friends. It was God's idea. It belongs to God. *We* belong to God. It is God who brought us together in His church. It is God who brought us together in this fellowship of believers where Jesus is Lord and everybody counts. It is God who established this church to be a place of grace in a world of ungrace. It is God who brought us together in the fellowship of Faith to be an intergenerational family to and for one another. It is God who placed His church here in Kingstowne. It is God who has called us to

be witnesses and ambassadors of His grace in this mission field. It is God who has blessed us with His own presence and equipped us with His own power through the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is with us and at work in us right now.

Though the church often appears to be weak, even impotent, compared to earthly powers, we can be assured that *God is able, more than able*, to fully accomplish all that He desires to accomplish in and through His people (Ephesians 3:20). Though our sanctification is far from complete, we can be confident of this, that God, who began a good and gracious work in us, *will* bring it to completion on the day when Christ returns (Philippians 1:6).

Now, in recent weeks we have been considering the experience and characteristics of the church in Jerusalem in Acts 2:41-47, following the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Last Sunday we took note of these two distinguishing characteristics of a healthy, thriving church found in verse 42: first, that the believers in the church at Jerusalem “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching ...”; and, second, that they devoted themselves “to the fellowship ...”

The word “devoted,” we said, refers to a single-minded, unwavering, passionate commitment. There was nothing casual about their belief in Jesus or their involvement in the church. They were committed. All in. Sold out. They were “devoted to the apostles’ teaching,” which is to say, they were eager to grow in their knowledge and understanding of the gospel and the Holy Scriptures. They were committed to the truth and authority of God’s Word. They wanted to know it. They wanted to understand it. They wanted to obey it. In gratitude for the grace they had received, they wanted to live life in accordance with God’s Word. Which should be the desire of our hearts, too.

They were “devoted” also “to the fellowship.” Not only were they committed to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, they were committed to one another in the *koinonia*, the shared life, of Christ’s followers. Which is to say, they were devoted to one another in Christian love. They opened their hearts and their homes to one another. They cared for each other. They shared with each other. Not because they had to. Not because communal sharing was a requirement of being a follower of Jesus. It was not. Their sharing with one another was totally voluntary. One of the ways they expressed their love in the fellowship was through their generosity to one another. It was, without a doubt, a beautiful thing to behold. It is still a beautiful thing.

The passage we read today from Romans 12 is a beautiful description of the kind of relationships God desires us to have with one another in the fellowship of the church. Chuck Swindoll gives these verses the heading *Christianity 101*, suggesting that this is a primer on how to live life as a Christian. Maybe we could call it *Koinonia 101* or *Christian Fellowship 101*, because here Paul, in a series of bullet-like statements, gives us what John Stott calls “a comprehensive picture of Christian love.”

To go back to Chuck Swindoll for a moment, he says that while 1 Corinthians 13 is the most beautiful and most eloquent treatise on love in the Bible, this passage in Romans 12 is the most succinct. It gives us a high-definition picture of how to live in *koinonia* with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, as fellow followers and servants of King Jesus.

Paul gets right to the heart of it in verse 9: “Love,” he says, “must be sincere” (NIV). The word Paul uses is the Greek *anupokritos*, which is literally “un-hypocritical” or “without hypocrisy.” The apostle is saying: Your love in the fellowship has got to be the real thing. It has to be genuine. Forget trying to fake it. Forget trying to fool people.

I recently came across a story about a bus driver in Egypt. Periodic drug testing was a condition of his employment. He thought he had come up with a foolproof way to avoid detection and beat the system by using his wife’s sample. Officials knew something was awry when the sample indicated a pregnancy. They asked the man to verify that it was his own sample. He said it was. To which they replied, “Congratulations, you’re pregnant.” Thus confronted with his attempt to deceive, the bus driver admitted it was his wife’s sample. He did not know, until then, that she was pregnant.

Love in the family of believers, in the fellowship of Christ’s followers, must be sincere. Genuine. Un-hypocritical.

In addition, our love for one another is to be discerning. That is, we must distinguish between good and evil. We are to “hate what is evil (and) cling to what is good” (12:9b). *The Message* says: “Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good.” Love in the fellowship of believers does not mean that anything goes. It does not permit us to close our eyes to sin. Nor does it allow us to call what is evil “good” or good “evil” (Isaiah 5:20).

To be “devoted in the fellowship” also means, as Paul continues in verse 10, to “love one another with brotherly affection” (ESV) and to “honor one another above (our)selves” (NIV). Both mutual affection and mutual honor or respect are essential to the health of the fellowship. They are essential to the health of *our* fellowship.

Next, Paul says, we are to be careful not to let the fire of our enthusiasm for God or our love for one another grow cold. The ESV translation of verse 11 says: “Do not be slothful in zeal.” Don’t allow yourself to become lazy or lethargic with respect to God or the fellowship of His people. Instead, “be fervent in spirit (and) serve the Lord” in all things at all times.

Another essential ingredient of *koinonia* is patience. Look at verse 12: “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction (or tribulation), faithful (or constant) in prayer.” Patient with our circumstances, patient with ourselves, and patient with one another as we look to God and trust Him with a joyful, confident hope.

Verse 13 is a call to share generously with one another, which is what the church in Jerusalem did in its devotion to the shared life of *koinonia*. The verb “to share” is *koinoneo*. The word for “generous” is *koinonokos*. To share in the needs and sufferings of one another, or to share what we have with our needy brothers and sisters, lies at the heart of true biblical fellowship. And it is a most beautiful thing.

After generosity, in Paul’s list, comes hospitality (13b), then the grace to bless those who treat us badly (14), and sympathy (15), which involves a willingness to enter into the experiences and emotions of one another. Finally, in verse 16, Paul concludes this brief treatise on love in

the fellowship with a call to harmony and humility. We are to do everything in our power to “get along with each other” (MSG). And we are to make sure we don’t act like stuck-up snobs, thinking that we are better than other members of the fellowship, or that we know better than everybody else. Pride is every bit as deadly to love as hypocrisy.

Koinonia 101. These are the basics, the fundamentals, the essentials of the shared life to which God calls us in the fellowship of His church. Our love for one another – our practical application of these instructions – is an expression of our love and gratitude and devotion to God. It is at the heart of what it means to be the church. It is one of the reasons I love the church and am committed to it.

As Jesus said, after washing His disciples’ feet in the upper room as a model of love for them to follow: “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:17).

Lord, let it be so in us, through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of Your name. Amen.