

February 1, 2009

ONE FAMILY: THE SACRED BLEND

Week One: We Are Not in This Alone!

Acts 4:31

“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly,”

OUR VISION

BLENDing the Family of God Together— “The Sacred Blend”

Bringing hearts together to celebrate, encounter, and adore our God. (Worship)

Lending our lives to the faith community. (Partnership)

Engaging in practices for spiritual growth. (Discipleship)

Never giving less than our best to God’s kingdom. (Stewardship)

Devoting ourselves to sharing God’s good news with others. (Friendship)

Lou Holtz, former Notre Dame football coach and current television analyst, told about watching a television program once that examined why men died for their country. The program looked at the United States Marines, the French Foreign Legion, and the British Commandos. The conclusion was that men died for their country because of the love they had for their fellow man.

In the show, they interviewed a soldier who had been wounded in combat and was recovering in a hospital, when he heard his unit was going back out on a dangerous mission. The soldier escaped from the hospital and went with them, only to be wounded again. When asked why he did it, he said that after you work and live with people, you soon realize your survival depends on one another.

Whether we realize it or not, that applies to the church. Our survival depends on our sense of community. Where would we be without our mutual prayers, our mutual encouragement, and our mutual service to and with one another?

The Early Church understood this and practiced it. Fresh from the hand of God, fresh from the creative power of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost; they had no history to draw upon as to how they should behave. The church had never existed before! So they didn’t know any better than to respond positively to the leadership of the apostles and to the inner voice of the Holy Spirit in their hearts.

Consequently, they ministered in an extraordinary way to the tangible needs of others in their midst. They refused to claim that their possessions belonged only to them. They had the audacity to share what they had with those in need. They were so successful in this that there were actually “no needy persons among them.” If a need arose, someone who owned some property would sell it, bring the money to the apostles, and let it be distributed to those in need.

The church ministered with beautiful, magnanimous acts of Christian love and service that impress us even to this day. It was so impressive that Dr. Luke, when writing his history of the Early Church, said they were “one in heart and mind.”

From the Greek word for heart we derive our words cardiac and cardiology. But here it means more than the physical heart. It refers to the reason, emotions, and will. It covers the whole range of mental and emotional activity. In other words, the believers thought and felt alike. Not that they were carbon copies of one another. It just means they had a great unity and purpose. Their goals and desires so coincided with each other that Luke said they were “one in heart.”

He also says they were “one in mind.” The Greek word refers to the spiritual life of a person, the part of us that can be quickened and filled by the Holy Spirit. They served the same Christ, were filled with the same Spirit, and worshiped the same Heavenly Father.

Dr. Luke goes on to tell us about Barnabas, who sold a field he owned and brought the money to the church. If everyone had done that, there would be no reason for singling out Barnabas. But here Luke cites him as one who gave generously to meet a need.

The point is: When a need arose, someone did what was necessary to meet the need and nobody had to suffer materially. So their behavior reflected Christian commitment. Christian commitment says, “What’s mine is yours if you need it.”

All of this background leads us to emphasize this point:

THE PROBLEM OF INDIVIDUALISM:

Acts 4:32

“All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.”

Actually individualism holds within it three perils that can trip us up today and keep us from being the servants that Christ has called us to be.

1. Independence .

Independence is a concept we hold dear, and we need to be independent enough to stand on our own two feet. We do not want to be a burden on others, as long as we have the wherewithal to take care of ourselves. We certainly don’t want to be like the fellow who ran a want ad in the newspaper that said: “Need co-author for a book on self-reliance.” Say what? Isn’t that a contradiction in terms? Yet perhaps even that is reminding us of how much we really do need each other.

A spirit of independence in the life of a Christian can be a terribly carnal, unspiritual trait, when it is expressed in an attitude of “What’s in it for me?” We can too easily adopt the idea that the world revolves around us. The Polish astronomer, Copernicus, studied the heavens and gradually came to the conclusion that the earth is not the center around which the universe revolves, but is rather a moving planet that itself

revolves around the sun. This was a revolutionary idea in his day. And even in our day, some people are surprised to know the world does not revolve around their lives and interests.

Instead of asking, “What’s in it for me?” we need to be the kind of people who ask, “What can I do for you?”

2. Indifference .

This is another peril into which many people fall. It is expressed in the philosophy, “Who cares about anyone else?” At the heart of this peril is an attitude of self-centeredness. Charles Swindoll writes, “What does the Lord do to help broaden my horizons and assist me in seeing how selfish I am? Very simple: He gives me four busy kids who step on shoes, wrinkle clothes, spill milk, lick car windows and drop sticky candy on the carpet.

“Being unselfish in attitude strikes at the very core of our being. It means we are willing to forego our own comfort, our own preferences, our own schedule, and our own desires for another’s benefit. And that brings us back to Christ.”

We need to be the kind of people who care and share and openly meet the needs of others whenever possible.

3. Individuality .

This third peril is a trap into which we can easily fall. We like to express our own identity, which is often appropriate. But when that expression fails to take into consideration the needs and concerns of others, it becomes a snare to us. Instead of looking out for others, we look out for “numero uno.”

E. Stanley Jones, a veteran missionary to India, said, “Everywhere I go, I go along, and I spoil everything.” It’s the plague of what Penny Smith called being a “selfaholic.” Citing medical experts who claim an addict is never cured, she says they refer to an alcoholic as either “wet” or “dry.” A drug addict is either “dirty” or “clean.” In the same way, she declares a selfaholic is either “ego-centric” (self-centered) or “Christo-centric” (Christ-centered).

Someone defined EGO as Edging God Out.

Individualism not only edges God out, it edges others out and destroys a sense of community. Our challenge is to rise above a self-absorbed existence and become the persons and the church God has called us to be. In other words:

THE POTENTIAL OF COMMUNITY:

Acts 4:33

“With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.”

This was the genius of the Early Church. They were a close-knit, loving, helpful community of faith and practice.

In order to become such a community, we need to get to know one another better. John Maxwell and Jim Dornan proposed three questions in one of their books, dealing specifically with people we might try to mentor. I want to ask you these three questions and have you think about whether you can answer them about the people in this church. Now certainly you will not know the answers for everyone, but is there a group of people in this church about whom you know the answers to these questions?

1. What do they cry about ?

What moves people? What do they feel at their deepest levels? Do you know what they're passionate about? Someone has said the great men and women of history were great not for what they owned or earned, but for what they gave their lives to accomplish. As you get to know people around you, listen with your heart. You may just discover the things for which others are willing to give themselves.

2. What do they sing about ?

What gives them energy? What triggers their enthusiasm? Frank Irvin Fletcher observed, "No man can deliver the goods if his heart is heavier than his load." There is a big difference between the things that lift a person's heart and the things that weigh a person down. What lifts the spirits of your friends? What makes them sing?

3. What do they dream about ?

Do you have any idea about their ambitions? In their fondest imagination, how do they perceive their future? Napoleon Hill said, "Cherish your visions and your dreams as they are the children of your soul; the blueprints of your ultimate achievements." Wouldn't it be fascinating if we could read the blueprints of someone's future achievements? Wouldn't it be interesting to know what is on the drawing board of their vision? We might have that opportunity if we get to know something about their dreams, plans, and vision for the future.

Now why do we need to develop a sense of community? It's because one is too small a number to succeed. We need each other. The church is so much more effective—even we as individuals are more effective—when we work together as a community.

Derric Johnson wrote a song a number of years ago that said:

"We're more than friends when we know the Savior.
We're more than friends when we're washed in His blood.
That makes us brothers and sisters in the family of God.
Together, forever, we're much more than friends."

Thank God for this great community called the church. I hope you are developing a greater sense of community as time goes by. As we rise above mere individualism and develop a sense of community, then we can:

THE POWER OF OUR RESOURCES:

Acts 4:34-35

“There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales³⁵ and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.”

1. Find a need and fill it.

This is where the rubber meets the road. This is where we discover great fulfillment as individuals and as a church—when we begin to find needs and fill them. As Henry Van Dyke said, “There is a loftier ambition than merely to stand high in the world. It is to stoop down and lift mankind a little higher.”

The amazing thing is that by helping others, we often help ourselves. M. Scott Peck, the renowned psychologist and author, told of a woman patient who suffered from severe depression. One day when she had an appointment with him, she called to tell him her car had broken down. He offered to pick her up on the way to his office, but said he needed to make a hospital call first. If she would wait in the car while he made the call, they could have their appointment.

When they arrived at the hospital, he made another suggestion. He gave her the names of two other patients who were convalescing at that hospital and indicated they might enjoy a visit from her. They met again after an hour and a half, and she was on an emotional high. She told the doctor that visiting those people and cheering them up had actually lifted her own spirits. She was feeling wonderful.

Dr. Peck said, “Now we know how to cure you of your depression.”

She responded, “You don’t expect me to do that every day, do you?”

That’s our problem sometimes. We may too easily think that doing what Jesus calls us to do is burdensome, when in fact, it may be the very best thing for us.

John Mason said, “When you help someone up a mountain, you’ll find yourself close to the summit too.”

There’s an old Chinese proverb that recommends:

“To be happy for an hour—take a nap.
To be happy for a day—go fishing.
To be happy for a month—get married.
To be happy for a year—inherit a fortune.
To be happy for a lifetime—help others.”

Jean Nidetch is the founder of Weight Watchers, which has more than a million members in twenty-four countries. Someone asked her how she had been able to help so many people. Nidetch said when she was a teenager she regularly crossed a park and watched mothers chatting while their toddlers sat on swings with no one to push them. She said, “I’d give them a push. And you know what happens when you push a kid on a swing? Pretty soon he’s pumping, doing it himself. That’s what my role in life is—I’m there to give others a push.”

That’s true for all of us. We’re here to give each other a push, a little nudge in the right direction.

Perhaps you’re thinking: I don’t know where to start. I don’t know who needs help. That’s why we need to get to know one another better in this faith community. But I can tell you this for certain: everybody needs encouragement from time to time. Take an example from Winnie the Pooh. One day Pooh Bear goes for a walk in the Hundred Acre wood. It’s about 11:30 in the morning. It is a fine time to go calling—just before lunch. So Pooh sets out across the stream, stepping on the stones, and when he gets right in the middle of the stream, he sits down on a warm stone to think about just where would be the best place of all to make a call. He says to himself, “I think I’ll go see Tigger.”

No, he dismisses that. Then he says, “Owl!” But he thinks, “No, Owl uses big words, hard-to-understand words.”

At last his face brightens. “I know! I’ll go see Rabbit. I like Rabbit. Rabbit uses encouraging words like ‘How’s about lunch?’ and ‘Help yourself, Pooh!’ Yes, I think I’ll go see Rabbit.”

2. Find a person and encourage them.

Don’t you love to be around a person who is encouraging? Why don’t you become such a person, an encourager of others, and you will have no trouble discovering people who need your help, your blessings, your encouragement.

Jesus said, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Matthew 20:26). Even Jesus himself “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

The thrust of my message today is: We are not in this alone! We are part of a great community. We do need to watch out for the perils of individualism because they can sidetrack us from being at our best in community. We also need to live with a greater sense of community as we get to know and appreciate each other better. But then as we realize how much we need each other, we will begin to find needs and fill them by the help and grace of God.

As a first step, why don't you ask yourself: where can I best fit in this community? How can I best serve? Then try to find someone within our community whom you do not know, and make a conscious effort to get to know them.

And what is our motive in all this? Mother Theresa had a signal with which she greeted her sisters with a raised hand, with all five fingers spread. It meant, "Do it all for Jesus." They would respond by raising their hand, with all five fingers spread, "We did it for Jesus."

We are not in this alone. You and Jesus and I—we are in this together!