

Acts 2:46-47, 1 John 1:5-9, Ps. 133, Romans 13:8-10

Nov. 19

Friday morning I went to the Electric Brew in Goshen for a meeting and I bumped into two women who I have known most of my life from Walnut Hill. I told them that I needed to get home because I needed to work on this sermon. They asked what the subject was and I said fellowship. And they said “well, maybe you should just sit here with us and we should have some fellowship and maybe we'll help you write the sermon.” I didn't actually sit down because it was Friday after all and I was feeling some time crunch, but my friend, Liz, told the story of how there were four couples at Walnut Hill some 40 years ago who all had children approximately the same age and because they all knew each other from church they began fellowshiping outside of the Sunday morning and Wednesday Evening Times. They walked with another through the hills and valleys of life. These were and continue to be important relationships, even though 2 of the couples left Walnut Hill for other churches.

This woman continued with her story about her son who has mostly only attended large churches in his adult years if at all. And he has told his mother that he really wishes he had what they had when he was young. It is hard to find Christian fellowship in places where you are one of many and where getting to know one another is not emphasized.

That is hardly the case in a church like FoH. In fact, I'm not sure a sermon on fellowship in a generic sense is needed at all. So that's not what I'm going to do.

As I've gotten to know you, I am sure that you chose that name deliberately, because it means something to you. Perhaps you were thinking of the biblical Greek word, *koinonia*, which we translate as fellowship. Other ways to translate that word, depending on the context of the passage would be a share in something, participation, intimacy, communion, community.

The Oxford dictionary defines fellowship as “friendly association, especially with people who share one's interests.”

Friendly association and shared interests. The church is not the only place this can be found. Clubs, bowling leagues, AA groups, meeting buddies after work at a bar, these are all places where people can find friendly associations and shared interests.

In the Acts Scripture about what the early disciples of Jesus were devoting themselves to, fellowship is listed along with apostle’s teaching and breaking of bread. Tumultuous events had just been happening. Jesus, their Messiah was arrested, Peter and others had betrayed Jesus in his time of need, he had been crucified but then broke all the laws of life and death and rose again. This was life-changing stuff! They were working out what this means, and people were joining their group who wanted a share in this unfolding drama. This is the interest they shared with one another that gave them purpose and a reason to be together, listening to teaching, eating together, and having conversations.

But it wasn’t long before the community began to struggle with one another. Loyalty to one group at the expense of another, unequal representation among leaders, people deceiving one another. Sounds like a bunch of losers, no? They call themselves Christians? JK, because this is every human group that I can think of.

This week in our fellowship we too have experienced various aspects of our humanity. We have come together to work towards making decisions about the future, about the shared interest that has held this community together for over 50 years. We have reason to feel good about the work that we're doing, about the people who are willing to serve in specific groups to gather more information to help us in our decision making. And we have experienced an act of vandalism, deception, very different opinions of what should happen and relational struggles.

Fellowship isn't mamby pamby stuff. It isn't just Holding hands and singing spirits songs and love and joy and peace flowing between us. It is wonderful when that happens and that is what we aim for to be more and more what we all experience. But it isn't the only story within our story as a fellowshipping community centered around Jesus.

Our Scripture today from 1 John can be a source of help and hope in the messiness of the real life of Christian communities. We recall that Fellowship happens when people have a shared interest. The Foundation of our shared interest that leads to human Fellowship, according to 1 John, is our fellowship with God, which causes us to walk in the light, as God is in the light and as God is the light.

Walking in the light as God is in the light is common language for apocalyptic literature of that time. Forces of light and dark and people were aligned with one or the other. You see this kind of language all over the New Testament and in other literature that did not make it into the Canon of Scripture.

I wonder if there was ever a time in the world that didn't seem apocalyptic—where the world as we know it didn't seem threatened, where the very survival of people we know and love wasn't threatened. We continue to hold our brothers and sisters in Palestine/Israel and especially in Gaza in our care and our prayer as their world is turned completely upside down. Our Anabaptist ancestors in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe certainly felt that their world was being turned upside down and wondered if these were signs of Jesus' imminent return.

On a much smaller scale, we here at this Fellowship feel that our community is in a tumultuous time, when things we reckoned would always be there for us, maybe won't be. It's uncomfortable, it's hard to live in the unknown, we grieve our losses and anticipate even more coming our way.

In some places in the New Testament and extra-canonical literature, you get a sense that it's about heaven and hell, angels and demons, right and wrong. Either you are a child of wrath or a child of light. All bad or all good. I know the authorship and dating of some of these letters in our Bible are contested, but to me, when I read the

whole of 1 John, this isn't the way the author is talking about light and darkness at all. It sounds much more like wisdom from an older person to their beloved children. His thesis is that if you do not have love, if you do not show love, you are not walking in the light. In chapter 2:11 he says, "But a person who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and lives in the darkness, and doesn't know where to go because the darkness blinds the eyes."

Maybe it is good to sometimes be jarred a little bit in our justification of ourselves as we pondered last week., in the Mary/Martha story and the story of the Good Samaritan. Its so much easier to blame others and to judge others for their lack of love than to look at our own hearts and minds. I really encourage each one of you for the rest of this Sunday to focus on your heart, your attitude and ask God to show you if love of your neighbor is your motivating factor for what you are saying and doing.

So if we take love of neighbor as the measuring stick for our walk being either in the light or dark, perhaps that will help us break out of these rounds of self-justification.

Self-justification seems to be part of Self-preservation. God has given us this instinct to keep us and the human race alive. And so many times we do and say things that are more about self-preservation than anything else. And this is where Jesus-shaped discipleship gets really hard. Loving Jesus more than loving our fight for what we want preserved, which is myself, my rights, my preferences, my opinions is nearly impossible.

John offers pastoral advice that each one of us would do well to take to heart. He says, Face it.

If any of us say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. Don't say that you're walking in the light when you're not. And don't deceive others. These deceptions and self-justifications hurt individuals and the well-being of the group.

John links walking in the light as God is in the light with having fellowship with one another. Fellowship is a direct result of walking in the light of God, kind of like the proof of it. If you walk in the light as he himself is in

the light, we have fellowship with one another. We have a shared interest, we participate in something that binds us together.

When we come up against that inner wall of impossibility to surrender our self-justification and self-preservation, pastor John gives us hope and a promise that we can take to the bank.

When we realize we are dipping into the darkness, we are not loving each other like we love ourselves and love God, there is a solution! We have a go-to guy and his name is Jesus. The simplicity of the formula is beautiful. Let us embrace it with gratitude and not overthink it and make it more complicated than it is.

Confess your sins.

Jesus is faithful.

Jesus will forgive.

Jesus will cleanse you from all the junk that led you to dip into the darkness in the first place.

Don't wallow in guilt. Don't wallow in shame. Get it off your chest. And then let the Spirit show you how to stand firm against sin and how to make things right and do better next time.

The beauty of being part of the community walking in the light, is that none of us has to take that journey alone. None of us have to figure it all out by ourselves. We have godly brothers and sisters who stand with us, support us and help us see the light.

Just like if you're walking a path in the woods at night, and the sky is overcast and you don't have a flashlight, and then someone with a flashlight comes up beside you and now you can see. That's what Christian fellowship does. The path is rough, rocky, roots popping up everywhere, but we can walk together in the light.

What does it look like? Maybe practice asking yourself, “what is the most loving thing I can do in this situation?” Sometimes showing love means having hard conversations, setting boundaries to ensure well-being. The first transition team worked out a set of relational standards that we use when we do this hard work. Of course it’s easier to talk about them than to put them into practice, but we are doing that together! We can do this. We can walk together in the light as God is in the light and our fellowship, our shared interest is the proof of that.

Paul gives us some concrete examples of what a love-driven fellowship among Christians looks like in very practical and concrete ways. So hear these words:

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup>love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup>Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup>Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup>Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup>Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ <sup>20</sup>No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’

<sup>21</sup>Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Let us ask ourselves, “what is the most loving thing I can do toward my neighbor,” as a way of loving God and preparing for the next phase of this hopeful Fellowship.