

October 18, 2009

Vision Series: *In The Church But Not Of The Church*

Alright good morning and welcome back – or welcome for the first time. Grab your Bibles and turn to the book of Hebrews, we will be there in just a moment or two.

If you've been here the last 6 weeks then you, I'm sure, really have a handle on what is happening on Sunday mornings this Fall. But just in case you haven't been here – and because we need to hear it over and over again for the truth to sink in – we are in the midst of a vision series. All that means is God is showing us how He wants us as His church to go about fulfilling the vision He has given us together. That vision – our purpose – is to be moving people to life in Christ one step at a time together.

We say "life in Christ" because salvation – being a Christian – according to Jesus means being a disciple – being someone saved by faith and intent on following, living like, being like Jesus. And if we are going to be doing life in Christ ourselves and moving others to life in Christ one step at a time, then we need to know at least the very basic steps of that process.

So far we know that disciples worship Jesus – they see all of life as individuals and corporately together as a response to who God is and to what He has done expressed in the way they live and the words they say. So if we're going to make disciples – if we're going to move people to life in Christ, we have got to give consistent opportunities to worship Jesus together.

The past two weeks we saw God show us that the next step of following Jesus – of doing life in Christ – of being a Christian, a disciple – is to learn truth. As we hear and read and hold to the teachings of Jesus, the truth of God's Word sets us free to love God, to do life like Jesus – to do life with and in Christ. We can't do it without learning truth so if we are going to make disciples – to move people to life in Christ, we have got to give consistent opportunities to learn truth together.

This morning we will start looking at the next step that we as a church must embrace if we are going to fit God's blueprint – to accomplish the vision God has given us. We'll only get started today – in fact it is going to be a short sermon today, we'll see much more the next two weeks in several ways, but the title on your message map this morning says "in the church but not of the church" – a phrase that sounds like "in the world but not of the world" – something that has been bantered around in churches for long time. And by the time we leave today I hope it not only makes sense to you, but deeply challenges your view of who we are.

Because one of the truths you have heard from me in this pulpit over and over again is that church is not a building or a place you go or a thing you do or an event you attend. **We are the church TOGETHER. The vision that God has given to Fairway, He has given to you.** And the third step of carrying it out really brings that home.

We will get to Hebrews in just a little bit, but let me just use the New Testament as whole to get us going this morning. Do you realize how often the Bible – our ultimate authority – gives us commands concerning one another?

50 different times in 24 different contexts, God's Word commands us about how we relate to "one another." Love one another. Serve one another. Bear with one another. Forgive one another. Encourage, admonish, pray for, be at peace with, carry burdens for – over and over again – 50 times in 24 different contexts – one another, one another, one another. One message, one theme is being screamed from the pages of scripture in that and that message, that theme is that **you and I were never meant to do life in Christ ALONE. We were never meant to walk with Jesus by ourselves.**

And I want you to remember something. That isn't just a bunch of different authors stealing each other's stuff – you know plagiarizing the text. The New Testament was breathed and inspired by the Holy Spirit of God. And if He felt it was important enough to write it down 50 different times that we are to love one another, care for one another, forgive one another, spur one another on, etc

etc then I think He wants us to understand something: that that is not an option for you and me. Community can not be an option if the Holy Spirit says fifty times we need to be doing it.

What is unfortunate is that in the 21st century living in community – living together in a close knit group of believers, living out our faith together, has become so optional to us that it is pretty much left to the level of ‘if I have time, I’ll do it, but if I don’t, then I won’t.’

I can’t tell you how many times as I have met people who have been coming to the worship service or maybe even have been through Fairway 101 and joined recently and they tell me “man I’m so glad I found Fairway” or “this is such the place for me,” and one of the first things I’ll ask them is if they have gotten into community – are you connecting with other believers, are you building relationships, are you in a Sunday school class or a LINK, are you doing life with people yet?

And so many times people say, well we just haven’t found a group that meets our needs yet so we kind of gave up on that, or it just doesn’t work out for us being gone another night or earlier on Sunday, or we’ve got small kids or it’s too far. And what you hear behind that heart beat is that community, living life intentionally, purposefully, together is an option for us.

But 2000 years ago when Jesus created the New Testament church, it wasn’t an option. Living apart from community was never the dream of Jesus when he birthed the church. And we know that because the early church modeled it for us. In Acts 2 that we’ll look at in the next couple of weeks, in the 1st century – they modeled this concept of worshipping God together – and worshipping God together in smaller environments as well.

In Acts 5, talking about the apostles as the early church was being formed it talks about how they set this example from the get go. You don’t have to turn there, it will be on the screen, but in **Acts 5 verse 42** the Bible says:

“Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.”

Day after day. In the temple. House to house. Worshipping God. A few things kind of jump out there. First, that they worshipped God when, on Sundays? – no – every day, day to day. **Christianity to them was not a building for them to go to in order to worship God once a week and then go about their lives, Christianity was a WAY OF LIFE.** But it occurred in two places. You see it?

First – **in the temple.** They were coming like we come together here going after God and it didn’t stop there. It left the walls of that building and went into their homes. **House to house.** And we’ll see later that that wasn’t unique to the apostles, the New Testament church made sure they got life to life, eyeball to eyeball and worshipped God together in big and small and multiple environments. And that continues to be God’s intent. In fact not only intent, but command.

Now that you are in **Hebrews, look at chapter 10 verse 24.** This is a verse that is regularly misinterpreted or at least misapplied. I want us to see it for what it is this morning. Verse 24 says:

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.”

So the author of Hebrews asks a question basically. Do you want to be a person of love? Do you want to be a person of good deeds? And most of us would say yes to that. Because we know Jesus said in John 13:34 here’s the deal. I’ve got a new commandment for you. I want you to love one another and not just like you did in the Old Testament when you loved one another as you loved yourselves. I want you to love one another as I have loved you.

So the writer of Hebrews says here’s how to be a person of love – here’s how to be a person of good deeds. Look at verse 25.

“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.”

You want to be a person of love – you want to love to come out of you? He says, the make sure you spend a lot of time praying, right?

Make sure you have a quiet time every day and twice on Saturday, right?

No – if you want to be a person of love, here’s how you spur one another on to do that – “do not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing.”

You know my whole life I heard in one way or another that that verse is talking about the church service or church programs. That what that means is “do not skip the church service – if you do, you won’t be a person of love.” And while that may be important, that is not what this passage is talking about.

Where the NIV there says don’t “give up” – that’s really a very weak translation. **The Greek word there is a very strong word** – we don’t use it much in our culture – **it means to ABANDON. Other translations use the word “forsake”** – but it still means abandon. Listen – the writer of Hebrews would not say ‘do not abandon meeting together’ if he’s just talking about skipping a church service to go play golf.

What he is saying is this – do not abandon the body of Christ. **The command of scripture is saying to you and me that community is not an OPTION. We cannot walk away from each other. Do not abandon community.** That’s what he’s saying.

And I don’t think that we think like that. So let me just say this real bluntly today, **if you claim the name of Christ over your life and you are not living in or at least PURSUING real, authentic, transparent, biblical community** – if you’re not looking for a group of people who claim the name of Christ to actively day by day do life with, if that’s not on your radar screen, then one of two things is going on.

Either you just didn’t know that that was a COMMAND of scripture.

Or if you are doing it disobediently, that is called SIN. And how many of us in this room think about not living in community as a sin? We don’t think about it that way, but it is. Whenever scripture says “do this” and we say “no thank you, I’ve got better things to do” – that’s called sin.

And we’ve already seen all over the place in the Bible we are told – commanded – by what we saw last week must be the final authority in our lives – to love one another, serve one another, forgive one another, bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.

And we say “if I have time.” That’s sin and we must come to a place where we understand we cannot live in the sin of giving up meeting together.

Now my guess is that for many of us, this is a new concept. That community is a command in the Bible – that living life in Christ together – not just corporately, but house to house, is something we have to have in our lives – that’s a new concept. And a lot of it is because of our parents’ generation.

Our parents’ generation did not model this – they weren’t taught it so they didn’t model it so we haven’t been taught it. Really it is only in the last 15 years or so that the church has grabbed onto the concept of biblical community. What my parents’ generation – the baby boomers and the one before that – what was their concept of fellowship? When they were having fellowship and really getting outside the box, what was it? Pot luck dinners! Right?

In the churches most people my age grew up in, if we got together once a quarter in the fellowship hall and the old ladies made fried chicken then we were doing something great in the name of community. That was and often is still the concept of fellowship. And I’m not saying that those kinds of things aren’t important or that they can’t be a first step to getting to where we need to be but when you get to crazy verses like what we see in Acts chapter 2 in scripture where it says that they were continually devoting themselves to each other – that they held everything in common – that they would sell what they had and give it out as people had needs. That’s a little different isn’t it? So now people say well that’s different today. That doesn’t apply to us today. Really? It doesn’t?

When Jesus birthed the New Testament church and those people started living it out, you’ll notice real fast some stuff coming out of their lives. First – they were fiercely loyal to GOD. But then – number 2 – that overflowed and they were fiercely loyal to ONE ANOTHER.

Question church, 2000 years later – have we lost that? Have we quit being fiercely devoted to each other? I think unfortunately the answer would be yes.

And as much as I want that to sit heavy on us, I want us also to know that it isn't all our fault, nor is it really our parent's fault. A lot of this got really muddy in the early 300s AD. Back then the church as a whole was a pretty small group of people, kind of like a family, they loved God, were passionate about Jesus, and they loved each other and were intensely devoted to each other and took care of each other and then in the early 300s AD the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire. He looked at what was called back then "The Way" – that's what they called Christianity back then – and said these people are flourishing. No matter how much we persecute them. No matter how much we kill them. No matter how much we take their property. So here's the deal. Rome is not flourishing. So what if we married the Roman empire with Christianity?

And here's what happened when he did. It institutionalized the religion. Made it the official religion, made people start meeting in buildings and here's what happened. Over night, we went from a group of people who loved each other and loved God and that was a way of life and over night it became an institution. And almost suddenly it was possible for you to come join the institution called the church and never become a part of the body of Christ. It became completely possible for them to come to church and never be the church.

And we are still fighting that battle right now. **The battle we fight is that it is too possible to be IN the church but not of the church. It is completely possible for you to come – to soak it all in even – even to try and grow and mature – and to do it all completely APART from one another. That was never the intent of Christ.**

That dilemma right there is a crossroads for our church.

Are we going to be an INSTITUTIONALIZED church or are we going to fight for one another? I think that question right there is going to be one of the biggest hurdles we face in carrying out the vision that God has given us. **Are we going to build community or not?**

We'll talk more in the next two weeks, we will define more in all of this, but for now how do you start? How do you actively pursue what God's Word commands – what Jesus' birthed the church to be – what every disciple must have in order to do life in Christ?

Let me just ask you a question – have you prayed for it?

Have you grabbed your wife – have you grabbed your husband and got on your knees together and asked God "would you show us how to live in community?" "Would you send us to people and bring to us people who we can bear their burdens and they can bear ours?" When's the last time you asked God for that?

Singles – when's the last time you prayed that as well?

Ask God for that today. That's the hope of our church folks. And once you ask God for it, then fight for it. You will give your time and your money to that which you value, so value it. Jesus valued it. And we'll just become another institution if we don't.

But if each of us individually will say I'M going to pray for it – I'M going to fight for it – then at that point we become what God intended as the body of Christ – the church of God – the family and community of faith. That's when we are able to continue moving to life in Christ one step at a time TOGETHER.

Next Sunday we will build on this idea of community. What it means, what it does, where it comes from and as a part of that we will celebrate the Lord's Supper together as a part of our worship. I tell

you that now because as much as we are taking lessons from the early church, we ought to take this one as well.

When the early church was going to have the Lord's Supper, they took it very seriously – more so than we typically do. Because they understood it. It was and is a huge part of what we are talking about today. That's why it is called "communion." And what they would do that we should do is to come back together having prepared ourselves for it.

We saw a few weeks ago that when it comes to our corporate worship of Jesus together, the value of our corporate worship is defined by the integrity of our personal worship all week. This week as you do life in Christ – as you respond to who God is in what you say and what you do – be getting ready to take the bread and cup in thanksgiving, in remembrance, and in anticipation with one another.

We were never meant to do LIFE in Christ alone.

Are you? Or are you pursuing the kind of transparent, loving, real COMMUNITY that God intends the church to be?

Start praying this week for that very reality – and then fight for it – and never stop.