

Nearly half (47%) of all Americans report sometimes or always feeling alone or left out. One in four Americans rarely or never feel as though there are people who really understand them. Younger generations continually report higher levels of loneliness than the previous generation. The number of confidants that individuals report having has dropped from three to less than one on average. This loneliness has drastic health side-effects as well. One study done by global health company, Cigna, found that loneliness has the same detrimental impact on one's health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, making it more dangerous than obesity.

Sherry Turkle wrote in her book, *Alone Together*,

**“Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities. And as it turns out, we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections...may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other. We'd rather text than talk.”**

How do we counter this powerful sway toward isolating individualism in our culture? How do we combat the formative power of individualism that leads to isolation and anxiety? The question becomes, is there something in the way of Jesus that can be utilized to counter this descent into loneliness? Does Jesus offer a different vision for our own development and growth in which we can be transformed by the powerful influence of living life with others? The role of community in our formation is to close the gap between who we think we are and who we actually are. It does so through authenticity and encouragement. Spiritual formation is the process of intentionally opening our lives up to the work of the Spirit to become more like Christ.

But this kind of community doesn't just happen; it must be cultivated. Christine Pohl, in her book, *Living into Community*, wrote, “Good communities and life-giving congregations emerge at the intersection of divine grace and steady human effort.”

### **The Call of Jesus into Community**

Notice, as you read the gospel accounts, that after Jesus announced the arrival of the Kingdom of God in our presence, he began to gather together this new humanity that would serve as the foundation of this new Jesus movement. And as he sought to gather this band of early believers together, he called people

into community. It was never a call to individualism or a call to experience this Jesus life alone. But rather, Jesus called people into a community.

Open your Bibles to Romans chapter 12. One commentator, in speaking about this particular section of Romans wrote,

**“An arpeggio of twenty-nine imperatives runs up and down the scale of love. We will never run out of ways to love; we will never lack for occasions to love; we will never come up short of people to love.”**

The life of the follower of Jesus is thoroughly and entirely consumed with the love of God that spills into love of others.

**“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” - Romans 12:9-13**

As Paul transitions to offer a more general understanding of how we live life with others, we begin to see a litany of ways Paul is calling us to live life with others. At the top of this rapid-fire series of thoughts on life with others, Paul begins with “Love must be sincere,” or more literally in the Greek, “Unhypocritical love.” For Paul, the necessity of love within the community cannot be understated. But this love is to be genuine and not mere pretense. This is more challenging than one may think. I would venture to guess that there isn't a single person in this room right now that would say they would not want to be a part of a loving community. Unhypocritical love - or genuine love - is the ideal vision of life with others that is universally held. We all long to be loved and to be found in the community of love.

But not all of us are ready to engage in this type of “unhypocritical” love. Because this would entail deep authenticity and the vulnerability of who we truly are - no masks, just intimate vulnerability, and genuine love. Paul continues to describe this type of love, “hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” What marks this community of genuine love is an adherence to the good and a rejection of the bad.

The basis of genuine love is devotion to one another. This is the only occurrence of this word “devoted” in the entire New Testament. But throughout the Greco-Roman world, the word

was used to speak of familial love. That which we are to be devoted is another type of familial love, "brotherly love." Paul is piling up concepts of familial love in order to ensure that we understand the type of love we are to have with one another. The result of this love is the "honor[ing of] one another above ourselves." It is the communal task of loving the other above yourself, and in this, you see a cycle of mutually sacrificing love. As I love the other, the other is loving me.

There is a sense of urgency in which we are called to love. Paul says we are to "never be lacking in zeal, but keep our spiritual fervor, serving the Lord" This type of commitment to life with others requires diligence, and to work in haste toward, to be "set on fire" by the spirit. Paul then offers three admonitions, hope, endurance, and prayer. Each one seems to be natural partners with the other one.

### **Be Joyful in Hope**

That which unifies and bonds our communities and those in which we share life is the hope of God's movement in the story. In God, our hope is actualized and held in the movement of reconciling all things to himself.

### **Patient in Affliction**

The reason patience follows the admonition to hope is that life is difficult. As the people of God, we experience these difficulties in the presence of loving community.

### **Faithful in Prayer**

In facing these worries and difficulties, we allow prayer to be our antidote. In a mutual pursuit and commitment to the hope in God, we are to persist in prayer. It's funny how intimate life with others naturally draws these three elements out of us, particularly when there is a mission to accomplish.

### **Practice Hospitality**

Lastly, Paul makes note that what marks the people of God is the practice of hospitality. This should be understood in a more robust understanding of hospitality that we commonly understand it today. In the New Testament world, there was a significant need to offer shelter and housing to travelers as hotels and motels were few and far between. Hospitality in the 1st Century was the radical welcome of the other into one's house.

In our world today, hospitality has a tinge of nicety or a decorative strategy for our tables during thanksgiving, or it is a mere extra that we consider a luxury, but not a necessity and certainly not a fundamental component of our spiritual development. We've reduced the concept to a place setting, with doilies, and pumpkins, that is totally adorbs. But in our quest to appear adorbs, we lose the edge of hospitality. The word for hospitality carries a weight to it. It is the philoxenia, which is the combination of two words, philo – brotherly love, or familial love and xenia – stranger, or other. Therefore, etymologically, hospitality

is the brotherly love for the stranger. It is sort of an oxymoron. The type of love that you have for your own, for your brother, is the type of love you are supposed to practice for the stranger that you don't know.

For Paul, this is the calling for life with others in the community of believers. It is marked by authentic, genuine love. A type of love that requires us to live openly and unhypocritically with others. In this authentic community, we are encouraging and loving others, spurring them on toward greater levels of love. Paul now moves from offering perspective on life with others from inside the community of faith to those outside the community of faith.

**"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. vv. 14-16**

In a similar way that Paul began the prior section, he begins this section with "Bless those who persecute you." This is an expression of sincere, genuine love. A love that is not circumstantial but dispositional. It is a worldview that recognizes all worthy of our love. This would also seem to be a direct reference to Jesus' teaching.

Matthew 5.44 - "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..."

Luke 6.27-28 - "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you.

The emphasis is repeated again, "Bless and do not curse." The posture is one of seeking divine blessing rather than calling down curses on the other. This grinds against our culture of contempt. To love and not curse manifests itself in the way we love, in who we interact with, how we speak of others or type about others. Church, this is a posture of love in which we assume the best in others.

N. T. Wright wrote,

**"At this point Paul stands firmly with Jesus and the entire early Christian tradition against all other traditions known to us...In both Jesus' teaching and his own practice there was a strikingly new note: hostility was to be met with prayer, and violence with blessing."**

This sort of love then swells up into solidarity of circumstance. "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." We live alongside our neighbors by coming alongside them in their circumstances. If we are to accomplish this, we must live among our neighbors. We counter the loneliness of others by proximity. It is about knowing our neighbors, knowing them by name, understanding their stage of life, and what they are going

through. Love requires proximity. It requires understanding and knowledge of the other.

This proximity is emphasized in verse 16, "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited." The idea of living in harmony with one another is akin to living with the same unifying spirit that is among the church.

Biblical scholar, Douglas Moo, makes an important distinction,

**"His wording here suggest not so much a plea for Christians to 'think the same thing among one another,' but to 'think the same thing toward one another.' Paul's point might then be that Christians should display the same attitude toward all other people, whatever their social, ethnic, or economic status."**

There should be no smell of elitism within the believers and their interaction with those outside the tradition. For this to be accomplished, arrogance and conceit cannot exist. A good healthy community and a strong network of life with others necessitates humility. Harmony cannot be attained if arrogance reigns; pride is the biggest barrier to unity. It is the diversity of community, the association with the lowly that we find the antidote to pride. Because it is in this diverse association that we are confronted with our arrogance and pride, it is the mirror in which we find our true selves exposed. And the healthy response to this exposure is to seek change.

**Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. vv. 17-18**

The central command is reiterated to love sincerely, but this time in the context of how we are to respond to evil. We are not to exact revenge or seek vengeance, but rather, we "overcome evil with good." For responding to evil with evil merely means we become the very thing that we despise in the other, and perpetuate the cycle of brokenness. The resistance to returning evil for evil is met with a positive injunction, "*Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.*"

Instead of seeking vengeance, spend your energy toward good works. This is a difficult reality for us because we are not wired this way. We are wired for a world that operates from a dog-eat-dog reality. Peter talks about, in his letter, that in the face of evil, we are commanded to maintain such exemplary conduct that our persecutors will have no grounds for criticism. "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

We must be careful in understanding this concept of peace. There is a tendency to view this idea of peace as something that entails us disengaging from people. But Paul seems to clearly mean a more active engagement within the community. For "as far as it depends on you" would seem to entail a sort of active posture in

which you are engaging with as much depth as needed to cultivate community.

The close relation between this exhortation, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" and verse 17 is clear - both urge Christians to pursue behavior that will have a positive impact on all people. Again, Paul seems to be echoing Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the peacemakers." It is important to note that this is not blessed are the peace-keepers but rather peacemakers or live at peace. The posture is active, not passive. So frequently, we assume peace is the absence of conflict, but peace, in the biblical sense of the word, requires active participation in seeking wholeness in all situations. Many times, this may involve finding ways to persevere through conflict and injustice. There will be conflict. Living life with others will always bring about conflict. The question is how we handle the conflict and if we allow it to shape us.

### **How Life with Others Changes Us**

Inherent within Paul's vision of life with others is a picture of a messy reality of life. You can have all sorts of different types of community. This is why cross-fit, albeit a cult (just kidding), is a form of community. They live in a particular place and share a similar interest. For us as a church, what is our community? It is us, living on the San Francisco Peninsula, and our common interest is Jesus, and learning to live out Jesus' way of life. We are not united by socioeconomic standing, political affiliation, cultural preference, or educational background, but the one common denominator with all of us in this room is Jesus.

Now, community is a very simple idea, it isn't easy to accomplish, but it is an easy concept. And living life with others is the center of what Jesus is on about in this world. Last week, we talked about spiritual practices, community, and living life with others is a spiritual practice unto itself. And I think you could make the argument that life with others, silence, and solitude may be two of the most foundational practices because they are the two containers that hold all the other practices. Generally, not always, moments of transformation happen when you are alone with Jesus in prayer and scripture. And when you are together with other believers working out your faith.

I want to dig into a few more thoughts on exactly why life with others is so paramount for our spiritual formation and draw out a few themes we see in the words of Paul from Romans 12. One clarifying thought is when we say "life with others," we mean any intentional relationship or network of relationships that are centered around following Jesus. This could look like a variety of things.

**Community Groups**

**WBS Table**

**Men's Fraternity Table**

## **Mentoring Relationship**

### **Close-knit group of friends**

So what is it about life with others that transforms us? First, remember the opening words of the section - "Love must be sincere" or "unhypocritical" The idea of "unhypocritical" or "sincere" in most of your bibles is taken from the concept of an actor putting on a mask. And so, if we are going to experience the transformative effect of life with others, we must learn to live authentically, taking off our masks and exposing our true selves. The more you grow in intimacy, the more authentic you have to live. There is a direct correlation between the two.

This is why life with others is so difficult to actually live. Because most of us, if you are anything like me, are afraid to truly live into community. Because it means being vulnerable and exposed. It means living as your authentic self and no longer hiding who you truly are. We are scared to go all the way into this sort of community, so many of us settle for going halfway there. We hover in pseudo-community. We go to church; we have Christian friends, maybe we are even in a community group. But we hold back part of who we truly are. But Paul is calling us to love that is sincere, that is at its core exposed and open. This threatens our value of individualism. To live in community, we have to commit and open our lives up to others. It is also to live under the voice of others, allowing people to speak into your life. To live life with others is to give up some of our autonomy.

### **Diversity**

Paul is writing this letter to a particular situation. And all that he prescribes to the church in Rome assumes that its opposite is happening. So, when he writes, "bless those who persecute you," this assumes that the people of God were being persecuted. It assumes that there is, in fact, trouble and difficult times. Also, look at v. 16. Paul is intentionally calling us to be in proximity to others who are different than us. Paul writes fairly extensively about the need to love our enemies, which implies that we will live life around those who are different than us. It is in diverse community that we can more clearly see our lives because we have those who are not in the same circumstances or life stage as ourselves, and therefore, they can offer insight from a position that is further removed. This sort of difference also has a way of exposing who we are, because we are able to see ourselves against the backdrop of difference.

### **Encouragement**

Good, healthy, life with others does not just expose who we are, but it also encourages us toward greater levels of maturity and Christlikeness. Think of v. 15, "*rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn.*" There is built into life with others a sense of solidarity and connection to our circumstances. For as difficult as community is, it should also be as encouraging. It is in community and life with others that we join together and recognize how we are all struggling to follow Jesus in the midst of our own brokenness and the brokenness of the world.

### **Grace**

Good community, or life with others, is messy. And we tend to have an idealistic vision of what community is, but we have to dispel this reality and come to grips with the fact that it is messy, difficult, hard, and it will let you down. But it is in the mess that we learn to love and be loved for the authentic self that we are. As we live at peace with others, they too are charged to live at peace with us, and we experience mutual grace given to experience the grace of God. Life with others is one of the paramount ingredients that the Spirit uses to grow us into greater Christlikeness. And church, may we become a place that continues to encourage life with others. May we embrace the messy, difficult, encouraging, and grace-filled reality of living this life with others.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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