

We are a Church Family through . . . Christian Fellowship

Or:

March 30, 2008

Year A: Second Sunday of Easter

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

[Matthew 25:37-40 \(NRSV\)](#)

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Little River Community Church was located just down the street from First Memorial Church. Since they were located on the same street in the same town, the two youth groups from the two churches were often competing with each other. They participated in the same softball league, the same basketball league, and had become intense rivals. Little River Community was always trying to outdo First Memorial and vice versa.

One Sunday, following a Bible study on serving others, the youth group at Little River Community Church decided to go out into their community and put their faith into action. The youth pastor organized the kids into "ministry teams" and challenged them to go out and to serve others. They could do anything – but they needed to remember: "Do what Jesus would do."

So the youth group from Little River Community Church fanned out into the neighborhood and starting serving. One group washed cars for people up and down the street. Another group pumped gas for free at a self-service gas station. Another group went to a convalescent home and sang songs to the shut-in who lived there.

After the time was up, all the ministry teams returned to the church and reported what they had done. Each group had stories to tell, as they shared what they learned and how it made them feel.

One of the groups told of how they had gone to serve a woman who lived close to First Memorial Church. When First Memorial, their rival, was mentioned, everyone groaned. "We mowed grass, raked leaves and did yardwork for her," said one of the students. "She was real nice. And after we were through, they invited us in and prayed for us. And then she said, 'You young people from First Memorial Church are always doing such nice things for us old folks.'"

"Oh no!" said the youth pastor. "She thought you were from First Memorial? Well, I hope you set her straight. Did you tell her that you weren't from First Memorial but from Little River Community?"

“Well. . . no we didn’t,” said the student, surprised by the youth pastor’s question. “You told us to do what Jesus would do, didn’t you? We decided that Jesus would just keep his mouth shut.”¹

You know today’s sermon could easily be titled: *WWJD: What Would Jesus Do?* You may remember those bracelets from 10 or 15 years ago. And if this sermon was written some 50 or 75 years ago it would be titled: *In His Steps*. That is the title of a book written by Charles Sheldon. Different names but they share the same premise – what would the world be like if we lived by the standard of Jesus Christ? That is at the heart of our first Core Value.

We are A Church Family through Christian Fellowship. The word fellowship means many things: a community of like minded people, an association of friends, a partnership of those who want to accomplish the same goals. And then there is Rick Warren. In his book, *The Purpose Driven Life* he says that God created us for five purposes. These are based on the model of the first churches found in the New Testament. Our first purpose is worship – what we are doing here today. Our second purpose is fellowship. He describes this second purpose as being a part of God’s family. He writes: “The local church is the classroom for learning how to get along in God’s family. It is a lab for practicing unselfish, sympathetic love. As a participating member you learn to care about others and share the experiences of others: ‘If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it. Or if one part of our body is honored, all the other parts share its honor.’ Only in regular contact with ordinary, imperfect believers can we learn real fellowship and experience the New Testament truth of being connected and dependent on each other.

“Biblical fellowship is being as committed to each other as we are to Jesus Christ. God expects us to give our lives for each other. Many Christians who know John 3:16 are unaware of 1 John 3:16: ‘Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.’ This is the kind of sacrificial love God expects you to show other believers – a willingness to love them in the same way Jesus loves you.”²

Christian fellowship is more than just about coming to a place and hanging out. It is more the just sitting down and having coffee with one another. It is more than just visiting. Christian fellowship in the words of Jesus is feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, and clothing the naked. Christian fellowship is not just gathering together it is just as Christ tells us, “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Shortly after World War II came to a close, Europe began picking up the pieces. Much of the Old Country had been ravaged by war and was in ruins. Perhaps the saddest sight of all was that of little orphaned children starving in the streets of those war-torn cities.

¹ Wayne Rice. *More HOT Illustrations for Youth Talks: 100 MORE attention-getting stories, parables, & anecdotes*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: ZondervanPublishingHouse. 1995.) 19.

² Rick Warren. *The Purpose Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan. 2002.) 133-134.

Early one chilly morning an American soldier was making his way back to the barracks in London. As he turned the corner in his Jeep, he spotted a little boy with his nose pressed to the window of a pastry shop. Inside, the cook was kneading dough for a fresh batch of doughnuts. The hungry boy stared in silence, with his nose pressed against the window, drooling and watching the cook's every move. The soldier pulled his jeep to the curb, stopped, and got out.

"Son, would you like some of those?"

The boy was startled. "Oh yeah. . . I would."

The American stepped inside and bought a dozen, put them in a bag and walked back to where the lad was standing in the foggy cold of the London morning. He smiled, held out the bag and said simply, "Here you are."

As he turned to walk away, he felt a tug on his coat. He looked back and heard the child ask quietly, "Mister. . . are you God?"³

I'll be honest with you, my definition of Christian Fellowship changed through this process. I don't think I am alone here. When we met to come up with our Core Values we kept right before us our Mission Statement. Then we watched a video on the values of The United Methodist Church, then we spent some time looking over census data on our community, and we prayed and then we prayed some more. Then we realized something – maybe it was through simple discernment, maybe it was just the obvious staring us in the face – but we realized that the definition of Christian Fellowship meant those words from verse 40: "are members of my family." Those words mean that we would drop everything we are doing just so we could be there for another. We would do this because we would have the same assurance that it would be done to us and for us.

Now I know I'm not sharing anything here that you don't already know – but there are very few of us here in Chadron that are blood relatives. Because of the college, because of the Forest service, because of this job and that, very few of us are actually from Chadron. And what does that mean? It means that we have to create our own family – a church family. The creation of this family is a unique and special family. A family based on the values of God. Values based on Christian Fellowship.

Dr. Leo Buscaglia taught at the University of Southern California. He tells of going to a nursing home with one of his students, named Joel. A number of elderly people were lying in beds in old cotton gowns, staring at the ceiling. Joel looked around and asked Dr. Buscaglia, "What'll I do?"

He said, "You see that woman over there? Go say hello."

The student went over and said, "Uh, hello."

The woman looked at him suspiciously, then asked, "Are you one of my relatives?"

"No," answered Joel.

"Good!" said the old woman. "Sit down, young man!" She began to pour out her story to him. She knew much pain and suffering. She had made her peace and with her approaching death, but no one had cared to listen -- until

³ Rice.

Joel. He started to visit her once a week. Soon, that day began to be known as "Joel's Day." He would come, and all the folks would gather.

The elderly woman asked her daughter to bring her a glamorous dressing gown. When Joel came for his visit, he found her sitting up in bed in a beautiful satin gown, her hair done up stylishly. Before long, others in the ward were dressing up for Joel.⁴

Are our decisions made with God in mind? Do we operate as if Christ were standing right in front of us? These Core Values are not just words on a piece of paper. They are a statement of who we are. And if we can not stand here and say we are doing them right now then we have a goal in front of us of who we want to become. Our first Core Value is to be A Church Family through Christian Fellowship. We do this through mission. A couple of years ago a little rain storm in Louisiana caused such damage that the state still has not recovered. A group of quick thinking volunteers asked people in this community to gather up diapers, pillows, clothes, you name it and shove it into a horse trailer and travel half-way across the country to say we are in fellowship. A year later a small little brush fire came over the hill top and a nice police man said to the pastor of this church, you've got to leave and not come back. And it was someone from this church family that took in this man, his wife, his three scared children, and their dog. This is Christian fellowship. Our first Core Value is to treat others as the family of God.

You may not be familiar with the name, Stephen Grellet. Grellet was born in France, was a Quaker, and died in New Jersey in 1855. That's about all we know about him, except for a few lines he penned that have made him immortal:

"I shall pass through this world but once. Any good I can do, or any kindness that I can show any human being, let me do it now and not defer it. For I shall not pass this way again."⁵

And what does this kindness look like? How do we show compassion in this life?

In My Father's House, Grace Fletcher tells about her father who is a pastor. His name was Lee Nies. One afternoon, Lee heard the parsonage doorbell ring and opened the door to find Molly Stark wanting to see him. She was quite upset.

"Lee, I've got to talk to you," she said. "I'm going to die."

He replied, "We all are, Molly. Come in and sit down, and tell me about it."

She explained that she had just come from the doctor's office and had been told she had only about four months to live. Lee listened intently, sympathized with her, and then said, "It's a raw deal you are getting, Molly."

She smiled.

"Lee, you are wonderful," she said. "But you see, I don't mind so much about myself. It's my boy, Jimmy. Jimmy is only 10. He's so young. His father is a good enough man, but he's never quite grown up. I'm worried that he won't be able to cope with everything."

⁴ "Joel's Day." *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part III.* 39.

⁵ Dan Safarik. "Show kindness in this life." *Ibid., Part V.* 27.

Lee didn't answer immediately. He was thinking about his own son with the good old biblical name of Bildad, who had died as a little baby about five years before. Finally he spoke.

"Molly, I'll make a bargain with you. I'll look after your Jimmy if you will promise to ride herd on my Bildad. He's 5 now – the right age for kindergarten and getting into mischief down here. So, when you see him, tell him his dad asked that you look after him."

Molly was laughing and crying at the same time. Then she said, "Lee, it's a bargain. You make it seem so, so everyday. Funny, everybody has to die, but you never expect it to happen to you.

Lee's voice was soft as he said, "What people forget, Molly, is that we are living in eternity right now. God holds the past, the present, and the future. And He holds all families, wherever they are, together, safe in the Everlasting Arms."

When the time came, just a few weeks later, Lee put his arm around Jimmy and told him of the deal, saying, "Your mother is looking after my Bildad from now on, and I'm going to look after you."⁶

What does Christian Fellowship look like? It is in those times when we look at each other through the lens of Christ and we say, "we are family." We look at after each other and say, "we do this for you for we do this for Christ." This is our first Core Value and what it means to be A Church Family that Makes a Difference. Amen.

⁶ *Ibid.* 29.