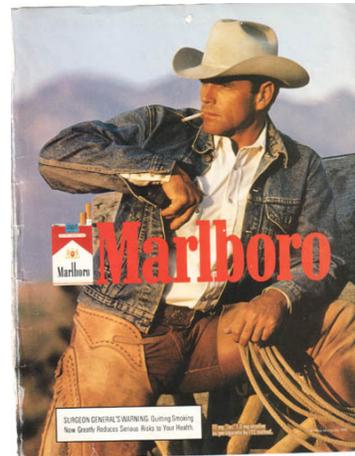


THE MESSAGE Sept 26, 2010
Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16
The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller
Thy Kingdom Come – Kingdom Community

Check out this picture. (*Display a photo of the Marlboro Man from <http://www.simondelliott.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/marlboro.jpg>*).

This guy is the Marlboro Man. He's an American icon. He rides alone, works alone, smokes alone and he likes being alone. He's tough, self-sufficient, needs no one. For him dependence means weakness. Did you know that an entire generation has been told in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that this is how a man should be?



That's what I was taught and so too were many of you. Is it any wonder so many of us struggle to understand, let alone live out, and fully participate in a real Christian community – especially for men?

Our topic today is the Christian community as it relates to the Kingdom of God. Our culture continues to encourage individualism and isolation, even as the good news of God's Kingdom calls us into radical connectedness and community.

Here in America we live with a myth that goes like this -- *my faith, my spiritual journey, is between me and God. I don't need the Christian community for my faith development or support.* I want to say to people – “Bologna! You got it all wrong!” And yet, for many people faith has become a private matter. Sadly, many people continue to be wooed into believing that – *it is none of your business how I'm doing with God. My faith is my business and your faith is your business. Let's leave it at that...*

That myth runs so deep in our American psyche. A psyche of rugged individualism, which says, “I don't need you. I am a rock, I am an island.” But that rock and island will leave you high and dry every time -- spiritually.

Here's the truth: God made us for community. Say that with me – *God made us for community...*

I was thinking the other day how so many people helped me get to where I am today as a parish pastor I can't even begin to count the number of people who had a part to play in my faith development. I give thanks to God for all the people who helped to nurture me and shape me and guide me and prayed with me and prayed for me to be the leader God has put before you here today. I am here only by the grace of God and so too are you.

My faith is not, and will never, ever be a private matter. My faith is shaped and developed by others, like you. You help me to grow-up in the faith just I (hopefully) help you to grow-up in the faith. We shape each other. We are shaped by each other.

Truth is, God made us for community. God created us with a longing to know and be known, to love and be loved, to serve and be served, to celebrate and be celebrated. God put that longing into our hearts that we might realize our need for one another. We need one another. Turn to the person sitting beside you and say, “I need you in my life.”

There are over 50 “one another” mandates in the New Testament. *Love one another, forgive one another, encourage one another.* The Bible was written with the assumption that we would live *the faith* together in community.

Now... some people hear that and might think, “That’s way too much togetherness for me! You people would start to get on my nerves.” We would get on each other nerves. We do get on each other nerves. Just as they did 2,000 years ago in the early church.

No wonder the Bible stresses forgiveness so much. No wonder Paul emphasizes the issue of unity so strongly in our reading from Ephesians. There was conflict in the early church, but they (get this) they were more interested in growing together than being comfortable alone. Let me say that again. There was conflict in the early church (just like there is today), but the early church was more interested in growing together than being comfortable alone. Are you? Are we?

Are we willing to do whatever it takes to live together in this place – working together, growing together, being together – in Peace (relative peace that is) as our church name suggests? Are you willing to do your part?

I hope and pray you can say “yes” to the question. And if you do then it calls for us to take some risks, to be vulnerable, to realize and admit that none of us are as good as we think we are. The Christian community is made up of sinners. Friedens (Peace) Lutheran Church is made up of sinners – a special kind of sinners – redeemed and forgiven sinners who are blessed by God for a mission.

There is always room for one more sinner in this place. There is always room for one more blessing.

It is so easy to allow selfishness and anger and gossip to get the best of us at times. It happens! That’s why the faith community is the perfect place to flex our spiritual muscles of forgiveness, patience, and self-control. This is not so much a call to be “born again” as it is a call to “grow up” and live the faith we profess.

So let the call go out because there are three good reasons why the Christian community here at Friedens is worth your presence and participation.

First, community is our strength.

Living as a Christian isn't easy. It isn't easy submitting our lives daily to God in a culture that is constantly telling us to put ourselves first. We need one another to hold each other accountable to our faith development. We need people in our lives to help us grow in the faith everyday until the day we die.

We need the strength of community especially in difficult times. The storms of life can wear us down or leave us more vulnerable to doubt and despair. That's when we need the Christian community to come around us and hold us up.

I had planned to show a clip of the movie "The March of the Penguins" (The scene begins at 00:28:29 and ends at 00:29:45, and is contained in scene 7 of the DVD.) but we had technical difficulties doing so.

Let me tell you about that part in the movie... the Penguins are all together and the wind and snow is blowing. They take turns on the outside of the big circle taking the wind and snow and then moving to the middle where it is much warmer and protected by the others. Penguins know their need for community in tough times. Working together... living together... doing life together... I wonder how the church can be more like that? I wonder how can we make Friedens more like that?

Second, oneness is our reality.

Truth is our job is not to create community. That's the job of the Holy Spirit. Our job is to live what we say we believe, to live what we believe God has done for us in Christ to live into the blessed image of the family of God and the body of Christ.

First image - The family of God.

Look around, we are family. In baptism, we are adopted into God's family. We are sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters in Christ.

In my ministry over the years I've come to realize that every family has some dysfunction. Every church has some dysfunction. Living together in community isn't easy. We don't always get along, but in Christ we will always belong to one another no matter what. And we have a responsibility to love and support and treat one another with respect.

Jesus never said, "Like one another" he said, "love one another." There is a big difference – more on that in a minute.

Second image - The body of Christ

Paul uses this image to reveal our unity in Christ. Our diversity is a strength, not a weakness. Every body needs body parts; hands, feet, legs, arms, ears, organs, etc. The body of Christ needs a diversity of gifts and experiences to accomplish the mission God has given us.

In the body of Christ there is no independence, there is only interdependence. Marlboro men will have a tough time with this. Just as a foot or an elbow can't live independent of the body, neither can any of us. We need each other. We need to appreciate each other. We need to work together so that we can accomplish everything God has given us to do in this place at this time.

We are God's family. We are the body of Christ. The question is what do we need to do (and what are we willing to do) differently in order to live that way more fully?

Third and finally, love is our witness.

Jesus said, "I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are to love one another. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples – when they see the love you have for each other."

Jesus commands us to love one another. I find that very strange. He doesn't suggest it. He doesn't say, "It would be really nice if you loved one another." He says, "I command you to love one another – whether you want to or not – do it! I showed you how."

If Jesus didn't command us to love one another, we probably wouldn't. Would we? So it's probably a good thing he did. And it's a good thing he shows us how to love one another.

But when you love some one, it just comes naturally. You don't have to command me to love my wife. I just do. You don't have to command me to love my children. I just do. But Jesus commands us to love one another. And when we do, others notice. They can tell. People can tell if our love is genuine and authentic and if it is not. So how we love one another here at Friedens is a powerful witness to others.

The greatest compliment someone could give us is to say, "You know, those people at Friedens have a genuine and authentic love for one another and it shows. It runs deep. You can feel it in the air. That's the kind of church I want to be part of."

We were made for community. It is our strength. It is the reality of our faith. It is a profound witness to the world. When people see us loving one another, they see a reflection of the love God has for the world.

So being the church takes teamwork. It takes work being the church because it really is a team sport. No one is to be left sitting on the bench. Everyone gets to play. Everyone in this drama of real life has an important part to play in this faith community.

We participate in community here at Friedens in two distinct ways – in Worship and in LIFE Groups.

First – we participate in community through Worship

We are so blessed to be able to offer two distinctively different worship experiences on Sunday morning -- contemporary and traditional. And that's a good thing. Both are liturgical, both include the work of the people, which is what liturgy means. No other Lutheran church in the area is doing what we are doing in worship. We are truly blessed when it comes to our worship ministry -- helping people connect with God. Can I have a "Thank you, Lord!"?

Second – we participate in community through LIFE Groups

We are blessed to be entering our second year of our small group ministry called LIFE Groups. L-I-F-E stands for Living In Faith Everyday. In these groups we build relationships with other disciples as we do life together for a period of ten weeks or so with trained facilitators to guide the process. Friendships are created, support is offered, forgiveness is practiced, life is lived, and lives are changed for good.

This semester we are offering five LIFE Groups and we've added one for our youth. That makes six. Sign-ups continue today in the fellowship hall. We are truly blessed when it comes to our LIFE Groups ministry – helping people connect with one another. Can I have a "Thank you, Lord!"?

We are blessed as the family of God, as the body of Christ, as a community of faith. We are blessed to be a blessing to others for the sake of God's Kingdom work on earth. Amen.