

Love Fueled Community (Love 3)
Hebrews 10:11-25 **Mark 13:1-8**

Welcome to our third sermon in the series about Love.

As you remember, I began with the Greatest Commandment: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. And Love your neighbor as yourself.*

Pretty heavy and life-changing stuff. Basically, learn to love and draw close to the Kingdom of God.

Then last week we turned to The Greatest Gift: *This poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had...*

Another heady teaching about priorities, sacrificial giving and placing God first in our lives.

And now, today, we come to the third part of this exploration of Love and the Christian faith; the idea of a love fueled community.

I find it to be a fascinating coincidence that the lectionary...that guide to scripture that divides the Bible into three parts, or “years” and acts as an outline to preachers and teachers...that the lectionary readings for this time of this year all focus on love and each provides an example of the relationship of love and giving in the life of the faithful.

If we are to truly begin to unpack the scripture for today, we must begin with an acknowledgement of the great offering that God has made to the world through Jesus Christ. Yes, we are in the midst of our autumn stewardship drive, however whatever we do, however we respond, it pales in comparison with the offering that God has made for us, for the world, in Jesus Christ.

Let’s face it, it is ONLY by recognizing God’s generous grace that we and truly begin to be grateful for the many things we have in life that we cannot earn and do not deserve. It is through Christ’s single offering that we have been perfected in love for all time.

But God has also given us the gift of the Holy Spirit, which assures us of the forgiveness of our sins by writing a new covenant on our hearts.

These two gifts alone – salvation through Christ and strength in the Holy Spirit – are motivation enough for giving generously to God out of a sense of irrepressible gratitude. But then we encounter even more when we hear our Epistle reading from Hebrews today.

Hebrews reminds us that the work of God is not merely individual but communal. Let that sink in for a moment.

The early followers of Christ would have had no problem with that concept, for Judaism, like most Eastern religions, is communal. Each action of every person of faith affects the entire body. You could use the old saying, “We’re all in this together” was never more true: As persons of faith, we ARE all in this together!

But things change, the focus shifts...over the years Christianity has been impacted by so many different cultures and philosophies, especially the individualism of the Greeks. The communal nature of our faith became more individual salvation. After movements such as pietism, our faith became more and more individualistic...“my” relationship with Christ, Jesus died for “me”. Both true statements, but both falling short of being a comprehensive reflection of the Kingdom of God.

Just as Hebrews reminds us that the work of God is communal, we are also told that Jesus, who is our high priest, presides over the “house of God”, describing us as a family whose relational ties are forged in our mutual kinship in Christ. We are indeed one together in the Kingdom of God, a community fueled by love. And in that community, whenever the Holy Spirit is mentioned, it is in the context of the body of Christ and the communal life to which all believers are responsible.

Translation? We are all called to be a part of One body, the Body of Christ.

It’s no wonder then that this passage from Hebrews ends with the reminder that all of us in the church are called to care and serve for each other. We do that in three ways:

- 1) Provoking each other to good deeds
- 2) Gathering together
- 3) Encouraging one another

Provoking each other to good deeds. What a wonderful turn of phrase, acknowledging that we grow most effectively in our faith when we are surrounded by others who are interested in challenging themselves and others toward spiritual growth.

By-the-way, if you ever wondered, this passage instructs us to forget about all that nonsense of being “spiritual without being religious”. There’s no such thing. The author of Hebrews clearly understands that spiritual maturity comes only in the context of Christian community. Why? Because we NEED one another for encouragement, challenge, and support as we grow and mature in our faith. We NEED to be inspired and challenged to be more, aim higher, grow deeper in our faith, and that comes from “provoking each other to good deeds”.

And then there is “gathering together”, a simple phrase that resonates in our world today. What’s the phrase, “the first step in success is showing up”? That is precisely what gathering together is, a recognition of the power of showing up.

Isolation can breed selfishness and separation from each other wrongly suggests that we can grow in our faith on our own. Instead, there is power in the act of joining together in solidarity with like-minded believers in gatherings of worship, discipleship and service.

Finally, “encouraging one another” means nothing more nor nothing less than nurturing those who are downtrodden and offering fellowship to others, regardless of whatever differences there might be among believers.

Years ago, there was in the church something called “The Church Growth Movement” that came from Fuller Seminary in the US. This growth movement for local congregations focused on one simple concept: Every congregation should go out and find people JUST LIKE THEM to join the congregation. If you want to be “successful” your congregation should all look alike, think alike, have the same basic background...that way you’ll appeal to the people you WANT to join your church...nice people...good people...people like you.

Do you recognize the hypocrisy, the errancy in that? Oh, for a while, it made for big growth in “country club” churches, but the question it failed to address was simple: Is that what God wants? Sadly, for that movement, the answer was and remains, “no”.

Encouraging one another means offering fellowship to others regardless of whatever differences there might be among believers.

As I look out this morning here at my IPC family, we get it. YOU get it! I only wish it was true among all Christian groups, even those here in our community. Sadly, it isn't. I guess it's not a surprise...it's so much easier to build a community where everyone is the same. But that's not what the author of Hebrews instructs. Instead, we are to build regardless of differences. Diversity is not a hinderance, but a blessing! And that is just the beginning!

Not only are we to draw together as a Christian fellowship, not only are we to welcome the downtrodden and offer fellowship to others, we are to ENCOURAGE.

How desperately we all need encouragement at times! Not false encouragement, some sort of participation medal for simply existing, but real, honest encouragement. The kind of “words of encouragement” that keep us going. Encouraging someone who needs comfort or support or assurance is one of the most precious, most sacred gifts we can give to someone.

Of course, that kind of encouragement is not without risks! Far from it. For this kind of sacred encouragement requires risk, vulnerability and persistence.

By the time we reach the end of today's passage, we are reminded that we are all called to be responsible stewards of God's church. Not out of a sense of duty or obligation but out of gratitude; gratitude for the gift that God has given us in salvation through Christ and through the strength of the Holy Spirit that creates and nurtures Christian community.

That's what it means, this idea of a love fueled community. It is to this community we are called. That is the answer to the “why” question we ask every time we have a stewardship drive. Why? Because we can do no other. We are all, each and every one of us, called to care and serve each other.

We are called to provoke each other to good deeds. To DO something, make your faith a living faith. Encourage one another to reflect their faith in thought, word and deed. Encourage, challenge, support, nurture one another in the doing of good deeds.

Gather together. It doesn't get much more simple. Gather together in the name of our risen Lord and Savior.

We are a communal faith and we grow in community. Simply showing up is a first step in this process. Oh, I know, and heaven knows I've been told plenty of times, you don't need to be in church to be a Christian. True! And you don't need to step on the pitch to call yourself a footballer. But, like the footballer, your greatest growth will ONLY come in the context of community. Like any team, growth, *excellence*, comes from first, showing up and second supporting and encouraging one another.

In the US one of the most famous baseball teams is the New York Yankees. Some of the best players in the world play on this team. Why is it, do you suppose, that year after year they fail to win the championship? Honestly, I don't know, but I have read that the greatest weakness of this group of players is that although they are all stars, they are not a team. What they have in skills is offset by what they DON'T have in mutual support and encouragement.

If we are to be the Body of Christ, if we are to live into our calling, we NEED each other.

We NEED people around us to provoke us into being our very best, reflecting Christ in our lives through our deeds;

We NEED each other to simply be there, witnessing by their presence that the body exists and continues to thrive;

We NEED each other to encourage and nurture and support us and be supported BY us as a part of our growth in faith. We need our sisters and brothers in faith to occasionally lean on, to remind us that what we do is important, to encourage us in good times and bad.

AND we NEED to be there as the encourager as well, making sure our sisters and brothers know of their importance as well.

That's what it means, "love fueled community". A community, OUR community, fueled by the love of and love from Christ. Having the audacity to live out that love and live into that love each and every day.