

Why I love the church: we're a caring family

Message for Sunday, January 20, 2019
by Bruce Fraser

Children's Message:

John 13:34-35, Good News Bible:

“And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.”

[Note to Reader: if you're familiar with *The Velveteen Rabbit*, you'll know what this is about.]

I've got two of my friends here (stuffed animals). Do you have a teddy bear or something like that at home? *Let them talk about their favourite animal. Their affection for it is the whole point here, so they might tell the whole message!*

Here's one of them, a dog. Look at it. What do you see that gives you an idea it's been around for a long time? *It's shabby; the guts have all fallen out.*

Here's the other one, a koala bear, which is much newer. How can you tell? *It's still in new condition.*

Question: Which one do you think was loved the most? *Listen for their answers, and reasons.*

This dog went everywhere. It went to the playground and got dirty. It went to the table for meals. It went to bed. It even went to the bathtub a few times. If you have a favourite toy like this dog, you don't think of it as a toy at all. It's a real friend, isn't it?

Jesus said that's how we treat other people: we love them. We treat them special, so they know they are special.

Message: Why I love the church: we're a caring family

I'm starting a new series of messages today. As you can tell from the title, the theme is going to be about the church. As the song says,

The church is not a building,
The church is not a steeple,
The church is not a resting place,
The church is a people!

The church is the people. We come together in response to the invitation by Jesus to follow him. The Bible actually says we are the body of Christ! [see, for example, Ephesians 4:12].

Again, as you can see from the title, I'm focussing on what's good about being part of the church, why I love the church. Jesus has given us a wonderful gift, the joy of being part of his body, part of his mission, part of his life.

But the truth is, it's not all good. There are always things which we do poorly or not at all. We shouldn't be surprised at that; we are only human, after all. But neither should we be complacent. Jesus calls us to wholeheartedly love God and love other people. That's our goal.

1) The joy of church as a caring family

When Jane and I arrived here almost six years ago, we were strangers in this community. I had briefly met a few of you earlier in the year, when I came for an interview, but that hardly qualifies as “knowing” one another. Jane had not even had that opportunity; she came here cold.

But the welcome we received was warm! When our rented truck pulled up to our new house, a swarm of people from the church descended on it. You had the entire truck unloaded, and our new home furnished, all within two hours! From the very beginning, we experienced you as family. It felt good to belong to the family. It still feels good.

I hear similar stories from others, often from people who have had a crisis. They talk glowingly of phone calls, meals dropped off, friendly visits, help with the chores, looking after children, and so on. It feels good to be part of a church where people care for one another.

Not everyone has this experience, though. I have also met people who tell about the phone and the doorbell being silent when they needed a touch. I have no idea why some people get remembered, and others get forgotten.

There are still others whose memory of church is neither cold nor warm; they remember a very hot place, where tempers flared and bitter words were exchanged. Feelings weren't just hurt—they were trampled on. Of course, that's how some families

are, too—but they aren't happy, thriving families. And neither are those churches.

My purpose today is to encourage our church here to continue as a caring family. We'll look first in the Scriptures to see the background for this. Then I'll offer a number of suggestions—not so much as a list of things to do; but more as a way of getting us thinking of what we could do in our situation.

2) The background for church as a caring family

It is no accident that the church is a caring family. God planned it that way! Adam and Eve were created a family. God promised Abraham and Sarah that through their family all the people of the earth would be blessed [Genesis 12:3]. Jesus himself was born into a family, enjoying a mother, father, brothers and sisters [see Matthew 13:55-56].

One day Jesus taught a standing-room-only crowd. His earthly family arrived, but they couldn't even get close to the house, much less get inside to see him. They sent a message through the crowd that they wanted to see Jesus. This is how Jesus responded:

Mark 3:33-35, New International Version:
 “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked.
 Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers!
 Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.”

But it was on the cross itself that family was confirmed as more than those we are related to. Jesus had brothers, but they did not yet believe in him as they later would. Mary apparently was a widow by this time (we never hear about Joseph after Jesus as a boy), but Jesus' brothers had left her to endure her son's death alone. They could not be depended on for continued support.

John 19:26-27, New International Version:
 When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Dear woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

Faith and love, rather than genes and chromosomes, would define *family of God* for Christ's followers.

From the beginning, churches were cast in the role of caring families. People in the early church had to care for one another because of the immense persecution suffered under a Jewish leader named Saul of Tarsus. Then one day, the resurrected Jesus appeared to Saul. Blinded by the experience, Saul spent three days repenting, praying, and waiting for the teacher whom Jesus said would come and heal him. Imagine the emotion of the moment when Ananias finally arrived.

Just picture Ananias giving this enemy of the church a hug, and saying,

Acts 9:17, New Living Translation:
 “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you may get your sight back and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

“*Brother Saul!*”! Amazing! A few days earlier Saul had viewed the Church as a religious cult to be hated and destroyed. Now he found it was his new family!

3) The prescription for church as a caring family

The last night that Jesus had with the disciples, before he was killed, he gave them a living parable: he took the role of a servant, by washing their feet. Then he told them what it all meant:

John 13:34-35, Today's English Version:
 “A new commandment I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. If you have love for one another, then all will know that you are my disciples.”

Jesus said that one thing guaranteed to have an impact on people is that the church is a place of love. People in the world are hungry for genuine love, meaningful relationships. The key here is on the word *genuine*: not like “friends” on Facebook, but genuine love.

4) The plan for church as a caring family

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, Paul writes out the action plan for how churches are to act as caring families:

Philippians 2:1-4, New Living Translation:
 Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and sympathetic?

Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one heart and purpose.

Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing."

That one phrase sums up everything I'm trying to say today, so I'll say it again:

"...loving one another, and working together with one heart and purpose."

5) The practice of church being a caring family

Now for some specific ways of caring for each other.

a) A family cares by treating people as important

If we could put a stethoscope to the spirits of people around us, we would hear many sounds of discouragement. Company restructuring, marriage failures, child abuse and a host of other problems cause many people to doubt that they are creatures of priceless worth, created in the image of God. The church has the job and the joy of lifting people up. Caring for someone tells them that they are valuable.

Ron is a teacher who became president of a Christian college. He was raised by a single mom, who did her best. They went to church, but it meant nothing to Ron, until he was in grade five. That year his Sunday School teacher called him one Friday evening: "Ron, I'm going fishing tomorrow and I've got an extra rod. If fishing interests you, I'd love to have you come along." Ron felt like a real person, important enough to be chosen over all the adult men his teacher might have invited instead.

Out on the lake, Ron's new hero lit up a cigarette, while patiently instructing him in the basics of fishing. After they had caught a few fish, the teacher told Ron about his life, especially what had happened since he had met Jesus Christ. Ron learned how important Jesus was to his teacher. That teacher was really fishing for a boy that morning, for that was the day that Ron asked Jesus

Christ to be his Saviour. He thus began his own lifetime adventure with the Lord.

When Ron tells the story, he smiles as he mentions that if the elders of his church had known that his teacher smoked, they would have disqualified him from leading a class. But this man was the only person in the church who cared enough to invest time in Ron and speak to him about his relationship with Jesus Christ. It was through this experience that Ron grew from thinking that he was "not much worth to anyone" to "a person of great value with a purpose and a future."

When you care for someone, you are telling that person, "You are special, you are valuable."

b) A family cares in the big moments

Jesus' first miracle was at a wedding, when he changed the water into wine [John 2:1-11]. We don't know who the couple were, but judging by the way that Jesus' mother felt responsible for the refreshments, we may guess they were family.

Births, weddings, illnesses and graduations are some of the bigger events in our lives. When the church is there to celebrate and mourn with people, we are family.

c) A family cares in the little things

How often does this happen in your house: it's Sunday night, after a long day, and you're glad to fall into bed. Just as you're about to drift off to sleep, your spouse nudges you and asks, "I didn't put out the garbage tonight. Did you?" Now I don't think there's anything particularly masculine or feminine about garbage; it's just something that has to be done. And at that time of night, whoever gets up and does it is showing care.

It's often the little acts of kindness that make a house into home; than make a biological group into a family. "Please" and "thank-you" still work wonders. It's a mystery to me why some families show more courtesy to strangers than they do to one another.

In the church we have the power to lift someone up with the right words. A simple caring conversation can lift someone up from discouragement. We need to look for opportunities at church to build up

others, encourage them. In the world of finance, the word “appreciate” means “to increase in value.” Well, the same is true with people. When we appreciate people, we are building up their sense of worth. Little things like a phone call, having lunch together, a card in the mail show that we care.

d) A family cares by listening

Jesus was a great listener. When Jesus met a strange woman at a well, they started talking simply about having a drink of water. But Jesus quickly perceived that there were things in the woman’s life that troubled her, and he gently talked with her about them. [John 4:6-30].

Often, the greatest thing we can do with someone is to simply *listen*. We should always be listening, even before we try to help. Maybe someone to listen is all the caring that is needed. One wise person has suggested we take a tip from nature: our ears aren’t made to shut, but our mouths are.

Every Sunday here is a family reunion. It all began at the cross, where Jesus committed his grief-stricken mother to a friend in his new church. Jesus continues to put the lonely in families. Every Sunday when someone comes to visit this church, they are looking for a caring family. I want to be this to be the place where they will find it. Don’t you?

Prayer

Learn to listen with the ears of Jesus. Pray the “Listening with Jesus” prayer:

Lord Jesus,
 I long to be part of a caring church family;
 but often I’m not sensitive to what people are really saying.
 Please teach me to listen with your ears of compassion.
 I pray for _____
 [a need you’ve heard recently].
 Lord, help me respond with a heart that cares the way you do.
 Amen.

Idea: pray this prayer every day for this week. Not just once; but throughout the day, especially when you meet someone, you can just say something like, “Let me listen with your ears, Lord.”