

Let me begin this morning with two stories. Some of you may be familiar with best-selling Christian author, Philip Yancey (**picture**). Though he's ten years older than I am, in our childhood we both attended the same church in Atlanta but I had never met him. His family had moved on before my family began attending that church. A mutual friend connected us a few years ago and we met for breakfast in the Chicago suburbs. Philip was working on a book about racism in the Church.

In the 1960's this church had an annual missions budget of something like \$300,000.00. But it was the South during the Civil Rights Movement. The church had a Christian school, one of the first in the nation. I still remember a special business meeting and the leadership communicated with the church that they were going to allow black students in their all-white school, just one, a little black girl – a kindergartner.

But Philip told me a story I'd never been told here before. It horrified me. Tony Evans (**picture**) was attending a black Christian college in Atlanta, Carver. The President of Carver, Dr. W.D. Hungerpiller, was a member of our church. Tony Evans applied for membership at our church and they turned him down because he was black. *He wasn't our kind of people.*

Second story. My older brother, Mark, was very successful in clothing manufacturing. At one time he was Vice President of Calvin Klein and went on to launch his own clothing company. Mark had gone through a divorce and was getting remarried. He was converting to Catholicism and his first marriage had been annulled, though they'd been married probably 20 years.

To seek to build a gospel bridge with my brother, Jane and I drove to New Jersey, just outside New York City for the wedding. My brother dropped more money for the reception than I made that year. Personally, I've never seen so many limousines at one event. At the reception they seated us with what was considered the religious table.

I'll never forget the conversation. Someone finally asked us when our flight was leaving. You could have heard a pin drop when I shared that we drove. "You drove!" I wanted to say, "Yeah, it's called a car...has a steering wheel and two pedals on the floor." But I didn't. It was very obvious though...*Jane and I weren't their kind of people.*

If you follow the Calendar of the Church Year, then you know today is Pentecost Sunday. Last Sunday James preached about Pentecost and the vital importance of fellowship in the local church. If you're new to Grace, you may not know it's rare for us to break from a sermon series.

Currently, we're in a series on 1 Samuel. We believe though that there is such a great need in our Grace Church Family that we're breaking from that series for a family chat. We believe that we need to grow in this area of fellowship. If you're visiting, this is our DNA. At Grace we want to be committed to fellowship. Turn in your Bible to Acts 6:1-7 (p. 914).

This morning we want segue from James's sermon last Sunday and talk about the **Peril after Pentecost**. Pentecost took place 50 days after Jesus' resurrection. We're not totally sure of the timeline for Acts 6. It probably was about a year and half later. God was doing some phenomenal things. The church was on fire. Thousands were getting saved and committing their lives to Christ. Though they were being persecuted, they were staying faithful. But if Satan can't destroy us with heat from the outside, he'll try to create division on the inside. Satan is the great divider. He loves division.

What did he do in Genesis 3? He divided Adam and Eve from God and from each other. It's why you fight with your mate or your children. It's why Christians stop speaking to each other. It's why churches split. Satan loves division.

But God loves unity. He wants us to be like Him and the Godhead, what we know as the Trinity or Tri-unity. Remember Jesus said, "*I and My Father are one.*" In the Godhead there is perfect fellowship and that's what Jesus wants us to have.

Fellowship is more than a potluck after church. *Fellowship is when followers of Jesus gather together in His name and experience something called koinonia which means "to share a common cause."* According to the Bible, you can't be a "Lone Ranger Believer." Through Jesus you're already linked with the other members of His body. For someone to try to live a solo Christian life would be as absurd as my hand leaving my body and trying to function by itself.

Sadly, many Christians attempt to have a spiritual existence separated from the Body of Christ. Jesus' plan for this age is the local church. Read the New Testament for yourself. Jesus loves the church. He longs for the church to have unity. But Satan loves dis-unity. This morning we're going to work through some things that often keep us from having fellowship and how we can grow in fellowship. If you're taking notes...

**1. Who are your "they're not our kind of people"?** Even spiritual people have problems. There was a sense of unity and community in this early church. They had the best leaders imaginable in the twelve apostles. They were growing in a

way that can only be attributed to the power of the Holy Spirit. Yet they had this problem of division that we find in Acts 6.

Whenever there is growth through new conversions, whenever God is working, you'll have problems. Even mature believers are not exempt from self-centeredness, struggles and sin. Every church, especially growing churches, will have problems.

This problem probably wasn't deliberate. The Hellenistic Jews felt like their widows were being slighted, while the Hebrew widows were getting more than their fair share in the daily distribution of food. The Hellenistic Jews mostly came from outside of Palestine, spoke Greek, and were largely influenced by the Greek culture. The Hebrews were Jews who spoke Aramaic and grew up in a Jewish culture, mostly in Palestine.

Both of these groups in the Jerusalem church had come to faith in Jesus as God's Messiah. They'd all been immersed after salvation and were members of this infant church. But getting saved did not erase all of these background factors. It's naïve to think, "Since we're all born again, we won't experience any conflicts." Salvation doesn't eradicate varied cultural assumptions and attitudes. There was division because these Greek speaking Jews weren't "*they're kind of people.*"

The Hellenistic Jews had a complaint. The Greek word means a "*murmuring.*" Probably they grumbled amongst themselves and word spread until the apostles heard about it.

Do you remember high school and the cliques? There were the jocks, the brains, the cool crowd, the rich kids, the poor kids, and druggies. People don't tend to change much after high school. Attend a high school football game and you'll see adults in those same groups. But the local church is to be different. Our church is to be different. We must be or what do we have to offer a lost world? God's plan is for us to live out Galatians 3:28: "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*"

I've been in the ministry nearly 40 years. For a church to be healthy, for a church to be Christ-pleasing, we must be clique fighters. We can't have "*those aren't my kind of people.*" I love you. I've invested most of my life here but we have some of this spiritual disease here.

***There are cliques of age.*** It's normal to want to be around those who are in your age group, yet we lose so much when segregate by age. Young believers need older believers; older believers need younger ones. Those with kids needs those without them. Empty nesters need full house people. *How many Christian friends do you have that are from another generation?*

***There are cliques of appearance.*** The more attractive hang with the more attractive. The better dressed hang with the better dressed. Have you ever noticed that those with perfect smiles don't usually hang with those with crooked or missing teeth? What about those with lots of tattoos or piercings or nose rings? Every teenager is over sensitized to weight issues. But it's not just teens. There's body shaming with adults too. *How many Christian friends do you have that don't fit your standard of appearance?*

***There are cliques of affiliation.*** One of my favorite presidential anecdotes was when President Reagan (**picture**) was shot. The chief of thoracic surgery, Dr. Benjamin Aaron, decided to perform a thoracotomy because the bleeding wouldn't stop. In the operating room, Reagan removed his oxygen mask to joke, "*I hope you are all Republicans.*" The doctors and nurses laughed, and Dr. Giordano, who was heading up the surgical team and who was also a liberal Democrat replied, "*Today, Mr. President, we are all Republicans.*" Beloved, when you drive in this parking lot, when you enter these doors, we are all Christians.

Please don't have political debates here. When the recall was happening for Scott Walker some of our folk got into some very heated debates. And I had to do something very difficult. I had to ask them to please stop.

A few years ago we had a couple storm out because, as we do every week, we prayed for an elected official. They were incensed that we dared to pray for Nancy Pelosi. Nancy Pelosi needs Jesus just like everyone else.

At Grace we're not concerned about who you vote for. Our driving passion is that we care about where you're going to spend eternity. We dare not alienate someone from the gospel over politics. As Tony Evans (**picture**) said, "*Jesus isn't coming back on the back of a donkey or an elephant.*" Salvation comes through the Lamb, not the donkey or elephant.

I love you. I pray regularly for every one of you. Some, it seems, are more concerned on what's going on in D.C. or Madison, than what's going on in someone's soul. They're more concerned with how someone votes than whether they know Jesus...and it's a sin. It's not our mission. *How many Christian friends do you have that have a different political affiliation?*

***There are cliques of marital or family status.*** The number of married adults fell from 67% to 53% between 1990 and 2019 and the share of adults who have never been married jumped from 17% to 33% during that same time. We don't want a single person – whether never married, divorced or who has lost a mate – to feel like a fifth wheel at Grace. Please don't let someone sit by themselves at church. This is a church family, so please go out of your way to include them.

Then, we have many who attend each week who come alone because their spouse doesn't attend with them. We're their family. *How many Christian friends do you have who have with a different marital status than you?*

**There are cliques of economic levels.** James 2 warns us about the sin of economic bigotry. *"My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, 'You sit here in a good place,' while you say to the poor man, 'You stand over there,' or, 'Sit down at my feet,' have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which He has promised to those who love Him?"* (James 2:1-5).

There are over 2000 verses in the Bible dealing with issues of poverty and wealth. Throughout Scripture we see very clearly that God has a special heart for the poor and disenfranchised. It's a concern He expects His people to share. But it's easier to give money to help the financially limited than it is to be their friend. Those who are economically disadvantaged need our physical *presence* more than our financial *presents*. *How many Christian friends do you have who have who are economically challenged?*

**2. Why is fellowship so important?** It's this simple – loving and caring for others shows that you really know Jesus. In John 13:34-35, Jesus said, *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

We demonstrate that we truly know Jesus when we love each other. These verses are from the words Jesus spoke in the Upper Room the night before His crucifixion. They're a command not a suggestion. Jesus isn't saying, "It'd be nice if you could love one another" or "try to love each other." No, Jesus uses the imperative voice to issue a command. With the same force and authority that God said, "You shall not kill or steal," He's saying here, "You must love each other as I have loved you."

It's much easier to see that this was a commandment when we remember the context in which it was issued. Jesus uttered these words on the night of His betrayal and arrest. He knew the Cross was only hours away. It was no time to mince words. It was a time for final, no-nonsense orders! Loving one another is a requirement for all disciples of Jesus. It's not optional.

*"By this all people will know that you are my disciples..."* Jesus said this is because God is the source of all genuine love. 1 John 4:7-8 says, *"...love comes from God...for...God IS love."* This text doesn't say, "God is loving," as if it were one of many of the divine attributes of God like His patience, His power, or His wisdom. No, it states, "GOD IS LOVE." In other words, the very essence of God's being is love. Love pervades and influences all of His attributes and activities. Since God IS the source of all love, then it follows that the best evidence someone truly knows God is whether or not he or she loves in a godly way.

1 John 4:7-8 says, *"Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God."* In other words, a stranger to love is a stranger to God. Love is the proof of a regenerate heart. Only true Christians are capable of Christlike love. It makes them look like God. Jesus has called us to love one another in the same way He loves us.

During World War II a man died in combat in France and his two friends desperately wanted to give him a decent burial. They found a cemetery in a nearby village. When the two friends found the priest in charge of the burial grounds, they asked if they could bury their friend in the cemetery. But when the priest learned the dead soldier wasn't a Catholic, he said he couldn't be buried in the cemetery. But he told them they could bury their comrade just outside the fence, so that's what they did.

The next day, they returned to visit their friend's grave, but couldn't find it. They went to see to the priest and they asked him what had happened to the grave. The priest told them that during the night he was unable to sleep, so he got up and moved the fence to include the dead soldier.

That's what love does. Love doesn't shut people out, it circles them in. It's what Jesus did for us and that's what we're to do for each other.

American poet Edwin Markham (**picture**) wrote some eighty poems and was still writing them when he was 80. I love one line from his poetry: *"He drew a circle that shut me out; Heretic, rebel—a thing to flout; But love and I had a wit to win; We drew a circle that took him in."*

**3. What keeps us from fellowship?** There are many barriers to fellowship in the church, fellowship in our church. Pride, selfishness, technology, fear. But I believe the number one reason that we don't build relationships with other believers is the idolatry of busyness.

Best-selling author, Brené Brown (**picture**), was interviewed by *The Washington Post*. The title of the article was, “*Exhaustion Is Not a Status Symbol.*” Exhaustion becomes a status symbol when we equate being busy with being productive and being productive with being significant. Sure, we pretend to hate being busy, and perhaps we genuinely dislike all the demands on our schedule. Whatever the reason, we are busy, too busy. And if we’re not busy, something feels wrong.

Consequently, we feel the pressure to stay busy. In doing so, we accept the judgment that our worth comes from what we do. Finding our worth and value outside of God is idolatry. Busyness isn’t a virtue; it’s often a vice. God has told us that, “*It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for He gives to His beloved sleep*” (Psalm 127:2). God isn’t impressed by busyness; He’s moved by love.

When we remember He loves us and, at the end of all our work, we completely depend on Him for everything, we can rest well. It’s the god of this world who is the author of a system where busyness is a status symbol.

To God, it’s just sad. God wants us to know that we’re loved. He wants us to love Him and wants us to love our brothers and sisters in Christ. You can’t do that if you’re so busy. Luke 10:38-42 is a powerful reminder. “*Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to His teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to Him and said, ‘Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.’*”

***Busyness creates an inner turmoil because our work, even our work for that which is good, cannot satisfy us.*** It’s why Jesus says, “*You are worried and upset about many things, but one thing is necessary.*” When we have too many competing and non-negotiable goals that we must meet to be happy, we ensure our misery and the misery of those around us.

***Busyness creates an irritability with and sense of moral superiority over others.*** Notice how Martha projects her expectations on her sister and assumes that she (Martha) is in “the right” and that the most important person in the room would agree with her. In fact, Martha’s obsession with busyness and productivity made her believe she was morally superior even to Jesus. When we grow bitter towards others for not meeting our expectations, we grow bitter towards Jesus for not correcting them.

Be honest. If we have a church fellowship activity, how many times do we rationalize – “Don’t they know I’m busy”? Someone invites you over and you resent it because, “You’re busy.” What do you think God values? Getting things done on our “To Do” list or people? We know the answer. We will never be what Jesus wants us to be as long as we put getting things done before being with and caring for people.

**4. What does God do when we grow in fellowship?** Look back to Acts 6:7, “*And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.*” Fellowship, Christian community is simply sharing a common life in Christ. It moves us beyond the self-interested isolation of private lives and beyond the superficial social contacts that pass for “*fellowship.*” The biblical ideal of community challenges us to commit ourselves to life together as the people of God.

Spiritual maturity takes time. What we often don’t realize is that God also uses our sisters and brothers in Christ to help us grow. It’s a process revealed in the “*each other*” language of the New Testament: Love each other, forgive each other, regard others more highly than yourselves. Teach and correct each other, encourage each other, pray for each other and bear each other’s burdens. Be friends with one another, kind, compassionate, and generous in hospitality. Serve one another and submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. This list just scratches the surface. It highlights that that you and I need the community of faith to grow up in Christ.

The value of Christian community reaches even further than bringing the Body of Christ to strength and maturity. Such communities, by their character and action, witness to the power and presence of God to a lost world. They are models of what God wants for all of humanity.

As Jesus’ disciples, we’re to be the light of the world, too often our beacon of witness falls short in candlepower, especially when Christians fail to have community. In clusters of Christians, unbelievers should be able to see what they hope for but hardly expect: people loving and serving rather than using each other. People of varied social statuses and professions honoring each other rather than putting each other down. They see love and acceptance, compassion and kindness, commodities that are in short supply in any age. And where they see this, the stark contrast of these communities compared with the world around them is a powerful witness.

**Conclusion:** Churches are hurting; Christians are hurting, many of you are hurting because we have failed to understand how critical community and relationships are. Our church is going to limp until we're committed to God's plan of healthy community. So let me give you some practical applications of this for our church.

**1. Take a Friendship Inventory of Your Life.** Do you have close friends? Are you consistently reaching out beyond your circle of comfort? Name your friends. Write them down. Take an inventory to see where you stand.

**2. Make church family events a top priority.** This summer we've put together several fellowship opportunities. Yesterday there was a men's event. Next Saturday there's a women's picnic. We have an upcoming work day (when you work together, you get to know each other). We have a plan for what we're calling Dinner for 8. Anyone can do it. We are putting the cookies on the bottom shelf to make this so easy. And men, please take the lead in reaching out. Often husbands hold back their wives.

**3. This fall get involved in a small group.** It's the testimony of many that they first learned to develop close friendships by sharing together in a small group setting.

**4. Open your home to others or invite others out.** Knock a hole in your cocoon. Start burrowing out instead of burrowing in. There's an intimacy in joining together for a meal that makes it easy to develop friendships. It can be McDonald's or even Flippy's. It's not the food, it's the fellowship that's important! It can be a bowl of soup or a cup of coffee – just do it!

**5. Finally, please pray that God will help us to become a church of people who deeply love and care for one another.** May it be said of us, as it was said of the first Christians, "*Behold, how they love one another.*"

May the lost world around us see our love and fellowship, and be drawn to the love and light of Christ.