

November 19, 2023
Falling in Love Again ... with God's Church
1 Corinthians 13

Last week I shared how God called me to faith in Him. Among some of things I learned – albeit rather reluctantly, were:

God loves us. He created each of us good – very good – with value and dignity. He created us for fellowship with Himself, other people, and all His good creation.

Created as we are, in the image of God, **we love our neighbours as ourselves.** We value and care for ALL people as equally created in the image of God.

We also care for all of God's creation – certainly other people, but the rest of His good creation, too (Genesis 2:15).

Our focus, our key, our centre is Jesus. *"God loved the world so much He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16). *"I have come that you may have life and have it to the full"* (John 10:10). Yes, it's about the future. But it's also about an open, free, personal relationship with God now.

That's good. But last week's sermon wouldn't be complete without this week's sermon. **God also called me to His church, His people, His community.**

If God's call to believe in Him was annoying, His call to His church was more so. After all God is perfect. He is good. He is perfect love. I can love that sort of God. But His church is not perfect. It's not all good. It's not all love. Church can be more difficult to love. Many people find themselves in that space. They believe in Jesus. They love God. But church?

Today I want to share how I have come to LOVE God's church, despite the challenges.

1. What is God's Church?

There are many metaphors/descriptions/images of God's church. I want to mention three:

- a. **God's Church is the people of Christ.** Thomas Groome writes, *"The church is to be a community of those who confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour and who manifest the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus, by proclaiming in word, celebrating in worship, and living in deed the Kingdom already and the Kingdom yet to come."* We are the people who believe in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. We are a family, united by blood, the blood of Jesus. We're a group of people who would never come together apart from that common bond.

We try to live it out.

What does this mean for us? As we come together as the people of Jesus, we worship Jesus. We also try to live by the principles of Jesus, loving our world as unconditionally, graciously, and generously as Jesus did.

- b. ***God's church is the body of Christ.*** Paul describes God's church in terms of a body (1 Corinthians 12). The head of the body is Jesus. He's the one who sets the agenda, makes the decisions, provides the leadership.

All of us – each one of us – is then an essential part of the body. Every muscle, joint, ear, finger, tendon, toe, and organ is required to make the body function well.

What does this mean for us? The only way God's church "works" is when we ALL use our skills, gifts, talents, resources, experiences, and abilities.

- c. ***The church is "interesting."*** When you read the New Testament, especially the letters, you discover people in the church had lots of "issues." When Paul has to say things like, *"now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, sexual immorality, and filthy language"* the implication is people had issues with these sorts of things. The good news is absolutely everyone was welcome to come to the church. This is where you met Jesus. The good news also is that God, through His Spirit, changes people in and through the church. The challenging news? We're all "works in progress." None of us is ever "there" yet.

What does this mean for us? God loves us and everyone else. God forgives us and everyone else. God calls us to be more and more like Jesus, but we're all in process.

2. Why do I need THE church?

That's all very interesting, but ... I have gone through stages when I've genuinely struggled to love the people of Christ, the body of Christ. But this IS God's church.

Yes, we are very imperfect. After all, the church is people, real people. A pundit once quipped, *"If you find the perfect church, don't join it. It won't be perfect anymore."*

God calls me to LOVE His church, warts and all ...

- a. ***God's church is where I meet Jesus.*** Yes, of course, I can meet with Jesus on my own, too. I can meet with Him at home. In the mountains. In the coffee shop. But in a special way, like no other, I meet Jesus when I'm together with His people. Here, together, we worship Him, celebrate Him, meet with Him, and learn from Him. It's not about me. It's about Jesus. Troy recently came across this quote, *"If you showed up today seeking God, you won't be disappointed. But if you showed up seeking entertainment, inspiration, controversy, we will do our best, but good luck."*

- b. ***God's church is where I can grow in my faith.*** Yes, of course, I can read the Bible on my own, and pray on my own or with a small group. But when I'm part of God's church, I can do that so much better. Here, in community with God's people, I can learn from others. And I can encourage others as well.
- c. ***God's church is where I can grow in character.*** Yes, God's people can be ... challenging. Paul writes, "*We can rejoice when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character.*" (Romans 5:3-4). Sometimes it's in dealing with the "difficult" people at church that we grow the most in character.
- d. ***God's church is where I can use my gifts.*** Yes, I can – and need to – serve God in the community. But I can put my gifts, talents, skills, and abilities into practice, first, in the church. Here, in God's church, we can contribute to helping the Kingdom of God come a little bit one earth as it is in Heaven.

3. What do I do with the mess?

In the church where I started, we called a new pastor. He was ... Well, let's just say I started visiting other churches. No other place seemed to "fit." God's Spirit clearly told me He had called me to that original church. I was part of that group of people, that body. I needed to stop complaining and seeing the problems, and start being part of the solution.

- a. ***I can change MY attitude.*** This was the church God had called me to. These were "my" people. If I was struggling, I needed to take responsibility for that. Going back to the marriage metaphor, one of the things I tell couples is that if you think you're going change your partner, that isn't going to happen. The only person you can change is yourself. The same is true in church. You can't change other people. You can change yourself. You can change your attitude.

I prayed about my own attitude. I tried to stop complaining. I also prayed for the church. I got to know the pastors. I got to understand their heart.

- b. ***I can get involved.*** There were many things I couldn't change. There were other places where, if I got involved, I could make a difference. One of the things that was lacking was any kind of a young adult group. So we started floor hockey. And a Bible Study. We started Sunday afternoon soccer. And some Saturday hikes.
- c. ***I can read 1 Corinthians 13 in a new way.*** 1 Corinthians 13 – the "love" chapter – is (surprise) between 1 Corinthians 12 – all about the church as a body and using our spiritual gifts and 1 Corinthians 14 – all about the church as the people of God using our gifts. So when we read 1 Corinthians 13, we can surmise it's not really about romantic love. It works well for that, of course. But it's really about relationships in God's church. It's about how we – you and I together – treat one another. When I read it in that context, my perspective on how I related to people began to change.

I found myself loving my church again. The pastor was still there. His sermons were still ... his sermons. The worship was still ... challenging. But God had changed me. And as He changed me and several of the others in the young adult group, and youth group, He changed the church. He even, I think changed the pastor a little bit.

Love is patient.
Love is kind.
Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude.
Love does not demand its own way.
Love is not irritable.
Love keeps no record of being wronged.
Love does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out.
Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful.
Love endures through every circumstance.

First and foremost, this describes God's love for us.

But it also describes the love we, in God's church, ought to have for one another. Try substituting your own name in there:

_____ is patient.
_____ is kind.
_____ is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude.
_____ does not demand its own way.
_____ is not irritable.
_____ keeps no record of being wronged.
_____ does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out.
_____ never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful.
_____ endures through every circumstance.

How can we fall in love with church again?

- **Maybe it involves praying about your own attitude.** Praying for the church. Praying for us pastors. If you're struggling to love the people of God, pray about that.
- **Maybe it means getting involved.** If we're struggling to feel connected with the body of Christ, pray through how you can be the heart/lung/knee/ear/toe/kidney God has called you to be.
- **Maybe it means praying through what love – real love – looks like.** If you're struggling to love the bride of Christ, the only one you can change is yourself. Which one of those characteristics do you struggle with most? What can you do about it?

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