

## **The Blessing of Christian Community** **Romans 1:8-12**

Our lives have really been shaken up lately and when that happens it usually makes us think about things we otherwise might not pay attention to. C.S. Lewis uses the illustration of a glass beaker full of water that has a layer of sediment settled on the bottom. You usually don't notice the sediment, but if you shake the beaker it gets stirred up and comes to the surface. Lewis used that to talk about sin that comes to our attention when we go through suffering, but that image also applies to other things as well. When life gets shaken up, lots of things come to our attention that we weren't thinking about before.

One of the things that's come to the surface this week is the importance of being in community, and especially the importance of being in Christian community. A week ago we were all enjoying the blessings of Christian community as we gathered for worship and small groups and Recharge, but then the virus started to spread along with the restrictions on gatherings. And here we are only a week later not being able to meet and all of a sudden we realize a little bit more clearly how important Christian community is in our lives. Sometimes you don't realize how important something is until it's taken away for a while.

Our whole family went to a St. Paul Saints game about three years ago as part of Kinship event where Amy works. We rode together on a bus to downtown St. Paul, and when we got there Amy had responsibilities with her job and I was responsible for our four kids. All I had to do was get them from the gate where we entered to our seats, which were on the opposite side of the stadium. We started out walking together as a group, but one of our kids was lagging behind, so at one point I turned around to scold them and get them to catch up.

When we got to the section where we were seated, I did a quick head count and noticed that I couldn't see Ayla, who was 4 years old at the time. I kept looking and didn't see her so I began to ask the people we were with and they hadn't seen her either. We were in a crowded area of the park – right near the front entrance and I started to worry. Where was she? Did Amy somehow get her? Did she wander out the front entrance into the streets of St. Paul? Did someone take her?

It was about that time that I saw Amy up ahead, so I asked her: "Do you have Ayla?" And with an alarmed look she said she didn't. That's when I really started

to worry. We started spreading out and searching. I went directly to the front entrance and scanned the whole area. When I didn't see her there I searched the main atrium. Amy had notified a security guard and they began looking too. I kept walking and searching. I walked about halfway around the ballpark, beyond the point I thought her little legs could carry her, and then I turned back to search again. It was terrible. I walked back to the place I had started when I finally heard good news – Ayla had been found! One of Amy's coworkers spotted her with an adult that was bringing her to security.

When I had turned around to get the kid that was lagging behind, Ayla veered off at that same time to go look at a restaurant that looked like a pirate ship. So we walked right by her without even knowing it. The whole thing really shook me and once we got to our seats with all four kids in view I had a much deeper appreciation that they were safe and we were all together. I didn't realize how big of a blessing that was until it was taken away.

Monday this past week was a heavy day for me. As I started to read all the recommendations from the CDC it became very clear that church gatherings of any size were going to have to be shut down. It was bad enough when I realized we couldn't hold worship services, but I thought at least we could ramp up Small Groups and keep doing Recharge. So when I learned that those too were going to have to be suspended it was really disappointing. Sometimes you don't know how important something is until it's taken away for a while...

This morning, because of the circumstances we're in, I thought it would be a good time for us to remember how much of a blessing it is to be part of an interconnected church family and use this opportunity to consider if there are any changes God may want us to make as we move forward. I was reminded of two passages of Scripture where the apostle Paul expresses his longing to be together with a couple of groups of Christians. In one case he had never been with them before and in the other he had deep interconnected relationships, but in both cases he talks about the importance of being together.

The first passage is in the book of Romans. This is a group of believers he had never been with before.

Read Romans 1:8-12.

*<sup>8</sup>First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. <sup>9</sup>For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in*

*the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you <sup>10</sup> always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.*

*<sup>11</sup> For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— <sup>12</sup> that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.*

Paul was longing to get together with the Christians in Rome because he knew the sweet benefits of connecting in Christian community. He knew how much they needed one another. The people in Rome needed him to strengthen and encourage them, and Paul needed their encouragement and support just as much. He had experienced the mutual encouragement of being in Christian community in other churches and he was longing to have that with the Christians in Rome as well.

I hope you feel some of that same longing this morning. We need each other to make it in this life. We are following the same person and going in the same direction. We have the same purpose and mission and needs. And we face the same struggles, temptations, and enemy. When we are born again in Christ, it's not just about getting saved and having peace with God, it's about getting a new family – it's about getting a new network of support to help us in living the Christian life. And that family is beautiful – with all our quirks and problems – and because of what's happened this week I think all of us can see that more clearly. We have been given a gift and it's one another.

Paul writes to another group of Christians, this time in Philippi, and these were people he had a long history with – they were very dear to his heart. But at the time he wrote this passage he wasn't able to be with them because he was in prison.

Read Philippians 1:3-8.

*<sup>3</sup> I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, <sup>4</sup> always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, <sup>5</sup> because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup> And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. <sup>8</sup> For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.*

If you put yourself in Paul's shoes, you have many reasons to be discouraged. He was in prison and he had been for a number of years. He was about to stand trial before the Roman Emperor Nero, who had the power to end his life. There were even people on the outside that were trying to ruin his reputation while he was stuck in prison. Yet when you read these verses, all you read about is his joy and confidence and thankfulness. Where did that come from? Later on he talks about how it came from Jesus, but here you can see much of it also came from the relationships and encouragement he had from this beloved group of believers. He knew that they were with him in prayer and that they were partnering with him in his efforts to spread the gospel. Paul wasn't suffering alone – he had close, personal friends at the church in Philippi and that brought him encouragement and support, even when he was in prison.

In a way it kind of feels like we have to be under house arrest for the next several weeks and the circumstances are going to be discouraging. Where are you going to find the support and encouragement you need to find joy and thankfulness in times like these? I hope, like Paul you will find much of it from the close personal relationships you have with other believers, and thankfully you can still connect with them in many ways – much easier than Paul could. Maybe you realize this morning that you don't really have that network of support from your church family... I encourage you to take this opportunity to change that – to reach out to people you've met at church to see how they're doing and begin to develop friendships with them.

Christian community and friendship is so important and I hope you are seeing that a lot more clearly this week. So in light of this situation I want to ask you to do a few things. Take some time to evaluate your priorities when it comes to your efforts to connect with Christian community. Life can get so busy that we can neglect the practice of getting together. Sometimes the most we get together is one or twice a month at church. That's not enough – not if we're going to lean on one another for encouragement and support. When this time of separation is over maybe it's time for you to join a small group, or have people from church over for supper. Maybe you need to start serving in an area of ministry that interests you so that you can build relationships with other people who are serving. What can you do to connect when things get back to normal?

What can you do to connect right now? We have a huge benefit that Paul never had. We have modern technology so that at least everyone in our church family has a phone and can talk on the phone. Most of us also have email, texting,

Facebook, and other social media platforms. Now more than ever it is important to communicate with people in these ways. Let them know you're thinking about them. Call people to see how they're doing. Share prayer requests. Build friendship.

And finally, what can you do to care for the people in our church and community who were already isolated and home-bound before any of this coronavirus stuff even happened? I'm thinking about the elderly, the shut-ins, those who are chronically ill and who feel sick or pain all the time so they rarely ever get out. You've experienced a little bit of what it's like to be homebound and maybe that can stir up some compassion for those who go through that all the time. With the extra time you've got at home maybe there's something you can do to reach out and brighten their day. Maybe your kids could make a card or draw a picture. Now might be the perfect time to build a friendship that will help them to feel connected and not forgotten. If you need help finding out who you could contact – contact the leaders of the Caring Team: Wendy Bachman or Paul and Rachel Justice.