

All in the Family

Sterling UMC
September 27, 2009
Ephesians 2:11-22

For the past two weeks we have been talking about what it means to become a Five Talent church. To invest our talents, our gifts, our resources as individuals and as a church in the most important areas of ministry so that we return a bountiful yield of fruit to our Master.

Last week we learned about the importance of investing ourselves in worship. The most important thing we can KNOW is that God loves us. And the most important thing we can DO is love Him back, presenting ourselves as a living sacrifice as our spiritual act of worship. Worship is expressing our love for our Heavenly Father. Well, this week we take it a step further, because we are also called to love PEOPLE. Now, of course God wants us to love ALL people-but the Bible teaches that He is especially concerned about the love we are to have for our fellow Christians-the people in His family. And, another word for this-loving our spiritual brothers and sisters-is FELLOWSHIP.

You see the Church is a Family! That's the theme of our text. Did you catch it? It said, "You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household." (Ephesians 2:19 NIV) That word "household" is the term for family. In fact our text is not the only place where the Bible makes this claim.

Ephesians 1:5 (NLT) says, "God's unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into His own FAMILY by bringing us to Himself through Jesus Christ." The Bible says that when you become a believer in Christ, you become a member of a family. Friends, the church is not an institution. The church is not a business. The church is not an organization, a social club. The church, the Bible says, is a family. So FELLOWSHIP is loving God's family. As Christians, we are to love God AND we are also to love His family.

Now why would God want us to do this? Why is this important? Why would He want us to learn to love the other people in our spiritual family? Well, there are several reasons:

One is because like any parent, God wants His children to get along.

I'm sure moms and dads would all agree that it hurts us when our children fight and argue and also that there is a special joy that we feel when our children love one another and take care of each other such that they enjoy each other's company-and God is the same.

But another reason God wants us to learn to love one another is because doing so makes us more like God, because God is love.

In his first epistle the Apostle John wrote, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love....Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him...The person who loves God must also love other believers." (1 John, 4:8, 4:16, 4:21 NIV) Well, God loves ALL people equally-even those who are hard to love and so He wants us to learn to practice this unconditional love as well. He wants us to be like Him-to love like Him.

And then, a third reason we are to keep our FELLOWSHIP strong is that our love for one another attracts the lost to God.

This pleases God because it helps GROW His family. You see, to the outside world, the way Christians like you and me relate to one another is a "litmus test" as to whether or not we actually know God. This is why Jesus commanded, "Love one another IN THE SAME WAY that I have loved you...by this will all men know that you are My disciples." (John 13:34-35 NIV)

And so if we are going to fulfill our desire to become a Five Talent Church FELLOWSHIP is very important-for many reasons. But unfortunately, fellowship is a word that is often misunderstood. I mean, if I were to ask you, "What do you think of when I say the word 'fellowship'?" What would you say? Casual conversation, Cover dish dinners, an ice cream social, hanging out with church friends.

That's not fellowship. No, the Bible teaches that true fellowship is much deeper than that. It has the power to revolutionize a life. And the truth is, in God's family there are four levels of fellowship you can invest yourself in. And the deeper we go in these levels the more we experience true Biblical fellowship and the more fruitful we become.

Okay, so the first level of Fellowship is Membership.

This is the most basic level of fellowship because it involves simply finding a church family to get connected to. Now, I've met many Christians who don't think church membership is all that important. They say things like, "Well, I'm a Christian, but I don't want to belong to any church." And, that just doesn't make sense. I mean, saying, "I don't want to belong to a church" is like saying, "I'm a football player, but I don't want to be a part of any team." or, "I'm a bee, but I don't want to be a part of a hive." This way of thinking is really nonsense because as Christians, we need each other!

You know, the Apostle Paul often compared the church to a BODY and each of it's members as body parts. Well, no body part will survive long on it's own will it? And it is the same with each of us. Cut off from the lifeblood of a local church body our individual spiritual life would soon wither and die. We need a church BODY to belong to! We need to attach ourselves to a group of believers, where we say, "I want to be a part of what's going on there."

The second level of Fellowship you can invest yourself in is a little bit deeper. I will call this "the friendship level." Learning to share. You see, you were created in God's image. So you were made for relationships. Life is not a solo act. And you need

friends. The Bible says this in Acts 2:44 (LB), "All the believers met together constantly and shared everything with each other." Notice two things in this verse: one, you can't develop friendships without meeting together; and two; you can't develop friendships without sharing.

So what are we supposed to share? Well, the Bible is full of instructions on things we're to share with each other as Christians. Let me just a few.

Number 1, the Bible says we're to share our Experiences. It is wise to learn from our experience, but it's even wiser to from the experiences of other people, because you don't have time to make all the mistakes yourself.

Second, the Bible says we're to share our homes. The Bible says in 1 Peter 4:9 (NCV), "open up your homes to each other." Why does God say that? I'll tell you why – because you cannot fellowship in a crowd. You see it is almost impossible to fellowship with this many people. We can worship together. We can celebrate together. We can learn together. But little fellowship will take place in this service. Fellowship best takes place in the small group. And that's why the Bible says open up your homes to each other.

Number three; we're to share our problems. We're not meant to face our problems alone. The Bible says, "Share each other's troubles and problems." (Galatians 6:2 NLT) You know when you share a joy, it is doubled; and when you share a problem, it is cut in half?

Finally we should share encouragement. That's why the Bible says this in Hebrews 10:25 (TEV), "Let us not give up the habit of meeting together. Instead, let us encourage one another." This is so important because in life you're always going to need encouragement.

This is the second level, learning to share in friendship.

Now, let's talk about an even deeper level. The third level is "Partnership." Partnership is doing my part. Partnership is realizing that I've got a contribution to make; that the family of God needs me. Listen, God did not bring you to Sterling UMC to sit and soak in some spiritual spa. He brought you here to serve. He wants to make a difference through your life. In every family there are family responsibilities. You divide up the chores. The Bible is filled with the fact that you and I are to work with one another in getting this job done. There are 58 times in the New Testament the Bible says we do it with one another. We serve one another. We love one another. We pray with one another. The Bible even says we have to put up with one another when we're doing all of this. That's how it works, together. This is love in action. Not just in words. You see, it is great to share your heart, that's level two. But it is even greater to do your part. That is what level three is all about.

Listen to what the Bible has to say in 1 Corinthians 3:9 (TEV), "We are partners working together for God." Did you know that in the Greek, the word "fellowship" is often translated "partnership?" That's how close these two words are. You ever want to be

part of a great team, something that just did something great? Some of you guys maybe had a dream of being a part of a team that went to the super bowl or won the World Series. Friends you're part of the greatest team there ever was in the church. What we do is going to last forever. Ever want to be a partner in a great business that went to the top of the Fortune 500? In the church, we are part of the greatest enterprise that's ever existed. We get to be part of God's plan for the universe. That's what it is all about, when we cooperate and participate together in the family of God.

But in order to be a part, you've got to find your niche, you have got to find out, "Where do I fit, how I do I fit?" The Bible tells us we all have a niche. Look what Ephesians 4:16 (NLT) says. "The whole body is fitted together perfectly...As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole Body is healthy and growing and full of love."

You have a part to play in the Body of Christ. And when we cooperate, we get more done together than we could ever get done by ourselves.

So I encourage you to make this a practical action step this week, the card in your bulletin has just a few ideas. There are countless other ways for you to engage and participate.

It doesn't have to be anything big or major, just some practical thing, and watch what it does for your relationship for your fellowship with one another.

Now, the deepest level of fellowship in the family of God is what I call "Kinship." Now, kinship is an old term. We don't use it much anymore. But kinship literally means your closest relationships. It means your closest family. When somebody has an accident, they say, "Notify the next-of-kin", and they don't mean go find Aunt Mildred. They mean you find the person they care about most, the person who is closest to them, the one they hold most dearly. And the Bible says that's the kind of attitude we should have.

That kinship -- the deepest level, is loving believers like family; treating and loving believers like they're family. You're completely committed to them. Romans 12:10 (GW) says, "Be devoted to each other like a loving family." Now, the word for fellowship in the Bible is the Greek word "koinonia." And the basic root literally means being as committed to each other as we are to Jesus Christ. That is family relationship. That is kinship. That is saying I'm at the level of being willing to sacrifice for you. You see, many of you know John 3:16, "God so loved the world," but you don't know 1 John 3:16. It says this, "We know what real love is because Christ gave up His life for us. And we ought to give up our lives for our Christian brothers and sisters." (NLT) This is the deepest level of fellowship; sacrificing for each other. It's the kind of love Jesus Christ had for you. He died for you.

So how do we do that? How do you get to this deepest level of fellowship? Well, you do it by standing with other believers when they are going through a crisis. When everybody else walks out, you walk in; you're there for them in the tough times. I've seen it a hundred times. And yet there is nothing that still puts a lump in my throat and

a tear in my eye more than when I see one of you offer love and compassion to someone in need. I know that there are many of you here today who could stand up and testify about how someone from this church stood you them in a time of need, wept with you in a time of sorrow, shouted with you in a time of celebration, walked with you through the darkest valley.

Friends, this is what life is all about, loving God and learning to love each other. If you miss this, you have missed the purpose of your life and I pity you. Because life is not about accomplishments. It is about relationships. You were put on this earth to know God and love Him, and to know His family and love them. As a pastor, I have been at the bedside of many people as they were dying. In all of those situations where I've been there as people were taking their last breath, I have never once had anybody say, "Bring me my diplomas. I want them close to me." Nobody says, "Bring me my trophies." Nobody says, "Bring me the gold watch I got at retirement." Nobody says, "Bring me my computer or my Blackberry." It is in those final moments they talk about what matters most, and they say, "Bring me my family and friends." One day, one day you're going to figure out that what really matters in life is knowing God and having close family and friends. I hope it doesn't take that long. I hope you don't discover that at the last moment of your life or put it off until it's too late. I hope you discover it now and begin to fellowship as God intended for us, because life is all about love.

You see friends, what I want Sterling UMC to be known for is not our size, not our sermons, not our singing, not our programs, not our building, but our love. Isn't that what you want too? We want people to say, "That's the place where they love each other," because that's what Christianity is all about, that's our purpose; loving God and loving each other. And let me tell you folks what happens when this becomes reality. When people find a church, a place, where there is genuine love, you'd have to lock the doors to keep people away, because people are not looking for religion, they are looking for a relationship. They're not looking for a building, they're looking for a bond. They're not looking for programs, they're looking for people. They're not looking for a facility, they're looking for a family.

So let me ask you a couple relevant questions: which of these levels of fellowship are you at? Have you even made it to the first one, choosing to belong? Are you still floating around from church to church to church and attend here and attend there? You've never gotten committed. You've never gotten connected to the body in membership. You need to choose a church. I invite you to consider joining this congregation, to commit yourself to making Sterling your church home, to make this congregation your church family. That's the most basic level. If you haven't done that, that's your next step. If you want to do that I invite you to please come talk to me or give me a call.

Then you need to learn to share. And where do you do that? In a small group. You don't learn to share in a place like this. Then you need to not just share your heart, you need to do your part. That's partnership. Find your niche. Find your place to give back, to make a contribution. If you're in the family of God, you have some family

responsibilities. God expects you to do your part in the family. You don't just slide along while everybody else does theirs.

Then you move to this deepest level. Are there any other believers that know you are devoted to them? That know you're going to be there for them in their crisis?

You are now going to have the opportunity to respond. I'm going to invite Debbie Myers our Associate Lay Leader for Fellowship to share with you some ways you can invest yourself in this vital ministry of fellowship.