

LIFE TOGETHER in the Community of the King

Lenten Series 2010

Introduction

Welcome to this church-wide study written to complement the sermons given by Dr. Richard Hansen in his final full series from the pulpit at Visalia First Presbyterian Church. As always, this study may be completed by individuals but is best experienced when shared in a small group setting as well.

In the Good News Bible, Ephesians 1:23 reads, “The church is Christ’s body, the completion of Him who Himself completes all things everywhere.” Contemplating these powerful words sets a tone for embracing old truths and discovering new ones during the next seven weeks. In the passages selected by Dr. Hansen, we will hear from some of the great voices of the New Testament, Peter and John, Paul and James. Each text calls us into vibrant, committed living with “one another.” Nothing could be more fitting as we move into the transition of sending a beloved pastor and his wife off into new fields of ministry. We will soon be welcoming to our pulpit new voices of men and women in whose lives God is already working to bring leadership here, especially those who will serve as interim and senior pastor. We are reminded that our church is Christ’s church, and all of us, pastors, members, lay leaders, staff, all of us live in the vibrancy of the community of our King. He NEVER leaves us incomplete, especially in those times when we feel great loss. Paul boldly declares in Romans 8, *“What then shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?”*

Two of the most direct ways God gives to us are through Scripture and through fellowship with other believers. Especially at this time, choose to receive His gifts as you participate in this study. Take the time to do all of the lesson before you meet with others. Prayerfully bring yourself to God as a “living sacrifice” during this Lenten season, so that He may make you bold to accept, live in harmony, serve, encourage, teach, forgive, and love one another.

Leaders are encouraged to plan carefully ahead of time, as some of the studies are longer than the time you have. Each study is centered on a brief text of scripture, but the context is explored for its valuable teaching, in order to amplify the key words. Editing according to your group needs is an act of love and consideration for everyone. Be sure to engage in partner sharing, where every person both speaks and ministers through listening. Following the concluding discussion are two final sections. “Living the Lenten Challenge” encourages individuals to grow in the particular area the study has emphasized by engaging in some form of personal ministry, especially during Lent. “Prayers for God’s Kingdom People” are written not only for private use, but especially as a part of the closing prayers of a group meeting.

As we join together in this last two-month community experience of study, led by Dr. Hansen, may we all deepen our appreciations of “one another,” individuals whom God has joined for a portion of time on a dynamic spiritual journey together. Thank you, Rich, for leading the way during this wonderful and long season. We love you.

Dedication

This study is dedicated to Carol Greenfield who does more than any other single person behind the scenes to enable all of us to live and grow and love “one another.”

Sunday, February 14, 2010

LIFE TOGETHER in the Community of the King

“ACCEPT One Another”

Romans 15:7

Warming Up: (*Partners - 5 minutes*)

- In your experience, how do people convey acceptance of one another? Do you ever encounter attitudes of rejection within the church, not necessarily targeted at you in any way? How do you respond? Have you ever found yourself rejecting another person? What prompted your attitude?

Kingdom Living in the Scriptures: (*Group and partners - 45 minutes*)

Read Romans 15:1-9.

1. How does verse one reveal Paul's commitment to the community of believers? _____
2. In the NIV, the word “please” is used three times in verses 1-2. What does it mean? _____
3. What responsibility falls on those who are “strong” in the faith?

 - a. How has Christ modeled this same responsibility (verse 3)? _____
 - b. How do scriptures help (verse 4)? _____

4. In verse 5, Paul talks about 3 gifts God specifically provides for believers: *endurance, encouragement, and a spirit of unity.*
➔ **With a partner:** *Share how you have experienced receiving each of these gifts.*
 - *In your own spiritual journey, which of these three have you the greatest need for right now? Explain.*
5. Return to the group: Why are these gifts given? What is their purpose? _____

- Reflect together about examples of each gift from your own small group experience. Discuss what happens to the body when the opposite qualities dominate: quitting, discouragement, disunity and discord. _____
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Reread verses 7-8.

1. Verse seven is the key passage for this study. What does it mean to you? _____

2. In this verse, Paul gives a command, an analogy, and an explanation of purpose.
 - a. What is the analogy? _____

 - b. ➔ **With a partner:** *What is your story regarding how Christ has accepted you?*
 - *(Did you notice that Paul's phrase reverses "church talk" of "accepting Christ"? Why is this reversal significant?)*

 - c. ➔ **Continuing with a partner:** *How conditional is your acceptance of others in the Community of the King?*

3. Return to the group and read Romans 14:1, 3-4, and 13. How do these verses relate to your partner discussion?

4. Verse eight says Christ became a "servant." How does having a servant's heart affect acceptance of others? _____

5. Review the familiar passages of John 13:12-17 and Philippians 2:6-8. How do these passages help explain Paul's vision of truth and revelation to the Gentiles which he speaks of in verse 8?

Concluding Discussion: *(Group - 5 minutes)*

- Looking first at our local congregation of Visalia First Presbyterian Church, and then at the body of believers world-wide, do you find that Christians are inclined to practice acceptance of one another or not? How can we as a community of Christ-followers become more intentional in our acceptance, especially as we approach the season of Lent with multiple opportunities for inter-denominational events?

Living the Lenten Challenge

- Whom has Christ laid on your heart, calling you to new levels of acceptance, so that you may “bring praise to God”? In addition to praying for this person this week, do something overt and tangible to express your desire to accept him or her without qualifications.

Prayers for God’s Kingdom People

From the very beginning, O Lord, You have called and accepted us just as we are. Your grace knows no boundaries; Your love overflows. Who are we, to choose not to accept another of Your children because of our own judgments of worth? We confess that we too often compare, measuring and evaluating others against our own limited vision. We do want to be strong, strong in Your love and in Your ways, but not stronger than others, not brandishing “superiority” like a drawn sword, ready to reject others who don’t measure up. Grace us yet again, most Holy God, with gentle and accepting spirits, ones which welcome others into Your Kingdom with hope and love. Only in Your power can this happen.

NOTES:

Sunday, February 21, 2010

LIFE TOGETHER in the Community of the King

“Live in HARMONY WITH One Another”

1 Peter 3:8

Warming Up: (*Partners - 5 minutes*)

- If you have ever participated in a choir, what part did you sing? What makes harmony more engaging than simple melody? What kind of vocal group produces your favorite music?

Kingdom Living in the Scriptures: (*Group and partners - 45 minutes*)

Read 1 Peter 3:8-12.

1. How do the qualities Peter lists, *sympathy, love, compassion, and humility*, contribute to harmony among believers?

- What does each word mean specifically *as it works for harmony*? _____

2. What admonition does Peter clearly express in verse 9?

- What would this look like among believers who have radically different expressions of the Gospel, for example a liberal social justice activist and a conservative right to life activist? Clearly their lives are not singing the same “melody.” Yet is harmony possible among such Christ-followers?

3. Peter quotes Psalm 34 in verses 10-12. What do you discover about living in harmony from this Old Testament wisdom?

- What specific behavior sows discord?

→ **With a partner:**

1. *How can you know when you're "singing off-key," when your words, attitudes, or actions are destructive to the harmony among Christ-followers? Have you found yourself in such a situation? How did you handle it?*
2. *What insights do you have to help someone else who is "off-key" and discordant and does not know it?*
3. *Do you ever pretend to sing, really just mouthing the words, to protect the harmony of the body?*

With the group, read Galatians 5:19-21.

1. What is the context of the word "discord" here? What is God saying to us in His body? _____

2. How does this passage relate to verses 9 and 10 in 1 Peter?

The commentator William Barclay quotes the theologian and scholar, C.E.B. Cranfield regarding 1 Peter 3:8. (*The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters of James and Peter*, by William Barclay, page 225-226)

The New Testament never treats this agreeing in Christ as an unnecessary though highly desirable spiritual luxury, but as something essential to the true being of the Church. Divisions, whether disagreements between individual members or the existence of factions and parties and—how much more!—our present-day denominations, constitute a calling in question of the Gospel itself and a sign that those who are involved are carnal. The more seriously we take the New Testament, the more urgent and painful becomes our sense of the sinfulness of the divisions, and the more earnest our prayers and strivings after the peace and unity of the Church on earth. That does not mean that the like-mindedness we are to strive for is to be a drab uniformity of the sort beloved of bureaucrats. Rather is it to be a unity in which powerful tensions are held together by an over-mastering loyalty, and strong antipathies of race and colour, temperament and taste, social position and economic interest, are overcome in common worship and common obedience. Such unity will only come when Christians are humble and bold enough to lay hold on the unity already given in Christ and to take it more seriously than their own

self-importance and sin, and to make of these deep differences of doctrine, which originate in our imperfect understanding of the Gospel and which we dare not belittle, not an excuse for letting go of one another or staying apart, but rather an incentive for a more earnest seeking in fellowship together to hear and obey the voice of Christ.
C.E.B. Cranfield

1. Cranfield says that divisions within the church are a sign that “those who are involved are carnal.” Rereading this phrase in context, what is Cranfield saying? Do you agree with him?

2. What kind of unity does Cranfield describe as Biblical? How is this unity more a portrait of harmony rather than of cloning?

3. Cranfield also says, “Differences of doctrine...originate in our imperfect understanding of the Gospel.” What is Cranfield’s solution to this? Do you agree? _____

Read I Corinthians 1:10 and 12:25.

- Do you find that these scriptures correlate to Cranfield’s comments? How? _____

Concluding Discussion: *(Group - 5 minutes)*

- What can we do as members of First Pres to promote unity and harmony among our members, especially in this season of transition as our senior pastor departs and new voices are heard from the pulpit?
- What is First Pres already doing to promote harmony among Christians in all the denominations in Visalia? How can you be a part of this, as an individual and with your small group?

Living the Lenten Challenge

- Surely speech is a prime source for creating discord. Eugene Peterson translates verse 10 in The Message this way: “Say nothing evil or hurtful; snub evil and cultivate good.” During this week pray daily that the Holy Spirit will alert you instantly to anything coming from your mouth which may move toward evil or be hurtful, especially if it is about someone not present. Examine your capacity for gossip, both disseminating and receiving. Pray that God will shut down the channels through which you utter “deceitful speech.” Embrace the tension of living in harmony with those with whom you disagree.

Prayers for God’s Kingdom People

Most Holy God, purify our hearts that the words which come from us reflect Your goodness. Let not our lips speak “deceitful speech.” Teach us our individual and unique parts in the great harmony of Your body working together. Enable us to read the musical notes You have composed for each of us to sing in this heavenly chorus on Earth. Holy God, in Your Kingdom community each of our parts is vital. Especially as we move through change, we pray that we may respond quickly to the variations and tempo You are creating. May we keep our eyes on You alone, our Conductor, even as You compose new music for all of us to live. And may all the applause and celebration glorify You alone.

NOTES:

Sunday, February 28, 2010

LIFE TOGETHER in the Community of the King

“SERVE One Another”

Galatians 5:13

Warming Up: (*Partners - 5 minutes*)

- Do you think you are going to Heaven? Why?

Kingdom Living in the Scriptures: (*Group and partners - 45 minutes*)

Read Galatians 5:1-15.

1. To what is Paul referring in verse one when he speaks of freedom as opposed to slavery? _____

2. In verses 2-4, why does Paul relate the act of circumcision as being “justified by the law”? _____

3. Why is Paul so opposed to new Christians being circumcised?

4. Why does he say “Christ will be of no value to you at all”?

5. What is the “only thing that counts”? Counts for what?

6. ➔ **With a partner:** *Although circumcision is not an issue in Western Christian culture today, a remarkable number of Christians privately believe their acts of piety and obedience to a moral code of goodness will become their ticket to Heaven. Why is that antithetical to Jesus Christ? Do you ever try to follow moral laws to cover your bases and make sure you are pleasing God? Search your heart to see if there is any seed of this motivation within you.*
 - *Can you earn your way to Heaven? Why is that concept an absolute denial of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?*

Returning to the group, reread verses 7-15.

1. Explain the “race” to which Paul refers in verse 7. (See Galatians 2:2, Philippians 2:16, II Timothy 4:7 for clarification)
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2. What does he mean by “obeying the truth”?
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3. The Bible’s use of “yeast” usually refers to false teaching. In this passage, what is the false teaching? _____
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- a. Why is yeast an apt metaphor? _____

- b. How can such teaching keep one from “obeying the truth”? _____

4. Read Ephesians 2:4-10. What is the ONLY source of salvation?
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- a. Write out verse 9. To what does the word “it” refer? What is a “gift of God”? _____

- b. What is the relationship between grace, faith, and works? _____

5. ➔ **With a partner:** *Reflect aloud on Ephesians 2:9. How does this verse express your faith journey?*

- a. *Ponder your view of others coming to know and follow Jesus. Do you consciously or unconsciously place conditional requirements on others? For example, in your mind must an alcoholic stop using alcohol if he becomes a Christian?*

- b. *Returning to Galatians 5, in verse 11 Paul says if circumcision is sufficient (a form of “works”), then the cross is abolished. Do you need the cross? (Try to move beyond head knowledge and Sunday School answers to share honestly both how much the cross means to you and/or your confusion at a “gut “level.”)*

Return to the group and read Galatians 5:13, the key verse for this lesson. All this previous discussion is background to the message which we now address as we are living together in the Community of the King.

1. We are ironically “free” from duty but God still calls us. What are we called to do as Christ-followers? What is our only motivation?_____

2. Paul’s words echo Jesus in Mark 12:29-31. What is the motivation of true Christ-like service?_____

3. **➔With a partner:** *What is your most frequent emotional companion in service: joy, resentment, endurance, guilt, procrastination, excitement, love...?*
 - a. *What does this reveal about why you serve?*
 - b. *Share an example of service rendered out of love. If you have one, share a contrasting example from your own life of service motivated by something such as personal reward or guilt.*

Concluding Discussion: (Group - 5 minutes)

- Jesus, in Matthew 20:28, tells His disciples that He “came not to be served, but to serve.” In John 13, He stoops with the towel and basin to wash the disciples’ feet, and then calls them to “wash one another’s feet.” What does this mean for us as we share life today in the Community of the King?

- How is understanding our deep personal motivation for service a sort of private, spiritual diagnostic tool? Especially in the mini-communities of our small groups, how can we help each other to serve in response to the grace we have received through faith?

Living the Lenten Challenge

- Take time to look at the next week or two of your calendar. Find a commitment or task of service already scheduled there. Prayerfully examine all the reasons you have for doing this. Praise the Lord if you find joy and delight in offering yourself to others in this way. If your reasons lead to

negative emotions and/or guilt, use this season of your life to reexamine your motives.

– Live in Ephesians 2:9.

- Sometime in the next week during this Lenten season, choose to embrace an act of service which you can perform in the spirit of John 13. Perhaps even serve someone anonymously, merely leaving the fragrance of God's love behind.

Prayers for God's Kingdom People

○ Lord, You know our hearts, our doubts and fears, and our desires to please You and to do good things. Continue to teach us how to have a servant's heart, ready to do Your bidding, yielding our agendas to Your plans and wishes. Fill us up with deeper understandings of Your gifts of pure grace and simple faith. As we rest beneath Your cross especially in this Lenten season, challenge us to pour out our lives in service to others and thus to You. We know that we can never out-give You, Master, but we want You to be able to help Yourself to our lives whenever and however You want, so that more and more we might resemble You, our Servant-King.

NOTES:

Sunday, March 7, 2010

LIFE TOGETHER in the Community of the King

“ENCOURAGE One Another”

Hebrews 10:25

Warming Up: (*Partners - 5 minutes*)

- Describe a physical place that is holy to you, that elicits from you an instinctive reverence and awe. If you can think of no such place, why is that, do you suppose?

Kingdom Living in the Scriptures: (*Group and partners - 45 minutes*)

1. The book of Hebrews was written by an early believer to Christians who were by birth also Jews, steeped in Old Testament worship rituals. Read Leviticus 16:11-17, 34. What do you learn about the Holy of Holies and the role of the high priest? Why is it that Aaron does not die? _____

- Imagine yourself to be one of those ancient Israelites, dependent upon Aaron's role as great high priest, for the forgiveness and atonement of your sins. What would that feel like? _____
2. Skim Hebrews 9:1-5 to enrich your imagery of the Old Covenant and its purpose, and to contrast it with the sacrificial death of Jesus. What stands out to you? _____

Read Hebrews 10:19-25.

1. With the background already given, explain in your own words the meaning of verse 19. _____
 - Why may we now have confidence to walk in to the Most Holy Place, the Holy of Holies, when Aaron and all the high priests who followed him could easily die in God's presence? _____
2. Read Matthew 27:50-51. Keeping Matthew's words in mind, explain what this Jewish author of Hebrews is saying in verse

20. If you could hear him speak these words, what would his emotional tone convey? _____

3. Read Hebrews 6:18-20. What parallels and understandings do you see correlating with Hebrews 10:22-23? _____

a. What is the “hope” in 6:18 and in 10:23?

b. What is “the anchor for our soul” in 6:19?

c. How are we tethered to the throne of grace “behind the curtain,” in the very Holy of Holies?

d. Who is “faithful” according to verse 23?

4. Given all of this background, what does it mean to “encourage one another”? _____

a. How does the imagery of “spur one another on” give urgency to our calling as believers?

b. Why is it so important “not to give up meeting together”?

c. What is the two-fold result of these challenges in verse 24? (To what are we encouraging one another?)

→With a partner:

1. *In Western North American culture, very little is regarded as sacred or holy, especially in the secular world. How do you feel your environment has impacted your faith journey and your own understanding of the sacred?*

2. *Can you wrap your mind around the image of Christ's body as the great temple curtain, literally torn in two at the moment of His death? Does this image also penetrate your heart? How?*
3. *What "anchors" your soul, in your faith journey: what others believe, what you've been taught in church, your experiences....?*
4. *If you could draw a picture with a boat depicting your faith and the anchor depicting the high priest, King Jesus, how big would each be relative to each other? In other words, how strong is this anchor to your faith? How reliable is it?*
5. *Why is an anchor in this context so vital? (Read Ephesians 4:14-16)*
6. *The word "encourage" can be thought of as putting "courage" "in" another. How has someone encouraged you, boosted your courage to live boldly for Christ recently?*
7. *How have you done this for another?*

Concluding Discussion: (Group - 5 minutes)

- Read Hebrews 10:24-25 as a personal charge to you and your small group. How can you "spur one another on towards love and good deeds? How can you not only encourage one another but also be a source of encouragement within the whole congregation at First Pres?

Living the Lenten Challenge

- In this week of Lent, specifically choose to encourage someone within the church body. Find a way to support someone on staff or in lay-leadership by giving positive feedback to their efforts. Communicate your love and support through a note, a gift, a hug, or time to talk over coffee. Infuse "courage" into the body through one person God lays on your heart.

Prayers for God's Kingdom People

Lord You have blessed us with many sources of encouragement. Through Your grace, we have climbed out of darkness and into Your marvelous light, as You sent others our way in Your name. Brothers and sisters have nurtured courage in us, to face suffering, difficult obstacles, and personal brokenness. Through their gifts of encouragement, You have made us useful in Your

Kingdom. May every day of our lives be filled with doing the same for others, especially during this season of Lent. Holy Spirit, “spur [us] on toward love and good deeds” that Your Kingdom’s glory will be seen. Make us living testimonies of the hope anchored in the Holy of Holies...You, our Risen Savior, who roots for us and encourages us to new life.

NOTES:

Sunday, March 14, 2010

LIFE TOGETHER in the Community of the King

“TEACH One Another”

Colossians 3:16

Warming Up: (*Partners - 5 minutes*)

- Describe a time when as a student you were eager and receptive to learn. How effective was your teacher? Expand your thinking beyond the classroom to any learning experience such as rock climbing, technology, cooking, etc.

Kingdom Living in the Scriptures: (*Group and partners - 45 minutes*)

Read Colossians 3:12-17.

1. Paul is writing this from house arrest in Rome. If you were one of the original recipients, which part of this passage would stand out to you the most? _____
2. How does Paul clarify the identity of these young Christians in Colosse (verse 12)? Name the 3 descriptors he uses. From whom have the Colossians received these characteristics?

3. List the “clothing” Paul encourages his readers to wear. Write an antonym for each word. Read the second list out loud. Do you ever experience Christians who have put on clothes from the “wrong closet,” attired in callousness, meanness, pride, hostility, or impatience? _____
4. In verses 13 and 14, what two additional qualities does Paul call the Colossians to “wear”? _____

→ With a partner:

1. We too are “chosen by God, holy, and dearly loved.” These descriptors are God-given. Which of these gifts have you received and integrated into your life the most? Are any of these still gift-wrapped and unopened on a shelf in your spiritual closet? Explain.
2. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates Paul’s words in Colossians 3:9, “You’re done with that old life. It’s like a filthy set

of ill-fitting clothes you've stripped off and put in the fire." So, in verse 12, he continues the metaphor with the guidance, "Dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you." How much do you pay attention to the God-given wardrobe you're wearing each day? Do you ever grab those "ill-fitting clothes"? How consciously do you dress yourself for God's work each day?

3. Continuing this image, Peterson refers to love as "your basic, all-purpose garment." Cite a recent example when you were glad you were dressed in love.

As a group, return to the passage, and read Colossians 3:15-17.

1. Name the additional qualities Paul urges the Colossians to experience in their lives. _____
2. In the NIV, verses 15 and 16 begin with parallel structures: "Let the peace of Christ rule..." and "Let the word of Christ dwell..." What does the word "let" in this context mean to you?

3. We are talking about The Community of the King, and our King is Jesus. How does any king bring peace to his subjects? How does Christ bring peace to the collective "hearts" of His followers? _____

4. The commentator William Barclay says Paul uses a word from the athletic arena and he literally says "Let the peace of God be the umpire in your heart." (The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, page 159) How does the Body of Christ willingly submit to the Umpire's decisions? _____

5. Whatever we permit to enter our inner world through our senses "dwells" within our minds. How can the "word of Christ" live "richly" within us? _____
 - Read Romans 15:4. For what purpose are we equipped with the Word? _____

6. How do we teach one another? Even though we know some have been given the spiritual gift of teaching, here Paul is calling all believers to teach and admonish one another. How does this happen, for example, in your small group?
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➔ **With a partner:**

1. *In what conscious ways do you give permission (let) Christ rule in you in peace?*
 - *Describe what it's like when the "peace of Christ" is broken in your life. What does it feel like? How does it happen? Is your inner world a relatively stable, peace-filled place, or does insurrection rear its ugly head too frequently? How does your inner state affect other Christ-followers?*
2. *Literally, on a weekly basis, how much time do you spend "in the Word"? How often are you and an open Bible together?*
3. *Do you believe that you are "equipped to teach and admonish...with wisdom" as a Christ-follower? Share a time when your words in a discussion blessed someone else at just the right moment, or share a time when someone else's words spoke wisdom to your needs.*
 - *How open is your heart to speak with confidence because it is the Lord who is using you?*
4. *How open is your heart to be taught by others? DO YOU LISTEN? Can you listen?*
5. *For what do you have a hunger to learn more?*

Concluding Discussion: (Group - 5 minutes)

1. What connections exist between teaching and admonishing one another with wisdom and singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in gratitude?
2. How is this entire passage of Colossians 3:12-17 a portrait of The Community of the King? In what ways do you see your small group reflected in these words of scripture?
3. How can sharing leadership in a small group fulfill the calling to "teach one another in wisdom"?

Living the Lenten Challenge

- Find a way this week informally to teach in the name of Christ. Dress in the clothing of a child of God. Listen for the still small voice of wisdom from the Holy Spirit. Dare to share boldly the Word which God has given you for someone else. Be creative. Write a note and include a verse of scripture, or listen to a friend, and share words of comfort from a favorite passage. Be a channel of the wisdom God is teaching you in your time in the Word. Spend enough time in Scripture so that you have something to teach.

Prayers for God's Kingdom People

○ Lord, we in the Kingdom wear the colors of the King. We come in the name of the King. We live and work and love and play and suffer and care as emissaries of You our Lord. There are no part-time jobs, Sunday morning only participants. You call us to all or nothing. Yet, we have much to learn so that we may teach with wisdom. May our lives absorb new lessons from You, and be a channel to communicate to our brothers and sisters. May every act be submitted to You, for every act models what we have already learned. Help us to dress in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience and may we, in this holy season of Lent, be both students and teachers to Your glory.

NOTES:

Sunday, March 21, 2010

LIFE TOGETHER in the Community of the King

“FORGIVE One Another”

Ephesians 4:32

Warming Up: (*Partners - 5 minutes*)

- Share an experience when you were forgiven by another person. Did you seek forgiveness, or was it granted without request? How did being forgiven affect that relationship? (Consider even a simple childhood experience with a parent, or a work-related issue with a colleague.)

Kingdom Living in the Scriptures: (*Group and partners - 45 minutes*)

Read Ephesians 4:17-32.

1. What stark contrasts are portrayed in verses 17-24?

2. In Paul’s description in verses 17-18, he specifically describes “futility of thinking,” “darkened...understanding,” “ignorance,” “hardening of...hearts,” all of which lead to a loss of “all sensitivity.” How does a person who is trapped in this state handle human relationships? _____

3. According to verse 24, for what specifically is the “new self” in Christ created? _____

→With a partner:

1. Throughout this passage, Paul implies personal choice with regard to the “old self” and the “new self.” Do you ever fall into the patterns of “the old self” as highlighted in question 2 above?
2. What does it mean to you that the Bible says to you that you are created “to be like God” in righteousness and holiness?
 - Look at Ephesians 5:1-2. How do Paul’s words here deepen or modify the concept of being “like God”?

Return to the group and reread verses 25-32.

1. In verses 25-28, what guidelines does Paul advocate for righteous and holy living as members of one body?

2. Does our Christian culture encourage or discourage truthfulness among believers? Explain. _____
3. In your experience, why does anger give “the devil a foothold” in a person’s life? _____
 - a. Explain Paul’s assumption in this phrase, “In your anger, do not sin.” _____
 - b. Does this assumption surprise you? Why does he not write, “Do not be angry.”? _____
4. In verse 28, using theft as an example of the “old self,” how does Paul go beyond simply ceasing to sin? What else does he advise? _____

→ With a partner:

1. *Is it easier for you to speak truthfully to a fellow believer than to someone outside the Kingdom? Do you encounter any barriers to honesty within the body?*
2. *Without using names, share an experience where “the sun [went] down” on your anger. Did it give Satan a foothold?*
3. *Again without using names, can you give any personal examples of someone who has converted the energy which used to be devoted to sin into serving and giving in the Kingdom?*

Return to the group and read the last admonitions in this passage (verses 29-32).

1. Briefly list them. _____
2. What does unwholesome talk mean to you? How do such words split the wholeness of the body? _____
3. Eugene Peterson translates verse 30 this way: “Don’t grieve God. Don’t break His heart. His Holy Spirit, moving and

breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for Himself. Don't take such a gift for granted." What does it mean to you that the Holy Spirit is "intimate"? How might it be possible to "grieve" Him? _____

4. Does verse 31 contradict verse 26 regarding anger? Explain.

5. Verse 32 contains a reversal of thought from negative attitudes and behaviors to positive ones. What 3 specific qualities does Paul advocate? _____
6. Paul says, "just as in Christ God forgave you." Usually, when we are faced with the task of forgiveness, it is because someone has hurt or offended us. How do we hurt God?

7. Read James 5:16. How does this verse expand the concept of forgiveness? _____
 - How are believers able to minister to one another in the matter of forgiveness? _____

→ With a partner:

1. *Share an experience where what came out of your mouth genuinely "built up" others for their benefit. In your every day work and living world, around people with whom you are most inclined to be candid, would you say your mouth speaks wholesome or unwholesome words generally?*
2. *Describe your sense of intimacy with the Holy Spirit. What parallel between intimacy and the capacity to "grieve" another exists?*
3. *For what might we need forgiveness from one another in the body of Christ?*
4. *Forgiveness is the heart of the Gospel. Yet some Christians live lives imprisoned and poisoned by the inability to forgive someone, in spite of the reality that "in Christ God forgave" them. What is your experience with confession and forgiveness within the Community of the King?*

5. *Is there someone from your life journey the Holy Spirit continues to prompt you to forgive in His intimacy with you?*
- *Note: the tenderness and pain related to this question may run very deep, and be very private. If you are not comfortable sharing with your partner about this, share that fact. Being able to forgive a terrible violation such as abuse, abandonment, betrayal, even death requires the miraculous work of God, for Whom “nothing is impossible.” Dwell in the intimacy of the Holy Spirit’s love and let Him lead you into healing, one step at a time.*

Concluding Discussion: (Group - 5 minutes)

- Does forgiveness mean condoning what has been done? Even though we forgive another person, why is forgiveness really a healing of ourselves as members of Christ’s Kingdom? Read Luke 23:34. How do the words of Jesus model another level of forgiveness?

Living the Lenten Challenge

- The need to forgive, and the ability to forgive are often both unfolding realities given by the Holy Spirit whose work intimately reveals layers of hurt and the need for healing and cleansing. This week, choose to pray specifically for guidance where and how you may be bound by old hurts, wounds, betrayals, attitudes...Pray for the power to be rid of bitterness, rage, malice, or anger. As you dwell on how God has forgiven you, let the Spirit show you ways to step down the trail of forgiving another.

Prayers for God’s Kingdom People

○ Lord, we seek Your Face. And, we find You at the cross, whispering hoarsely in Your suffering, speaking words of forgiveness...“They know not what they do.” Lord, we know not what we do. Being locked in old pains and hurts, feeling justified in our anguish, we sometimes don’t even realize we need to forgive. Yet, we want to be kind and compassionate, readily forgiving and being forgiven. Move among us in your Kingdom, Lord, that the fresh wind of Your Spirit may reveal any places where we are “darkened in understanding,” where ignorance has “hardened our hearts.” Help us to live as

“Children of the Light,” as Kingdom men and women. Especially in this Lenten season, as Holy Week approaches, may we learn with new depth just what Your cross shows us in the journey of forgiving.

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Sunday, March 28, 2010

LIFE TOGETHER in the Community of the King

“LOVE One Another”

1 John 4:7

Warming Up: (*Partners - 5 minutes*)

- In his introduction to the book of 1 John, Eugene Peterson in The Message says, “The two most difficult things to get straight in life are love and God. More often than not, the mess people make of their lives can be traced to failure or stupidity or meanness in one or both of these areas.” Do you agree? Explain.

Kingdom Living in the Scriptures: (*Group and Partners - 45 minutes*)

Read 1 John 4:7-21.

1. How many times does John use the word “love” in this passage?

2. Based on this entire Biblical text, how do you understand the relationship between God and love and you and others?

3. How many times does John say “love one another”?

4. Who initiates the love which we are to direct to each other?

5. How is love the visible expression of the invisible God, according to verse 12? _____

6. What do you discover about the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives regarding love? _____

7. What is the connection between love and fear?

→ **With a partner:**

1. *Is the word “love” a frequent part of your vocabulary? Are you more inclined to use it seriously or frivolously (“I love you.” or “I love ice cream.”)?*
2. *Explain how you “know and rely on the love God has for you.” (verse 16)*
3. *How have fear and love intersected in your life? Do you agree that “perfect love drives out fear”? (verse 18)*

Return to the group.

- According to the NIV Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible, page 1571, four Greek words are used in the New Testament to express love:
 - *Erao* which is intense, passionate love, expressing strong desires ranging from patriotism to sexual love
 - *Storgeo* which is natural love, family love, especially between parents and children
 - *Phileo* which is love of personal affection, fondness for something, often love of friends...based on the loveliness or attractiveness of the object
 - *Agapao* which is rooted in the mind and will of the subject. It means to value, esteem, prize, treat as precious, be devoted to. Action is done for the benefit of the object. For example, God placed such value on mankind, though he deserved nothing, that He sacrificed His Son.

1. Agape love gives value and worth to its object because that value and worth reside in the mind of the *subject*, the lover, not in the loveliness of the object of love. What does this mean when John says “love (agape) one another”? Why does his direction not mean love the nice people in your church?
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2. What makes it possible for us to “treat as precious” and “be devoted to” those within the body whom we find annoying, unpleasant, or even hateful? _____
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3. Revisit “we love because He first loved us.” (verse 19) Using this understanding of agape, how does this amplify God’s love for you? _____
4. What is the power that fills you with agape for brothers and sisters? _____
5. **➔With a partner:** *Read I Thessalonians 3:12, 4:9 and I Peter 4:8. Each of these passages also uses agape love. “Overflow” implies images such as out-of-control, abundance, even flooding. Have you ever felt so flooded with God’s love that you were out of control; you let down your reserves and self-control, and just poured out love to others? Explain.*
6. **➔Continuing with your partner:** *What experiences with God have taught you love? Without using names, have you ever experienced love for someone for whom you could find no beauty or attractiveness or personal connection, someone you have loved purely with agape love, grounded in the God-given value in your mind in spite of the other person’s negative qualities? Explain.*

Concluding Discussion: (Group - 5 minutes)

- After 2000 years, the body of Christ continues to carry the message of God’s great love to a hurting world. But the body sometimes doesn’t speak very clearly. As the Community of the King, why are Peter’s words, “love covers a multitude of sins” profound and hopeful? How can we in our small groups and in our church as a whole be filled not with philio, which only loves the deserving, but with agape, which sees and values with the heart of Christ?

Living the Lenten Challenge

- This week write down 3 people whom you love deeply, not relatives or family, but members of the Community of the King. Where and how do you see agape love at work in you in their lives? Also write down the name of someone within the Community for whom you have little or no personal attraction. Pray for agape love to fill you as the Holy Spirit softens your heart to bestow worth “because God first loved you.”

Prayers for God's Kingdom People

Of all the challenges Your word puts before us, surely the greatest is love. We think we know what love is, but so often it is merely attraction to that which pleases us or benefits us. Help us to dwell in the amazing truth that our capacity to love comes only from You and Your love. You started this. You call us to participate. You give us worth by grace alone. If we are ever to be Your community, we must be marked by Your love. Nowhere is that love more clearly shown than from the cross. As this Holy Week reminds us through worship, through Scripture, through prayer, and in the images of Your Passion, teach us to love one another. Teach us to see in others the worth You demonstrated on the cross, even for those who nailed You there.

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