

Growing More Engaged with Meaningful Fellowship

John 13-17

So friends, why have you decided to come to church today?

It's probably been a long week,
I'm sure there are other demands on your time,
but what made you say to yourself "No, today I'm heading to church"?

If I were to survey everyone who came along today I'd hear different responses.

Most of us would say something like
"I'm a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ
and so I'm coming along to receive some encouragement in my faith"
My guess is most of us would say something like that.

But we may have other reasons as well, and some of us will have more than one:

You might be here because you've made some good friends here at church
You might be here in the hope of making some good friends
Many people start coming to church to support a family member or friend.
We have a number of people in our church
who first become connected with us for that very reason.

Maybe you're here to reconnect with God,
Maybe you're here because you have spiritual questions
Maybe you're here because you don't like being at home,
Maybe you're here because it's a discipline that you've developed
and you cannot think of anywhere else you would be on a Sunday.
... Maybe you're here because you like the morning tea, I don't know!

There are all sorts of different reasons why we might come together.

And to all these reasons there is one more that we can add:

We gather together as a fellowship of believers
because it's what Jesus himself did,
and as followers of Jesus we want to imitate his example.

It's week six in our series entitled *Growing More like Jesus*,

a sermon series asking the question
"If we are wanting to become more like Jesus,
then what kind of people must we become? What kind of person was Christ?
And the witness of the NT Gospels is that Jesus was very keen on fellowship.
He was no solo operator;
right from the beginning he had a group of people around him—
his understanding of spirituality was a communal one.

And perhaps the most detailed example of Christ's practice of fellowship
is the Last Supper.

This final get-together of Jesus and his friends is recorded in all four Gospels,

with the most extensive description (5 chapters!) in the Gospel of John.
If we wish to imitate Jesus as he met with his friends,
then the Last Supper is worth studying as an example of how he did it.

What ought we expect from our time together?

The Last Supper as recorded by John gives us a useful model,
and I think an encouraging model.
It demonstrates what is good about Christian fellowship.
Sometimes church feels like a chore, doesn't it?
But we see in this example something very valuable about meeting together.

Within John's description of the Last Supper I see three broad components.

The first is recorded for us in Ch 13,
where we see that this time together was marked by an act of love.

Footware was minimal in Jesus day, and roads were dusty,
and so, like many of us, shoes were left at the door
but feet still needed washing.

This task was relegated to the most junior person in the house,
like a servant or a child, but here in Ch 13 Jesus stands and, as John describes
from v4, he took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵ After that,
he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the
towel that was wrapped around him.

Over the last four weeks

some of us have been gathering together on Sunday afternoons
as Nick Speyer leads us through a five-week parenting course.
And the topic for one of the weeks
was all about how we show love to other members of our family.
The theory adopted by the course is that there are 5 love languages.
Have you heard of this before?
There are at least 5 different ways we can show love towards other people,
and we each have a preference in how we show love and how we receive it.
The idea is that you work out how people in your family like to receive love.

So the five languages are:

Words of encouragement,
The giving of gifts
Spending quality time
Physical touch, and
Acts of service.

Now this is not a Biblical theory;

you won't find this list explicitly stated in any book of the Bible,
but these five ways of loving are *reflected* in Scriptures.
and there are many examples as we observe the early church in action.

In Acts 14 Paul makes a return visit to the churches he planted
in order to *encourage* them were told.

In Romans 15 Paul tells the Romans that he plans to visit them
to not only receive their assistance as he carries out his work,
but also to *enjoy their company for a while*, he writes.

In 2 Corinthians 9 Paul encourages the church in Corinth
to prepare a financial *gift* for churches in Judea who are experiencing famine.

In Acts 20, as Paul says goodbye to the Elders of the Ephesian Church,
Luke observes how the elders wept as they embraced Paul and kissed him.
Luke then writes how they had to tear themselves away from them.

And here in John 13, we have Jesus demonstrating his love by an act of service.

And he asks his followers to do the same.

Ch 13, Vs 14-15. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also
should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have
done for you.

How literally should we take this command?

On one level it's a bit redundant because foot washing of this sort
is no longer a part of everyday life.

But the call to sacrificially love others is still very relevant.

I wonder, is there one love language that you excel at?

I know someone who recently embarked on a ministry of card writing.

Encouraging words written on a card, a very basic gift.

I know others who are very good at spending time with the shut-ins.

I see others who are always willing to serve and lend a hand

to those who could use it.

It might be good idea in our Growth Groups

to share how each of us like to *be loved*.

Imagine if your group was marked by everyone offering simple gestures
that really hit the spot for one another.

That would be a wonderful experience, wouldn't it?

It's what a Christian fellowship can be really good at

given we have this example given to us by Jesus.

And the effect of a loving fellowship will not only be a wonderful experience

It will also send a really positive message to those who are watching.

Ch 13, vs 34-35: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so
you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you
love one another."

When we work hard at loving one another

we're saying something about our identity,

that we are followers of the one

who has the greatest love for humanity that the world has ever seen.

Love in the church reflects the love of Jesus.

A love shown, not only by a basin and a towel wrapped around the waist,
 But supremely by a bloody death on a cross,
 a death willingly endured as an act of service for us.
 (That's what the foot washing was actually about:
 Jesus was explaining what he was about to do on Good Friday).

We are in the business of promotion:
 of promoting Christ as the one whose love is there for us to receive.
 Now imagine if you took up a job as a spokesperson for— I don't know—
 the Cancer Council of Australia.
 And imagine you turned up to your first media event with a sunburnt face,
 and as the cameras started rolling you took a couple of drags on a cigarette.
 The message you have to deliver would be undermined by your actions!

Our message is one that speaks of the selfless giving of Jesus
 for underserving sinners like you and me.
 And looking at what we have here in John 13,
 it's a message that's designed for us to live and demonstrate
 and not merely one to simply speak.

And so the feet are washed,
 and then from ch 14 the gathering shifts gear until the end of ch 16.
 After his act of service Jesus takes on the role of teacher,
 as he instructs his disciples with a very detailed and extensive lesson.
 This is not only a time of loving fellowship
 but also a time of learning fellowship.

And one of the topics he touches on during this time of learning
 is the subject of Christian teaching itself;
 Jesus is teaching about teaching, the disciples are learning about learning.
 And Jesus teaches us that in the life of the Church
 the Holy Spirit is our ongoing instructor.
 The Holy Spirit has many tasks, and a key one is that he teaches God's people.
 Jesus mentions the Holy Spirit a number of times in this capacity,
 one example is Ch 14:26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in
 my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

How is the Holy Spirit going to do this? What are his teaching methods?
 The writing of the NT is one way.
 We believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the first generation of Christians
 as they wrote the gospels and the letters.
 And another way is through those in our current day and age
 who are empowered by the HS to teach.
 You may remember Paul's discussion in various places in the NT
 about how the HS equips all believers with abilities,
 some of whom have the ability to teach others.

So the HS spirit is our teacher.

He teaches us through our study of the Bible,
through our preaching of the Bible,
through the Bible readings that we have in church.
The old fashioned word for Bible reading was Bible lesson—
its an opportunity for us to learn something.
I wonder how focused we are on listening.

What was the last concert you attended?

For me it was Hugh Jackman in concert at the Sydney Entertainment centre.
Thye've pulled it down now so that's how long ago I went to a concert.
I'm not a big Hugh Jackman fan but Jas said "were going" so off we went.
And I went with an open mind, I thought "he's got to famous for reason,
let's see what the boy from Turrmurra can do!"
Turns out he can do a lot! A triple threat! I was very entertained!

And so was everyone else at the concert that night.

Everyone's eyes were peeled and focused on the stage.
No-one was reading their email,
no-one was having a conversation with their neighbor.
People had their phones out alright,
but they were trying make a bootleg copy of the performance.
They didn't want to miss a thing.

And so if this is the attention we give to Hugh Jackman,

then how much more should we be listening
when it's the Holy Spirit himself who is speaking?
This is who we've come to hear!
So lets open our ears and our minds and our hearts
and allow the Holy Spirit to teach us as we gather.

What God has to teach us is really important.

Jesus wanted his friends well taught
so they would last the distance as disciples:

John 16:1 "All this I have told you so that you will not fall away. ² They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God. ³ They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. ⁴ I have told you this, so that when their time comes you will remember that I warned you about them.

It is a dangerous habit to start resisting or avoiding the Holy Spirit's teaching.

When I was in year 12 my best friend was given a car by his Father.
It was a black Toyota Celica (a sports car basically)
and so we would drive around all over Sydney. We had a great time.

One day the rain came down after a dry spell and so the road was slippery.

My friend started to aquaplane,
 and the worst thing you can do when you loose traction
 is to slam on the breaks and violently steer. But my friend didn't do that.
 Foot off the accelerator, foot off the break,
 a gentle steer in the direction he wanted to go,
 and it was over almost as soon as it begun.

Now how did he know the right thing to do?
 When his father bought him the car
 he insisted that his son do an advanced driver training course.
 That extra bit of learning, saved our bacon on that day.
 We could have very easily become yet another P-plate statistic.

Do you want to avoid becoming a spiritual statistic?
 Do you want to last the distance so that you're still standing on the final day?
 Then don't neglect your spiritual education.
 It's very easy to get into a frame of mind that says
 "I'll go to church if I have nothing else on, if there's nothing more pressing"
 What could be more pressing than to ensure you and your family's salvation?
 We must keep exposing ourselves to the teaching of the Holy Spirit,
 a teaching that happens as we gather together.

How does this meeting end? Have a quick look at ch 17. It ends with prayer;
 Jesus demonstrates a commitment to *lean* upon God (had to find an 'L' word!)
 I wont say much about this point because
 I spoke at length about depending upon God in prayer a couple of weeks ago.
 I'll only to say that, with the prayer of Jesus here in ch 17
 we have a Christian gathering that extends in three directions.
 We gather to love and serve one another,
 we gather to receive instruction from God,
 and we gather to send something back.
 In John's account of the Last Supper it's this prayer in ch 17.
 Other gospels add the detail that the gathering sang a hymn.
 And so with this return of praise and prayer the meeting comes to an end.

Christian fellowship can be hard work.
 Often we might find it dissatisfying, perhaps boring.
 Sometimes we might feel that our own suburban church is not very exciting.
 There were only 13 people at the last supper, and Judas left half-way through.
 But they got through some pretty meaningful stuff.

When we think about these three dimensions,
 is there one that you feel might be your strength?
 The HS doesn't only equip teachers, he equips doers and prayers.
 And if you seek to bless others in one of these things,
 that will help our church continue to be a very meaningful fellowship.

On the other hand it's worth noting whether you have a blind spot.
I'm all on board for church as a place of learning,
but I have to be careful that I'm not disregarding the two vectors,
because Jesus didn't disregard them,
and I want to be like him.

Pray.