

March 14, 2004
AM Service (3rd Sunday of Lent)
Patchogue Church of the Nazarene

God's 2nd Purpose For Your Life - Fellowship: You Were Formed For God's Family
Rom 12:4-5 NLT

4 Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, 5 so it is with Christ's body. We are all parts of his one body, and each of us has different work to do. And since we are all one body in Christ, we belong to each other, and each of us needs all the others.

During Lent we are reading together Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*. God has created us for a purpose. Two weeks ago Pastor Nick spoke on God's 1st purpose for your life – worship: You were planned for God's pleasure. Today we look at God's 2nd purpose for your life – Fellowship: You Were Formed For God's Family. Why do we need a Church Family? God designed His church specifically to help you fulfill the five purposes He has for your life. God's purposes for His Church are identical to His purposes for you: Worship; Fellowship; Discipleship; Ministry; Evangelism. Today's topic is fellowship:

Formed for God's Family

We were formed for God's family. God wants a family, and He created you to be a part of it. Because God is love, He treasures relationships. When we place our faith in Christ, God becomes our Father, we become His children, other believers become our brothers and sisters, and the church becomes our spiritual family.

Every human being was created by God, but not everyone is a child of God. The only way to get into God's family is by being born again into it. You became part of the human family by your first birth, but you become a member of God's family by your second birth. Everyone is invited to be part of God's family, but there is one condition: faith in Jesus.

Being included in God's family is the highest honor and the greatest privilege you will ever receive. Whenever you feel unimportant, unloved, or insecure, remember to whom you belong. How can you start treating other believers like members of your own family?

What Matters Most

(Love) Life is all about love. Because God is love, the most important lesson He wants you to learn on earth is how to love. When we love we are being most like God. Learning to love unselfishly is not an easy task. That's why we are given a lifetime to learn it. God wants us to love everyone, but He is particularly concerned that we learn to love others in His family. Why? Because God wants His family go be known for its love more than anything else. Jesus said our love for each other is our greatest witness to the world.

The Bible says, “Let love be your greatest aim.” (1 Cor 14:1a). Life without love is really worthless; Love will last forever; We will be evaluated on our love (In heaven God will not review how well you knew your theology or what good intentions you had, He will review how you treated other people, particularly those in need).

The best use of life is love. The best expression of love is time (When you give someone your time, you are giving them a portion of your life that you’ll never get back. That is why the greatest gift you can give someone is your time). And the best time to love is now. Why? Because you don’t know how long you will have the opportunity. One day we will stand before God, consider how you will explain those times when projects or things were more important to you than people? Who do you need to start spending more time with? What do you need to cut out of your schedule to make that possible? What sacrifices do you need to make? Honestly, are relationships your first priority?

A Place to Belong

You are called to belong, not just believe. We were created for community; none of us can fulfill God’s purposes by ourselves. Christians are meant to belong. A Christian without a church is in an unnatural state. Our relationship with Jesus Christ is personal but it is not meant to be private. The Church is a body not a building; an organism not an organization. For the organs of your body to fulfill their purpose, they must be connected to your body. The same is true for you as a part of Christ’s Body. If an organ is somehow severed from its body, it will shrivel and die. It cannot exist on its own, and neither can you. Disconnected and cut off from the lifeblood of a local body, your spiritual life will wither and eventually cease to exist. This is why the first symptom of spiritual decline is usually inconsistent attendance at worship services and other gatherings of believers. Whenever we become careless about fellowship, everything else begins to slide, too. The person who says, “I don’t need the church,” is either arrogant or ignorant. The church is so significant that Jesus died on the cross for it. “Christ loved the church and gave His life for it.” (Eph 5:25). I can’t imagine saying to Jesus, “I accept you, but I reject your body.” But we do this whenever we dismiss, demean or complain about the church. God commands us to love the church as much as Jesus does.

Experiencing Life Together

Life is meant to be shared. I need others in my life. God intends for us to experience life together. The Bible calls this shared experience fellowship. Whenever you are hurt by someone, you have a choice to make: Will you use your energy and emotion for retaliation or for resolution: You can’t do both.

Cultivating Community

Community requires commitment. Eph. 4:3 says, “You are joined together with peace through the Holy Spirit, so make every effort to continue together in this way.” It takes both God’s power and our effort to produce a loving Christian community. It takes honesty, humility, courtesy, (at times) confidentiality, and frequency. How can you help cultivate characteristics of real community in the church?

Restoring Broken Fellowship

Relationships are always worth restoring. God has given us the ministry of restoring relationships; broken fellowship is a disgraceful testimony to unbelievers. You must learn to be a peacemaker. Peacemakers are rare because peacemaking is hard work. Peacemaking is not avoiding conflict and it is also not appeasement – always giving in or acting like a doormat. To help restore relationships: *Talk to God before talking to the person*; *Always take the initiative*; *Sympathize with their feelings* (use your ears more than your mouth. Focus on their feelings, not the facts. Begin with sympathy not, solutions. Let them unload emotionally without being defensive. Patience comes from wisdom, and wisdom comes from hearing the perspective of others. People don't care what we know until they know we care); *Confess your part of the conflict* (begin with admitting your own mistakes or sin. Confession is a powerful tool for reconciliation. Don't make excuses or shift the blame; just honestly own up to any part you have played in the conflict. Accept responsibility for your mistakes and ask for forgiveness); *Attack the problem, not the person* (choose your words wisely. A soft answer is always better than a sarcastic one); *Cooperate as much as possible* (Paul said, "Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with everybody." – Rom. 12:18. Peace always has a price tag. Sometimes it costs our pride; it often costs our self-centeredness. For the sake of the fellowship, do your best to compromise, adjust to others, and show preference to what they need); And *emphasize reconciliation, not restoration* (it is unrealistic to expect everyone to agree about everything. Reconciliation focuses on the relationship, while resolution focuses on the problem. When we focus on reconciliation, the problem loses significance and often becomes irrelevant. We can reestablish a relationship even when we are unable to resolve our differences. We can disagree without being disagreeable. This doesn't mean you give up on finding a solution – but do it in a spirit of harmony).

With whom do you need to restore fellowship? Don't delay another second. Right now talk to God about that person and begin the process of reconciliation today. When you work for peace, you are doing what God would do. That's why God calls peacemakers His children. Who do you need to restore a broken relationship with today?

Protecting Your Church

It is your job to protect the unity of your church. Unity in the church is so important that the NT gives more attention to it than to either heaven or hell. Unity is the soul of fellowship. Destroy it, and you rip the heart out of Christ's Body. Jesus prayed passionately for our unity (John 17: 20-23). It was our unity that was uppermost in His mind during those agonizing hours. That shows how significant this subject is.

Nothing on earth is more valuable to God than His church. He paid the highest price for it, and He wants it protected, especially from the devastating damage that is caused by division, conflict, and disharmony. As a part of God's family it is our responsibility to protect the unity in your church.

As believers we share one Lord, one body, one purpose, one Father, one Spirit, one hope, one faith, one baptism, and one love. We share the same salvation, the same life, and the same future. These are the issues, not our personal differences, that we should

concentrate on. Focus on what matters most – learning to love each other as Christ has loved us. Conflict is usually a sign that the focus has shifted to less important issues.

Be realistic in your expectations. In the church there is a gap between the *ideal* and the *real*. Yet we must passionately love the church in spite of its imperfections. Other believers *will* disappoint you and let you down, but that's no excuse to stop fellowshiping with them. They are your family, even when they don't act like it, and you can't just walk out on them. We hurt each other, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. But instead of leaving the church, we need to stay and work it out if at all possible. Reconciliation, not running away, is the road to stronger character and deeper fellowship. The sooner we give up the illusion that the church must be perfect in order to love it, the sooner we quit pretending and start admitting we're all imperfect and need grace. This is the beginning of real community.

Choose to encourage rather than criticize. It is always easier to stand on the sidelines and take shots at those who are serving than it is to get involved and make a contribution. It's the devil's job to blame, complain, and criticize members of God's family. Anytime we do the same, we're being duped into doing Satan's work for him. Remember, other Christians, no matter how much you disagree with them, are not the real enemy. Any time we spend comparing or criticizing other believers is time that should have been spent building the unity of our fellowship.

Refuse to listen to gossip. Gossip is passing on information when you are neither part of the problem nor part of the solution. You know spreading gossip is wrong, but you should not *listen* to it, either, if you want to protect your church. When someone begins to gossip to you, have the courage to say, "Please stop. I don't need to know this. Have you talked directly to that person?" People who gossip *to* you will also gossip *about* you. They cannot be trusted.

Practice God's method for conflict resolution. Jesus gave the church a simple three-step process: "*If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him – work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you've made a friend. If he won't listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. If he still won't listen, tell the church.*" (Matt 18: 15-17a - Msg.). Private confrontation is always the first step, and you should take it as soon as possible. The next step is to take one or two witnesses to help confirm the problem and reconcile the relationship. What should you do if the person is still stuck in stubbornness? Jesus says to take it to the church. If the person still refuses to listen after that, you should treat that person like an unbeliever (Matt 18:17b).

Support your pastor and leaders. They have the impossible task of trying to make *everyone* happy, which even Jesus could not do! Your leaders will one day stand before God and give an account of how well they watched over you. But you are accountable, too. You will give an account to God of how well you followed your leaders.

I challenge you to accept your responsibility to protect and promote the unity of your church. Put your full effort into it, and God will be pleased. It will not always be easy. What are you personally doing to protect unity in your church family right now?

How can you start treating other believers like members of own family?

Honestly, are relationships your first priority? How can you ensure that they are?

How can you help cultivate characteristics of real community in your church?

Does your level of involvement in your church demonstrate that you love and are committed to God's family?

Who do you need to restore a broken relationship with today?

What are you personally doing to protect the unity in your church family right now?