



SMALL GROUP SERIES 2018

SERMONS
& SERMON OUTLINES

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Love Together

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

John 13:34-35

LOVE TOGETHER

What, on earth, are we here for? If we were to pin all of life down to a single theme, what would it be? To love God and to love each other. That sounds right given that Jesus summarized the whole law of God: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength, and love your neighbour as yourself.”* Everything we do in life is about making that happen. A person called C. Morley wrote in 1990: ‘If we discovered that we had five minutes left to say all we wanted to say, every telephone booth would be occupied by people calling other people to stammer that they loved them. Why wait until the last five minutes?’ That is precisely what happened when the Twin Towers were hit in 2001. To be human is to be in loving relationships. You may remember when the Soviet Union collapsed, images were seen of orphanages in Romania. There were sickly pictures of young children stunted in their development because they had never been picked up and hugged. There were those who had died because of lack of love. But it’s not just the children who suffer from lack of love. Dr Karl Menninger, noted psychiatrist, was seeking the cause of many of his patients’ illnesses. One day he called his staff and outlined a plan for developing an atmosphere of love in his clinic. No unloving approaches were to be displayed in the presence of patients. All the nurses and doctors were to go about their work with a loving attitude. At the end of six months, the time spent by patients in the institute was cut in half. Dr Menninger concluded ‘Love cures people, both the ones who give it and those who receive it.’

We all thrive on love, on nurturing relationships. So, it will come as no surprise to us that the Bible emphasizes loving each other. Here in our text in John 13:34-35 Jesus says *“A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”*. Now, note what Jesus says just before that in verse 33: *“My children, I will be with you only a little longer...”* You get the drift. What do you say if you know your time is nearly up? What’s most important! ‘I love you!’ Jesus knows he is soon to be crucified. After his resurrection he will leave the disciples and return to the Father. Look at verse 1 *“Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father...”* These are his final, parting words. And what does he focus on? *“Love one another”!* It’s the first subject he puts to them, so it gets great emphasis.

But why love? Because it’s the main character trait of God himself. John in his first letter writes that remarkable line (1 John 4:8) *“God is love”*. It means the very essence of who God is, is love. But isn’t love a relational thing between persons? How can an

individual 'be love'? Well, as you know, God is three in one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is not an individual but a community. In the Trinity there is a love so deep, a relationship so close, that the three are one. In John 17:20-21, we see Jesus prays for his disciples: *"My prayer is not for them alone (the disciples). I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message (that's us), that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you"*. When Jesus says *"...you are in me and I am in you..."* he is describing the heart of how the Trinity works. In a sense they create space for each other, in each other, and embrace, so to speak, so tightly, they become one. Ultimate reality is not the individual but community. We are made in God's image. So, we too find our true identity not in our individual self but in our relationships. Note how Jesus pleads with God that those who believe may be one just as Jesus and the Father are. What Jesus says is mind boggling. The whole point of his redeeming work, is to invite us into the relationship he has with the Father. That's why love is so important. Being deeply loved by God, loving him in return, loving each other, is what true life is all about. It's why we are here! It's why Jesus died on the cross to bring forgiveness- that we might all be one.

You remember the fruit of the Spirit. We defined the fruit of the Spirit as the character of God. Remember what they are? *"Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control"*. What do you see about these characteristics? They are all relational. You can't grow in any of these on your own. You must be in close relationship with at least one other person if you want to develop patience, or express kindness. Notice the first of the fruit; that which sums up the rest: love. Why are we here? Why emphasize love? Because it's the very character of God.

There is something else here. Love is a quality of God's people that will always be there. Paul wrote I Corinthians 13:8 *"Love never fails...but where there are prophecies they will cease, where there are tongues, they will be still, where there is knowledge it will pass away."* But love abides. When Jesus returns and all of creation is renewed, when we will no longer live by faith but by sight, what one thing will remain? When there will be *"...no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away"*, what one thing will remain? Love! On the new earth the thing that will be most wonderful is the deep love we will have for Jesus and each other. Why are we here? *"Love one another!"* In other words, get into practice for eternity!

Now, in all this talk about love we are not just talking emotions or mushy sentiment. As Sam Levenson wrote in his book: 'Love at first sight is easy to understand. It's when two people have been looking at each other for years that it becomes a miracle'. Real

love is giving, it is sacrificial. Note what Jesus says in our text *"Love one another....as I have loved you"*. In Jesus we see love personified to a new degree. When Jesus said *"...as I have loved you"* he was referring to the foot washing we see earlier in this chapter. Here was the rabbi, the master, giving himself in humble service. He was acting as a slave to serve his own disciples. It was unheard of. It was highly embarrassing to the disciples, especially Peter. Jesus' point in washing the feet was to give a 'live parable'. It was an expression of how he would give himself to the lowest by dying on the cross and suffering the deepest agony of hell. No one ever, before or since, has stooped so low, so deep for another in their love. After washing the disciples' feet, he said "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you". That is, "Love one another as I have loved you." What a challenge. Jesus does not ask us to do anything that he did not first do for us.

The reason Jesus calls us to love each other like he loved us, is so that we can show what Jesus is like. It is to reveal something of what it means when the Bible says: *"God is love"*. Jesus says to his disciples *"By this will all people know you are my disciples."* And John writes in his letter (1 John 4:11&12) *"Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one had ever seen God; but if we love each other God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."* You get it? That's why Jesus emphasizes what he does with his disciples. If they are not truly loving, no one will know what God is like. But more than that; there is something really bold in what John says here: *"God's love is made complete in us."* The love of God which originates in himself (*"God is love"*) and was revealed in Jesus, is made complete in us his people. You get it? God's love is only fully completed when we truly love each other as God's people. The distinguishing mark that let's everyone know we are Christians is not our theological knowledge, important as that is. Nor is it our busyness and all our activity in the church. It's our deep love and affection for each other. Note again what Jesus says, *"By this will all people know that you are my disciples if you love one another."* This is our badge, our name tag, that tells everyone who we are. So why are we here? To love God and love each other.

Now for that to happen as a congregation we need to do more than just talk about it. We need to create the place and space for loving relationships to happen. We need to build community and connections. And the best way to do that is to be regularly in small groups where we can get to know each other, and really relate and care for each other. That's why Leadership has decided to make a strong push for each of us to be in a regular small group. You will have received a letter and survey outlining a 'Small Group Festival' in five weeks' time. The preaching and Ministry Spots will keep

emphasizing the value of small groups. Now I know it's not going to be easy for people to be regular in small groups, given we have incredibly busy lives. We might not have the emotional energy to get into it. The key to it all is to just start and do something. I read the story of a newspaper columnist and minister, George Crane, who tells of a wife who came to his office full of hatred toward her husband. 'I do not only want to get rid of him, I want to get even. Before I divorce him, I want to hurt him as much as he has done me.' Dr Crane suggested an ingenious plan. 'Go home and act as if you really love your husband. Tell him how much he means to you. Praise him for every decent trait. Go out of your way to be as kind, considerate and generous as possible. Spare no efforts to please him, to enjoy him. Make him believe that you love him. After you have convinced him of your undying love and that you cannot live without him, then drop the bomb. Tell him you're getting a divorce. That will really hurt him.' With revenge in her eyes, she smiled and exclaimed, 'Beautiful, beautiful. Will he ever be surprised! And she did what he said with enthusiasm, acting 'as if' she loved her husband. For two months she showed love and kindness. She listened and gave and shared with him. When she didn't return, Crane called. 'Are you ready now to go through with the divorce?' 'Divorce?' she exclaimed. 'Never! I discovered I really do love him'. Her actions had changed her feelings. Motion resulted in emotion. The ability to love is established not so much by feelings but by often repeated deeds. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote, 'Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbour; just act as if you did. As soon as you do this, you find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.' That's why Jesus says "A new command I give you..." We are commanded by God to love. Just get on with it and the rest will flow.

Why are we here? The Word of God commands us to love each other. And when it's all said and done, that's precisely what all of us need; to be loved and to love. As a congregation live over numerous suburbs, often with little opportunity to naturally come across each other. We are time poor people. Few are at home during the day. If we lose connection we have a clear recipe for loneliness, drifting from each other, drifting from the Lord. This is not just an issue for us here at Hope. The congregation I served in Sydney was even more spread out and busy. So, the congregation adopted a commitment: 'We recognize the biblical teaching that the emphasis in life is not on the individual but on the community, just as God, in Trinity, is a 'communal God'. We acknowledge that because of our geographical diversity, very busy professional lives and growing numbers, there are many in the congregation we do not know. We confess there may be those who are lonely. Thus, we commit ourselves to getting to know each other, inviting each other to our homes, and not just talking about being

loving, but helping each other in the congregation experience what it is to be loved. We commit ourselves to sharing the workload of the church in such a way that each of us has sufficient time to develop our relationships.'

One of the best ways for us as a congregation to express love for each other is to gather around the Word in small groups, encourage each other with what God says, share our respective journeys and joys, pray for each other and support each other. So please think about who you can join up with to form a small group. Think about whether you might be able to facilitate a small group. Our mission statement says we are to '...grow as disciples who make disciples of others.' That is not something we can do on our own. It's a communal thing. That's why Jesus calls us to be a church, to gather together. That's why he calls us to "love one another as I have loved you".

SERMON OUTLINE – LOVE TOGETHER

- Five minutes left- what do you say?
1. “Love one another”: why?
 - Main character trait of God: “God is love”- trinity = to create space and embrace each other
 - “Fruit of the Spirit”: all relational- cannot grow without relating to & loving others
 - “Love never fails”: we need practice for eternity
 2. “Love as I have loved you”-doing what Jesus did
 - Foot washing: a parable of the cross and an example to follow
 - Revealing God, completing his love
 - Our distinguishing mark: not orthodoxy but love
 3. “A new commandment I give you”
 - A great secret: motions result in emotions
 - It’s a command: get on and do it!
 - A recipe for loneliness and drifting from God & each other.
 - Let’s develop our small groups

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- *What was a highlight for you from the teaching in this sermon about Jesus’ command to love one another? Why?*
- *What were some of the personal issues that you related with in the sermon? What are some of the relational/love needs you are aware of?*
- *Why is community so important in expressing love for each other and growing in our faith?*
- *“Love is a command- just do it”. What practically can you/will you do to form or your own small group? Be practical: who, what, when?*

Serve Together

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

John 13:1-1

SERVE TOGETHER

I read a quote which said, 'Most people wish to serve God- but only in an advisory capacity!' In 1878 when the Salvation Army was beginning to make its mark, men and women from all over the world began to enlist. One man, who once dreamed of being a bishop, crossed the Atlantic from America to England to join the Salvation Army. The man, Samuel Brengle had been a minister in a well-to-do church. But William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, was reluctant to accept Samuel Brengle. He said 'You have been your own boss for too long.' To instill humility in Brengle, Booth set him to work cleaning the shoes of the other trainees. Brengle was quite discouraged and said to himself 'Have I followed my own fancy across the Atlantic in order to polish the shoes of others!?' And then he thought of Jesus bending over the feet of rough, uneducated fishermen. 'Lord' he prayed, 'you washed their feet, I will polish their shoes.'

John the Baptist once said of Jesus, (John 1:27) "He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." The people well understood what he meant. To remove the sandals of another and wash their feet was considered one of the lowest duties of the day. People in those days did not tuck their feet under the table. They reclined on couches around the table. So, the feet had to be cleaned of the sweat and manure dust from walking on the tracks. Those tracks were used by donkeys and camels as well. And you know what they left on the road. It was the job of a slave to clean the stinking feet. But John the Baptist says that in comparison to Jesus he is so low he was not good enough to offer to wash Jesus' feet. Yet here in our text we see Jesus himself doing the degrading job of a slave.

Now grasp the significance of the event. Here is God kneeling in humble service before his sinful creatures. It is fair to put it that way because our text says in verse 3 "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God." Jesus is very conscious of his own majesty. He "comes from God". He is God. "...all things are under his power". Jesus is not just a 'softie', the weak one, who always gets the dirty jobs. Here is the Son of God, God on his knees deliberately giving his disciples a message. Verse 1 "It was just before the Passover feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave the world to go to the father. Having loved his own in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love." Jesus knows that the next day he will die on the cross. His washing of the disciples' feet is an 'acted parable'. Not just the telling of a parable but acted out. It's a sign of what he is about to do. Feel the situation here, with the disciples reclining at the table with their dirty feet. No one wants the foot washing job. They end up in this situation because a power struggle is going on. Another gospel says they were arguing as to who was the "...greatest among them". No one would stoop to foot washing. Not when they were trying to establish the political pecking order amongst them.

So, Jesus strips off to his loin cloth and kneels before the disciples and quietly goes about washing and drying their feet. There is no lecture. Just the quiet example that leaves the disciples dumbstruck. Until of course Peter speaks up. Peter never was one to keep quiet. For him this whole scene is wrong. It's a total screw up. He doesn't want Jesus washing his feet. He does not want a humble servant for a master. He wants Jesus to stand up, to be strong, to do great things. It is not right to see a king on his knees serving! He wants a powerful leader, so he can be a powerful second in command. Peter doesn't understand the acted parable here. He cannot accept that Jesus must serve, that he must suffer to pay for sin. It takes a lot of humility to admit that Jesus needed to die for sin, that we cannot make it on our own. It is not easy to admit that every one of us is rotten to the core, deserving hell. If you think about it, it is not right to see God as a servant, as a slave suffering for our wrong. But that's what God in his grace has done. He stooped to serve to give us forgiveness! Jesus was not forced to wash the disciples' feet. It is not like, so often, the weakest, the smallest in the group is humiliated into doing it. Being a servant, suffering for sin, was his decision. It was his mission that stemmed from his love.

Now, Jesus' actions were not just for him. He says what he did was also an example. If we accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord, we must do as he did. Let's be real honest here, this is not easy. It goes right against the grain. Much of our society, especially at work, is 'success' driven. There is the constant drive for higher and better things. You surely don't expect the boss to get everyone coffee, that's the trainee's job. Even in religion it's hard to accept a humble suffering master. In theology we have tended more to see God as the creator, Lord of all. We don't usually think of God as humble, the triune God, where the Son humbly serves the Father and the Spirit serves the Son. We don't get it that humility is part of God's character. Pride reveals our character. Humility reveals God's. Serving is often considered to be beneath us. Do you argue in your house about who cleans the toilets? What is a task you think is beneath you? Now Jesus comes to us and says (verse 15) "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." It blew the disciples away. Their culture was very clear on the rabbi-disciple relationship. The teacher was so much greater than the disciples. The teacher's way was absolute. Yet here their teacher, the one who had done things implying he was God, had acted as their slave. And then he says, 'You do it to each other'. And they must because they are not greater than Jesus. Verse 16: "No servant is greater than his master". They cannot say 'You perhaps Lord, but not us. It's beneath us.' Here Jesus challenges our whole way of life. Christianity is not just about going to church, trying to be polite, trying not to swear. We are called to a life of service. Many people are looking for happiness. But God tells us to look for opportunities to serve. That's what life is about. We were put here by God to serve him. And the way we serve God is by serving other people. A friend once said to his wife 'I love God more than you'. He wanted to emphasize his deep commitment to God. But he expressed it wrongly. He should have said 'I love God deeply. And I will show it by my love and devotion for you.' We serve God by serving each other.

Now the Bible has a word for serving others. It's called 'ministry'. In the Greek the word for 'service' and 'ministry' are the same word. And in the Bible the word 'servant' and 'minister' are the same word. So, all of us are called to ministry because all of us are called to serve God and others. You don't need a title like 'pastor' to be involved in ministry. You simply need to be active doing something. And the something you are called to do has to do with your S.H.A.P.E. – Spiritual gifts, Heart (passion), Abilities (like work skills), Personality, Experiences. Your S.H.A.P.E. determines your unique contribution to the church and kingdom of God. But while you may have a particular S.H.A.P.E., what you actually contribute to the kingdom is determined by your attitude. It's your attitude, your servant's heart, your willingness to imitate Jesus' serving, that determines your spiritual maturity. Your attitude determines what you will do for the kingdom of God. The greatest thrill in life is to be used by God and know that he chose to use you. God is using ordinary people like you and me to help bring peace to the earth, to save sinners, to restore the entire universe, to bring in his kingdom.

So, what does it take to be used and learn to serve like Jesus? It's quite simple really. It's about being willing to put your hand up because you make yourself available. To serve like Jesus did means we are available as Jesus was. Look at the gospels. Jesus didn't do healings by appointment. So often people approached Jesus and he stopped where he was going and attended to their needs. Are we available? Are you willing to say, 'God what do you want me to do?' Let's be honest for a moment. Let me give some common barriers to being available. One is self-centeredness. We see it with the disciples. They were too busy jostling about who was greatest to even consider doing the menial job of foot washing. The number one enemy of compassion is busyness. 'I am so busy I have no time to serve. I have my agenda, my plans, my ambitions'. To become a real servant, we need to be open to being interrupted. 'Lord who are you putting across my path today? Where can I serve another, today?' It could be as simple as doing the dishes when your favourite TV show is on. Or the church needs some people to help with an outreach project. The second barrier to being used by God is perfectionism. It's about having the perfect conditions before you will serve, or feeling you are not good enough and you don't want to embarrass yourself. But look at the Bible, who apart from Jesus was perfect? Moses stuttered. Mark was rejected by Paul. Hosea's wife was a prostitute. Jacob was a liar. David had an affair. Solomon was too rich. Abraham too old. Peter was afraid of death. Lazarus was dead. Paul was a murderer- so was Moses. Jonah ran from God. Miriam was a gossip. Gideon and Thomas both doubted. Jeremiah was depressed and suicidal. Elijah was burned out. Samson had long hair and Noah got drunk. If God only used perfect people nothing would get done. We all have weaknesses. We all have faults. But God, as he has always done in salvation history, uses people where they are, to do his great task. The one question God asks of us is, 'Are you available?'

One other important thing to learn to be a servant like Jesus, you must learn the difference between significance and prominence. They are not the same thing. A lot of people think that if something is given a lot of visibility, prominence, then it's the most

important. But that's not true. Some significant moments in another's faith can come about by actions completely unnoticed by others, by simple acts of service. Years ago, two teenage boys tried to come into a church service at night. But it was packed out and they couldn't find any seats. So, they turned around and decided to leave because they couldn't find anywhere to sit. But one usher said, 'Come on guys, I'll find you a seat.' That usher personally escorted them down the aisle and searched until he found them seats. That night both of those boys accepted Christ and became Christians. One of them was Billy Graham who went on to minister to millions of people around the world. Does anyone remember the usher? No. Was his action prominent? No. Was his service significant? Yes! Has God noticed the actions of the usher? Yes! "Well done good and faithful servant."

One of the best opportunities for serving together is in small groups. It is the ideal place for everyone to use their S.H.A.P.E. A well-functioning small group is like a mini church. Its function is holistic. It is a place to study the Word of God together. We can share insights and learn so much more than on our own. It is a place of worship, where people can use their talents in playing music, writing poetry, help each other be in awe and devotion to God. It's a place of prayer, when we can pray for each other, for the community, for unbelieving friends and family. It is a place to personally care for each other. Depending on our S.H.A.P.E. we can serve through hospitality, visiting, listening, supporting. It is a place to which we can invite friends who are not Christian who can relate with the group over a BBQ or movie night. It's a place to apprentice new leaders. It's God's way to make us grow to be more like Jesus. As Paul writes in Ephesians 4 "Christ himself gave ... pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature".

It is very important that we all have M.B.A.'s- 'Mop Bucket Attitude's'. Whatever the task Lord, I'll serve, because I love you for serving me. If God can stoop to serve, so can I. Doing so does not mean we lose out. Jesus said (:17) "Now that you know these things you will be blessed if you do them." The great violinist, Nicolo Paganini, willed his marvelous violin to Genoa, the city of his birth. But only on the condition that the instrument never be played upon. That was an unfortunate condition. For it is a peculiarity of wood that as long as it is used and handled, it shows little wear. As soon as it is discarded, it begins to decay. The exquisite, mellow-toned violin has become worm eaten in its beautiful case, valueless except as a relic. The moldering instrument is a reminder that a life withdrawn from all service to others loses its meaning. Bless yourself; serve others and let them experience the grace of God. Honour Jesus by imitating him.

SERMON OUTLINE - SERVE TOGETHER

- Most wish to serve God- in an advisory capacity!
1. Jesus foot washing- his service
 - Foot washing – a slave’s job- John the Baptist not good enough to do Jesus feet
 - God in humble service before his sinful creatures
 - An ‘acted parable’ – representing suffering on the cross
 2. Jesus an example- our service
 - Serving is not easy- considered beneath us
 - We are not greater than Jesus
 - Serve God by the way we serve others
 - All called to ministry, depending on our S.H.A.P.E.
 3. Attitude to service
 - What does it take to be used by God- be available!
 - Common barriers to availability
 - Self-centred
 - Too busy
 - Perfectionism
 - The usher & Billy Graham- no service is insignificant
 - All need to have MBA’s- Mop Bucket Attitude
 - “Blessed if you do these things” –Paganini’s violi

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- *What in the sermon was inspiring? What was hard to receive?*
- *Why is a small group a great opportunity to serve together? What are the various aspects of a holistic approach to small groups?*
- *Do you know your S.H.A.P.E. (Spiritual gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality, Experiences)? So where can you serve best in the church or small group?*

Worship Together

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

Romans 12:1

WORSHIP TOGETHER

After attending church one Sunday morning, a little boy knelt at his bedside that night and prayed, 'Dear God, we had a good time at church today- but I wish you had been there!' One of the things we know is special about coming together for worship is our Lord's promise, *"Where two or three are gathered in my name there am I in the midst of them"*. The question is, how much do we notice the presence of God when we come together for worship? A lot of what passes for worship can just be going through a routine. Or an expectation about the preacher. The story is told of the American preacher, Henry Ward Beecher. One day he couldn't preach. So, a visiting minister substituted for him. A large audience had already gathered to hear Beecher. When they saw the substitute minister step up to the pulpit, several disappointed listeners began to move toward the exits. That's when the minister said loudly, 'All who have come here today to worship Henry Beecher may now withdraw from the church. All who have come to worship God keep your seats.' What drew you to church today? Was there some sense of routine? Was it a deep desire to worship God? Was it a mixture? Sometimes we need the routine to carry us over the dry periods when our desire to worship is low. Why do we desire to worship God? And why do it together?

C.S. Lewis once suggested too many people set their sights too low. They settle for sex, drugs, fame and fortune and end up staying with the boring stuff. They ought to get some passion in their lives. Get with it and be filled with the greatest in life. God himself! Too many settle for what God gives. What life has to offer. But to truly worship God you must come to see that God himself is the greatest pleasure in your life. The Westminster Catechism in its first question asks: "What is the chief end of man?" And the answer says, "To glorify God and enjoy him forever." John Piper in his book 'Desiring God' puts it slightly different: 'Our purpose is to glorify God by enjoying him forever?' When we look at the psalms we see that longing for God is at their heart. In Psalm 63 David expresses his deep desire for God (:1) *"O God you are my God, earnestly I seek you, my soul thirsts for you, my body yearns for you, in a dry and weary land, where there is no water."* David has fled into the Judean desert because his son Absalom was out to kill him and take over as king. David is hungry and thirsty. Yet he has a far deeper longing for something other than water. God himself. What David does is to use a physical reality to illustrate his spiritual condition. The desperate longing David had for water, his soul had for God: *"...my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you..."* Not just his soul but his "body longs" for God. Does that sound strange to you, that you can long for God with every fiber of your being? But doesn't the Bible say to *"Love the lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength"*? A.W. Tozer once wrote: 'What is worship? Worship is to feel in your heart and express in some appropriate manner a humbling but delightful sense of admiring awe and astonished wonder and overpowering love in the presence of that most ancient Mystery, ...whom we call our Father in heaven.'

Now all of this makes us think again about why it is that we gather as we do on a Sunday. We come together for a 'worship service'. The word 'worship' is the key word on our text in Romans 12:1 *"...which is your spiritual worship."* The word 'worship' comes from the old English 'worth-ship' which means to bring a gift or service of worth, in adoration and praise of God. We notice two things in that definition. First, the centre of attention is not us but God, and his worth. Second, worship requires that we bring something; gifts and acts of service. So, the first thing to remember as we gather for worship is that God is here. Psalm 96:4-6 describes God as *"...great is the Lord and most worthy of praise, he is to be feared above all gods.... the Lord made the heavens. Splendour and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary."* That God is right here with us. This is what we have been created for. We are here together to present ourselves before the 'Living God.' The moment we come for worship our attention should be on God. We should be considering his overwhelming greatness. We should be filled with awe and wonder. We should be filled with gratitude at God's amazing love shown in his Son. When we have this deep longing, like David's thirst to be in God's presence, and we have that sense of awe at the wonder of who God is, then we begin to worship.

The second thing about worship is that we are to bring gifts, acts of service which honor God. Note Psalm 96:9&8 *"Worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness, tremble before him, all the earth...Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name, bring an offering and come into his courts."* Romans 12:1 says *"Therefore I urge you, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies and living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God which is your spiritual worship."* The point is clear, isn't it? Worship is giving, offering, sacrificing. So, worship is not first what you receive. Or what you 'get out of it.' Worship is giving to God. It is serving. It's a worship 'service'. And what you give, how you serve, must be in obedience to God's Word. It must be the very best. You notice in our text Paul writes *"...offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God."* The imagery here is of the Old Testament worship. When an Israelite went to the temple to worship God he brought offerings according to the laws given to Moses. A live animal was brought and offered to the priest to be sacrificed. Now those offerings were to be the very best of what the worshipper had. When the Israelite offered a lamb, he did not bring a sick one. No, he brought one of his prize animals. He really gave. It was a giving that cost. It was a sacrifice. It had to be *"holy and acceptable to God."* It's interesting to note Paul uses technical temple language here: *"...offer your bodies... present your offering..."* To 'present' was to place your offering in the priest's hands for sacrifice. So, you took your hands off the animal, leaving it with the priest. It was given. It was no longer yours. So, when we *"offer [our] bodies as living sacrifices"* it means we take our life and place it in God's hands. And take our hands off. Our lives are no longer ours. It is a 'holy offering'. It is set aside for God. It's for God's use only!

Now what is *"...holy and acceptable to God"* when we come to worship? It is the total giving of ourselves. Paul writes, *"...offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God."* That is what real worship is. It's when you give yourself. When you

give yourself completely in obedience to God. As distinct from the Old Testament, we are to be a living sacrifice. We serve God with our living. Each thought we have, every word we say, each action we take, are all to be acts of worship. This total devotion obviously means that all of life is worship. That's why Paul writes in verse 2 "*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world...*" As Christians we are called to be different. And that difference, our obedient living, is all part of our worship of God. All of life is worship. What we do at work is worship. What we do in our studies is to be done as an act of worship. How we think and act during a night out is to be in worship of God. But worship is most focused when we worship together. In the Bible there is a real emphasis on the gathering together for worship. The Psalms are full of it. The word 'ecclesia', which we translate as 'church', means 'the gathering.' To be together in worship is so important. The public gathering is a visible declaration to the community that we serve the living God. It shows that all of life is called upon to recognize and serve God. The stress is on gathering together for worship. The story is told of a man who decided he could just as well serve God by himself in nature. So, he stopped going regularly to church. His minister visited him one cold night. Sitting by the open fire the minister noticed the hot coals glowing. Quietly he got the tongs and took out a coal and laid it on the hearth. It didn't take long for the coal to stop glowing and grow cold. As the two men stared at the coal, the man said to his minister, 'I'll see you in church on Sunday.'

God made us communal beings, just as he is. That's why we have been stressing the need to gather in small groups to minister to each other. It's when we do things together that we grow best. On our own we can struggle with doubt. We can slide from doing our devotions. We can slip into wrong behaviour patterns. Australia has shifted into an anti-Christian culture. If we are not supporting each other the influence of the culture around us will quickly draw us away from the church and God. We need to gather together. And that is especially so for worshipping together. When we gather for worship there is something special about all of us, together, expressing our faith in confession and song. All together being encouraged and challenged by the Word. Our regular attendance is an act of service to God. It is also an act of service to the others gathered. It is a sad thing if many Christians decide to turn up occasionally for a worship service. They deprive God of the public honor he is due. And they deprive fellow Christians of their encouraging presence.

What it comes down to, as we have been saying, is that worship is bringing your sacrifices, your acts of service. And that has to do with our attitude. Let me put it this way. I have an awful confession to make in this AFL mad city of Melbourne. I enjoy watching an occasional football match. But not being a committed club member, or player, I am not overly concerned in the result of the game. My attitude would be very different if I were a player. Then I would be preparing for the game all week. And I would do my utmost to see that our team wins. Those who say church is boring and they get nothing out of it, are often those who have not made a serious commitment to Jesus. If you are not a 'player', if you don't love Jesus, the worship service will seem a

dull routine. That's why Paul starts off this verse by saying, *"Therefore I urge you in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices."* Paul urges worship, *"in view of God's mercies."* In the first 11 chapters Paul has been writing about the way God has brought forgiveness and life through the death and resurrection of Jesus. He spells out how believers have been adopted as God's children. They are even his heirs! Paul is so inspired by what God has done that at the end of the chapter (11:33) he cries out in praise: *"Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God."* To truly worship God, you must know the utter joy of being forgiven. You must grasp the depth of what God has done for you. So, let me ask you: Do you really know Jesus as Saviour and Lord? If not, talk with me today; it is vital, eternally vital, that you do.

Now, to practically give ourselves in service to God in the worship service it means we should prepare ourselves. It is important that we see public worship together as the climax of the week. It's to be what we long for. To be together with God and each other in adoration and praise. To help prepare, let me make some suggestions. This will be radical and counter cultural for many. Consider making Saturday night reasonably early. We say that we are to give our total selves in worship to God. That includes our bodies. There is nothing more distracting from real worship than a tired body and a hangover head. Spend time in prayer before coming to church to prepare your frame of mind to meet with God. During the service, concentrate on God himself. As you sing, focus on the words and express adoration and love for God. When the Bible is read and preached on, listen to it as Words from the Father. Be receptive, 'Lord speak to me through your servant today.' When the offering comes around really give, not just some change, but giving sacrificially. Those of us who lead should give our absolute best in reading, music, praying, preaching. We come totally prepared to offer ourselves, our best. Doing this is never too much. Our service, no matter how exuberant or serious, is always an inadequate response to what God has done in Jesus. In a moment we will participate in the Lord's Supper. As we do, reflect on Jesus with his disciples at that supper. As we saw last week, see Jesus, God himself, on his knees as the slave cleaning their dirty feet. It was the acted parable of Jesus going so low in hell itself for our sin. Remember what God in his grace has done. Then think again of Paul's words *"...in view of God's mercy, ...offer your bodies as living sacrifices."* Remember and worship accordingly.

SERMON OUTLINE – WORSHIP TOGETHER

1. The object of worship

- Wish you were here!
- God or the preacher?
- *“Glorify God and enjoy him forever”*
- *“My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you”*

2. Defining worship

- ‘Worth-ship’- bring a gift or service
- Focus on God- the awesome one is present
- *“holy & acceptable”* – our very best
- *“living sacrifices”*- all of life is worship
- ‘ecclesia’ – the public gathering

3. Preparation for worship

- Bored spectator or involved player
- *“I urge you in view of God’s mercy”*
- Prepare your body, prepare your heart
- Remember Jesus’ sacrifice.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- *What does it mean to worship (worth-ship) God? Why is it so important to do it together?*
- *What will you do to help you prepare for worship, to help you in your (sacrificial) service in the worship service?*
- *How is the importance to be together in a worship service reflect the importance of gathering together in small groups?*

Reach Out Together

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...

1 Peter 3:15

REACH OUT TOGETHER

The story is told of a young salesman who was disappointed at losing a big sale. As he talked with his sales manager he lamented, 'I guess it just proves you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.' The manager replied, 'Son, take my advice; your job is not to make him drink. Your job is to make him thirsty.' That is the key to our theme today, 'Reach Out Together'. I am taking my cue from Jesus who said of the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost (John 7:37): *"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, 'rivers of living water will flow from within them.' By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive"*. Let me illustrate the point of thirst with a personal story. Many years ago, when I could still drink wine and eat cheese, Liz and I had numerous discussions over a good red with our neighbours. Occasionally we ended up talking about God, but they were not too receptive. Until one day the husband came around and asked to talk to me. He had just found out that his sister had cancer. He wanted to talk to me about God and life after death. Several times I had brought him to the 'living water', so to speak. But now he was readier to drink. You get the point. Now what does the average person thirst for. A Gallop Poll some years ago found the needs of the average person were: 'The need for shelter and food; the need to believe life is meaningful and has a purpose, the need for a sense of community and deeper relationships, the need to be appreciated and respected, the need to be listened to and be heard, the need to feel one is growing in faith.' So, summing it up, people have a deep need for community, a need to love and be loved. So, what is going to make them thirsty? Seeing a community of people who genuinely love each other. People who practically care for each other. People who are gracious and accepting of each other, warts and all.

Now, we see in 1 Peter 3:15 that the apostle writes *"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."* You see how it's a case of the other person initiating the conversation with a question. You could say they are thirsty. They want to know why you seem to be different? Why you live the way you do? Why you have a sense of hope? But what is it that makes them ask? What makes them thirsty? Well if we look at the context we see that Peter writes in 2:9 *"You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light"*. Note the repeated reference to community, being a people, a nation. That is the stress throughout the Bible. We are a community, not just a group of individuals. Notice verse 12, the apostle writes that as a community his readers are to: *"Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they*

may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us". In other words, Peter says their lives together are saying something to those around them. Look at chapter 3:1 *"Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without talk by the behaviour of their wives."* Now when Peter writes *"...in the same way"*, he is saying that the wives are to be like Jesus. In chapter 2:21-25 he shows how Jesus was submissive and suffered for our sin. He says Jesus did that not just to bring forgiveness to those who believe. It was also an example to follow. Verse 21: *"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."* That reminds us of what Jesus said (John 13:34): *"Love one another as I have loved you. By this will everyone know you are my disciples"*. Now what is said here is all relational stuff, how we get on together. We see it some more in chapter 3:7 where Peter says *"Husbands, in the same way, (that is as Jesus was) be considerate as you live with your wives."* Then in verse 8 he says *"Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble."* So, in other words, God's people are to be together a harmonious, loving community. But being such a loving community is not just for our own benefit. It's what generates a thirst in the community. It is what attracts people. It's what creates the longing, the thing that has people ask: 'What have you got? What is the reason for the way you are? Or, *"What is the reason for the hope you have"*, as Peter says, coming back to verse 15. That's why we are to reach out together.

In a book by Bill Hybells, he quotes a letter from a relatively new Christian to the person who had influenced her so greatly. Listen to some of what she wrote:

'You know when we met; I began to discover a new vulnerability, a warmth and a lack of pretense that impressed me. I saw in you a thriving spirit- I could tell you were a growing person and I liked that. I saw you had strong self-esteem, not based on the fluff of self-help books, but on something a whole lot deeper. I saw you lived by convictions and priorities and not just by convenience, selfish pleasure or financial gain. I had never met anyone like that before. I felt a depth of love and concern as you listened to me and didn't judge me. You tried to understand me, you sympathized, and you celebrated with me, you demonstrated kindness and generosity, and not just to me but to others as well. And you stood for something. You were willing to go against the grain of society, and follow what you believed to be true, no matter what other people said, and no matter how much it cost you. And for these reasons and a whole host more, I found myself really wanting what you had. Now that I've become a Christian, I wanted to write to tell you I'm grateful beyond words for how you lived your Christian life in front of me.'

Doesn't that motivate you? How we live, and especially how we live together as a community is so important.

In fact, we need to be quite intentional about it. It strikes me how Peter writes *"Always be prepared to give an answer ..."* Our lifestyles should be such that as we relate to folk, somewhere along the line someone will question us about our hope. We need to be intentional about our being a church community. And we need to be intentional in being prepared to give an answer. Having the small group festival and developing the small groups is not just for us as a church. We need to be intentional about it for the sake of the communities we live in. In Hobart, Tasmania, there is a major bridge across the Derwent River. One night a captain was drunk as he sailed his large cargo ship towards the bridge. He hit one of the supports, causing a span to collapse and fall into the river. Several cars went down with it. When people realized what had happened, they desperately tried to stop cars going onto the bridge. They almost threw themselves in front of the oncoming cars. They were very intentional, very desperate to save lives! To just stand there and let cars go on the bridge when they knew what had happened, would have been callous beyond words. How intentional, how desperate are we to save our friends and workmates etc. We know that without Christ, people will face eternal hell. 1 Peter 3:12 says *"For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."* God's face is turned from us unless we have come to him in repentance and accepted Christ by faith.

Now, saying that we should be prepared, being intentional, does not mean I insist you all go down the street and front up to people and 'Bible bash' them. None of us likes being confronted in the street by a Mormon, or someone trying to sell something. John Dickson in his book 'Promoting the Gospel' tells the story of him sitting at a café talking with a colleague about what his church was doing to promote the gospel. A woman who was sitting close by, obviously had heard their conversation, got up and after paying her bill went straight to John and said 'So, you want to convert the world. How dare you!' And off she went. Too much of what goes on for evangelism is intrusive and offensive. It sends shivers down our spines too, if we think that's what we should be doing. No wonder so few want to go out and witness. Thing is, the apostle is not telling us that we need to collar and Bible bash everyone. He tells us to be prepared to answer when asked. Part of being prepared is that we must be very intentional about our lives as community together: *"live in harmony, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble"*. Be attractive in lifestyle.

Part of being quite intentional, being 'prepared' to reach out together is about being hospitable. Peter writes in chapter 4:8&9 *"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling."* Invite people to your homes, to your small groups. (We get a practice next week with 'Guess who is coming to your house?'). Let people see your lives, how you relate together. That is the great value of having small groups in our church. With our church spread out all over the place it's hard to have a natural community. So, we need to focus on our small groups to show others how we live and care for each other. Have small group BBQs and outings. Invite non-Christian friends. Show acceptance. Invite all kinds. Give practical help as a small group. Imagine someone in the community needs help. An elderly woman in the community has a garden that is a mess. You take your small group and clean it up for her. When she asks why you are so helpful, be prepared to give the answer for the hope that you have. It's the practical stuff that really speaks to our society. That's why the Salvation Army has such a good reception in our towns. That's why 'Hope on Friday' gives us a good name in the community. When a group of Christians go out of their way to help a non-Christian friend, it speaks volumes and generates a thirst.

Outreach is not an individual thing. It's communal. Jesus never sent out his disciples on their own. Paul was usually with someone else. That's why we are encouraged to reach out together. But outreach is not just about how we show love and care for each other. When a friend is touched by Christian compassion, then a time may well be created by the Spirit, where they ask us to *"give the reason for the hope that you have"*. And when they do, we should be ready, we should 'be prepared' because that's one of the reasons why we focus on community. We want people to get thirsty, so questions are asked. Peter says, *"Be prepared to give an answer."* The Greek word for "answer" is 'apologia', which meant to give an explanation, a defense of your faith. There is a sense in which you need to know what you believe and be able to explain it to another. Now I don't mean some great theological explanation. I mean in simple terms, that you can easily share. I mean sharing your own testimony on how God has been at work in your life. That's where our focus on having small groups is so important. In small group discussions we are encouraged to talk about our walk with the Lord. That's so we can support each other to grow. But more than that it helps us articulate what we believe. If we can't share our faith with each other how will we do it with a non-Christian? It's all part of being "prepared" as the apostle Peter writes. It's about being intentional. Witnessing is not about winning an argument. Peter writes that giving an answer to the question must be with *"gentleness and respect"*. Witnessing is quietly telling our own

story with Jesus and letting the Spirit change the heart of another as they warm to what they hear.

In the book 'Becoming a Contagious Christian' there is a formula that helps us remember the theme of today. It's this:

$$HP+CP+CC=MI.$$

High Potency + Close Proximity + Clear Communication = Maximum Impact.

High Potency refers to how attracted people are to those who are authentic. It refers to the 'pull of compassion'. Close Proximity refers to the opportunities we have when we have relationships with others, when we do things together. In other words, HP+CP have to do with community, being together. Clear Communication has to do with being prepared to give an 'answer'. So, it sums up what Peter is writing about. It's also the method Jesus used. He was always hanging out with the people, having meals with 'the sinners'. The book also talks of the 'BBQ first principle'. Have neighbours over for a BBQ and get to know them and love them before you think of sharing the gospel. Doing that with your small group is even better. One line in the book says, 'You can't be a contagious Christian without getting close enough to other people to let them catch the disease.' So, reach out together. Be a community. Be hospitable. Give practical help. Genuinely care.

Let me close again with the words of Jesus, (John 7:37-38): *"If anyone is thirsty, let them come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within them."* That's the Pentecost promise. Thirst no more!

SERMON OUTLINE – REACH OUT TOGETHER

- Leading a horse to water
1. Generating thirst by community- *“the hope you have”*
 - Reaching out together- *“a chosen people”*
 - Example as community- *“live such good lives”*
 - Example of Jesus- *“suffered for you leaving an example”*
 - Traits of community- *“Live in harmony, love as brothers, be compassionate & humble”*
 2. Intentional about community- *“always be prepared”*
 - The Hobart bridge- intentional, desperate to save others
 - The need: *“The Lord’s face is against those who do evil”*
 - Not talking of Bible bashing
 - Intentional in: hospitality, using small groups, showing acceptance, giving practical help
 3. In community telling our story- *“give an answer”*
 - ‘apologia’ giving our defence, giving our witness
 - Share in small groups, learning to share with others
 - HP+CP+CC=MI
 - High Potency – people attracted
 - Close Proximity- people close
 - Clear Communication- people understand
 - *“If anyone is thirsty let them come to me and drink”*

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- *What stood out for you in the sermon? Explain HP+CP+CC=MI and how a small group can help with that.*
- *Focusing inwards, if we are intentional about being a real community that creates a thirst for others, how, as small groups, can we go about making that happen? What would it look like?*
- *Focusing outwards, what are some practical things we can do as small groups that gets us involved with others & perhaps creates an opportunity to “give an answer for the hope we have”? e.g. hospitality, practical helps.*

Fellowship Together

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

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. 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. 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. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12

FELLOWSHIP TOGETHER

The story is told of old Betty who went to the post office. She was confronted with a long line of people waiting to be served. Betty only needed stamps, so someone said 'Why don't you use the stamp machine? Then you don't have to stand in line.' Betty said, 'I know, but the machine won't ask me about my arthritis.' No matter our technology, people still need human contact. We read in Genesis 2 that after making Adam God said, *"It is not good for the man to be alone"*. We all need others to be with, laugh with, cry with. Now admitting our need for each other is not easy. We are quite self-sufficient individuals. We have our pride. To ask for help, to share a struggle, is seen as weakness. But we must be careful that our strength does not become our weakness. So many people really are lonely. Who remembers the Simon & Garfunkel song: 'I am a rock, I am an island':

*'A winter's day
In a deep and dark December
I am alone
Gazing from my window to the streets down below
On a freshly fallen silent shroud of snow
I am a rock, I am an island.
I've built walls
A fortress deep and mighty
That none may penetrate
I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain
Its laughter and loving I disdain
I am a rock, I am an island....
And a rock feels no pain
And an island never cries'.*

Yes, we may protect ourselves from pain. It can save you from crying if you put up your barriers. But have you lived? Have you lived as God wants you to live? Listen to what the apostle Paul writes in Romans 12:5 *"...so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."* God's Word does not see us as rugged individuals, but people who are part of each other. We are parts of one body (I am your leg, you are my eye!). Our being one body starts with our relationship with Jesus. Paul starts off that verse speaking of us being *"in Christ"*. We are 'in Christ' when we trust him to be our saviour and Lord. His Spirit unites us to Jesus, so we have a living relationship with him. As we respond to the Spirit within, we will want to live more and more for Jesus. As Paul writes (Romans 12:1) *"I urge you, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-which is your spiritual worship."*

And for us to live sacrificially for Jesus at home, at work, at the football match, we need to first change our thinking. (Verse 2) *"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is- his good, pleasing and perfect will."* One area where we need to think differently is how we relate with each other. Because the closer we get to Jesus the closer we get with each other as Christians. The one is in direct proportion to the other. It's like the spokes on a bicycle wheel. The closer the spokes get to the hub, the closer they are together. When you know the ratio, you can work out how far you are from the hub by the distance between the spokes. We can get an idea of how close we are to Jesus by our fellowship with each other. The great thing is in small groups we can get closer to each other and Jesus at the same time.

To relate well with others, we need first to have a proper assessment of our selves. That's why Paul writes in (verse 3) *"...Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment..."* So, none of this 'I'm better than you. I have it all together. I'm going to succeed even if you don't. I am making bucket loads of money. I am fine on my own'. But we shouldn't go to the other extreme either. 'I am nothing. I am a worm. I can't do anything properly. I am useless.' Having low self-esteem is not being more Christian than being proud. Look carefully again at what Paul says, *"do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but with sober judgment."* That is, have a balanced view. Recognize both your strengths and your weaknesses. We are all made in God's image. We are so valued by God, that he gave his own son for us. God has made you in a particular way. God has given you your life experience, character and spiritual gifts. You have your areas of weakness, things where you need someone else's help. Now this is not just some unfortunate way things have turned out. You might think that way if you assume we are all meant to be self-sufficient individuals. Having our own strengths and weaknesses is by God's design. It makes us reach for each other. We see how much we need each other. Paul in verse 4 says bodies have various parts and that these various parts *"don't all have the same function"*. Which is as it should be. If the whole body were an eye you wouldn't be very mobile. If the whole body were a leg you wouldn't see! You get Paul's point. We belong together as a body with various parts. We need each other. Christian life is meant to be lived in fellowship with each other.

Now for fellowship to work well we also need to have a certain attitude. Paul writes (verse 10) *"Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves."* In other words, hold each other in high regard, deeply respect each other. That starts by remembering that Jesus gave his life for the other person who also loves Jesus. So, imitate Jesus and honour their worth and dignity as well. Fellowship is about sharing

our lives together and supporting each other. (Romans 12:13 &15) *"Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality... Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn."* Fun times, important times in our lives are so much better when we have others to share them with. Imagine your first child has just been born, you have a great job offer, or you have just bought that house, and you have no one to tell. How bad is that! Tough times also should not be suffered alone. No one should be sitting in the hospital waiting room alone alone. If we have deep fellowship, we are not only there for each other, we feel for each other. In fact, we feel it too. Have you ever hit your thumb with a hammer? Your whole body is jumping around. You feel it all over. So, if one of us faces loss or pain, we all feel it. We all share the grief. Paul writes that for us to have decent fellowship we need to get along together. (Romans 12:16&18) *"Live in harmony with one another... If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."* A Leadership magazine article compared humanity with a bunch of porcupines huddling together on a cold winter's night. 'The colder it gets outside the more we huddle together for warmth. But the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. And in the lonely night of winter we eventually begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness'. Jesus gave us an alternative: forgive each other for the pokes we receive. Always come back to Jesus and remember what he has forgiven us. That will allow us to stay together and stay warm.

We need to fellowship together for our spiritual survival. A Zambian proverb says 'If you run alone you can run fast. If you run together you can run far!' The Christian life is not a 50-meter sprint. It's a marathon. We need each other to keep going in life. Paul writes (Romans 12:11) *"Never be lacking in zeal but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord."* What keeps you going? Our Lord uses his body to keep you going. If you are going on leave for a while, you get your neighbour to put out your rubbish bins, to get your mail, to keep an eye on your place. The neighbour covers for you. We need others to watch out for us. Let me ask you: do you have anyone looking out for your soul? Isn't your soul more important than your possessions? So, who's helping you out in your spiritual journey? Who's watching out for you? Who's asking you the hard questions in life? Who cares enough to be honest with you, to make sure you are still growing in your spiritual walk? Who's watching out for you when you get discouraged, depressed and feel like giving up? You see how important small groups can be? How unhelpful it is to remain rugged individuals who don't need any one else? Can you say to each other 'I need you'? It's not easy for us, is it? Leonardo Da Vinci, with his engineering insight made the observation that 'An arch consists of two weaknesses which leaning against each other make a strength.' Let's be humble and honest, we need each other.

SERMON OUTLINE – FELLOWSHIP TOGETHER

- Who will ask about my arthritis?
 - Simon & Garfunkel: 'I am a rock, I am an island'.
1. One body, belonging to each other
 - *"in Christ"* – that's what brings us together
 - Spokes on a wheel, closer to the hub, closer together
 2. One body, different gifts
 - *"Not too high, sober judgment,"*
 - Where I am weak, you are strong
 - Body parts, different functions, can't do without each other
 3. One body, right attitude
 - *"Honour one another"*
 - *"Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn"*
 - *"Live in harmony"*
 - *"Keep your spiritual fervour"*
 - I need you

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. **What stood out for you in the sermon on Fellowship Together? What will you reflect on some more?** (e.g. 'we are not meant to be self-sufficient', 'having a balanced view of self, not too high or too low', 'no one should suffer alone').
2. Consider the bicycle wheel: *'The closer we get to the hub the closer the spokes come together. So also, the closer we are to Jesus the closer we are to each other'.*
How close are we to Jesus and how is that seen in our closeness to each other?
How could a small group help us grow closer to Jesus and each other at the same time?
3. Consider the following:
 - *'If you run together you can run far'.*
 - *'Our Lord uses his body to keep you going.'*
 - *'We need to fellowship together for our spiritual survival'.***Who is watching out for you in your spiritual journey?**
Who is honest with you when it is needed?
Who encourages you when you are down?
How can a small group provide pastoral care and hold each other accountable?

Mature Together

...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Ephesians 4:13-16

MATURE TOGETHER

It has been said that 'Growing old is inevitable. Growing up is optional'. The same can be said about us spiritually. You may be getting older in years, but are you growing up spiritually? This is an important question. Let me put like this. We all love babies. There's something delightful about their innocence and angelic look. You just want to open your arms and cuddle them. We may wish they stay small and cuddly. But we all know they are to grow up. If a child never learns to walk and talk, never figures out how to feed herself, it's a sign that something is wrong. My brother has a son with Down Syndrome. He is in his early thirties with the mind of a child. The antics of a child can be cute in a three-year-old, but so sad in a thirty-year-old. We are all supposed to grow up and become mature adults. It's the same thing for all of us spiritually.

Why do we have to grow up? Jesus said, (Matthew 18:4) *"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* If I trust Jesus as a child I am forgiven and will go to heaven. So why do I need to become spiritually mature? Look at Ephesians 4:14 *"Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming."* Paul mentions two problems about being "infants". The first is *"...being tossed back and forth."* He gives the picture of a boat tossed about by the waves. First it is going in one direction, then tossed in another direction. Children are like that. They have short attention spans. Five minutes on this then five minutes on that, like a storm, all over the place. The second childish behaviour is they are caught up *"...by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming..."* Our children can be so naïve to danger. Like a child approaching a power point with a knife. That's the sort of problems you might have with those young in the faith. Young Christians, especially, are subtly led along by our culture because they don't always have the biblical maturity to see where it's wrong. Immature Christians can be easily distracted from focusing on the kingdom of God, by the appeal of wealth, or fame or the 'me culture'. A growing Christian is less vulnerable to temptation. They are more joyful in the Lord and they are more stable in a time of crisis.

What does this spiritual maturity look like? Ephesians 4:13 says we are to *"...become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."* So spiritual maturity looks like Jesus. If we are growing in maturity, our character is becoming more and more like Jesus. That is God's goal for us. Keith Green, the Christian song writer wrote the lyrics 'I want to, I need to be more like Jesus. The end of all my prayers, is to care

like my Lord cares. My one and only goal, his image in my soul. He's faithful and he's true, to complete the work he began in you.' If being more like Jesus is what we are all to become, how do we get there? Verse 14 Paul concludes, *"...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the son of God and become mature..."* Verse 15 *"...speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."*

We see two factors for growth here. The first is a "build up" in the "unity of the faith". Not just a growth 'in faith', but in the 'unity of the faith'. In other words, it is a shared understanding. We as a community all share in the receiving and telling of the gospel. The unity of the faith comes about by us learning from each other. It will involve you as parents discipling your children. It involves me preaching. It happens best in a small group sharing insights in Bible study and sharing our faith. Young Christians will grow when they try to understand the Bible with the help of more mature Christians. You notice it's a growth in unity. It is a growing up together in our understanding. It is a communal affair. Faith is lived and shared and grown in community. The implication is that spiritual growth will not be so good where there is not an increase in shared understanding. So, you can see the need for small groups. We hold each other accountable to be in God's Word regularly. And we expand our ideas and understanding as we interact with each other. Our becoming like Christ, our 'unity in the faith', is a "building of the body" says Paul. It's something we do with each other. We need each other to mature.

The second factor is that there must be an increase *"...in the knowledge of the son of God."* This is different to the previous point. 'Knowledge' here is not just knowing about Christian teaching. It is a personal knowing of Jesus himself. This comes by two things. Being constantly in prayer and aware of Jesus' presence. And then acknowledging his presence, doing what Jesus tells us in his Word. 1 John 2:3-5, *"We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commandments. Whoever who says "I know him" but does not do what he commands is a liar and the truth is not in that person. But if any one obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete (mature) in them. This is how we know we are in him. We must walk (live) as Jesus did."* To know Jesus personally we must follow him. We must walk in his steps. Imagine being at the beach as a child and playing a game with your dad. He walks first with little steps, then big steps, and you as the child walk in those same steps in the sand. When we read the gospels, we see Jesus and his character. When we obey his commands, we begin to see Jesus' character in ourselves.

We “...walk (live) as Jesus did”. It is in the doing that we see who we are: the body of Christ.

It's not just about having the right theology, but the right practice. We need to live right. The Hebrews had a saying 'If you say you know it, but are not doing it, you don't know it.' Knowing is not just head knowledge, it's a lifestyle. Being regular in our small groups helps us grow. Our experience of the Lord is deepened and enlarged when we pray with and for each other. We experience Jesus better when we serve each other. Remember Matthew 25:40 “...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters, you did it for me.” We experience Jesus in us when we relate to others in the way he would. Love expressed to us through others in our group is Christ's love to us. Paul extends this thought when he says we are to “...speak the truth in love” to each other. The word here is actually “truthing in love”. In other words, “truth” is a verb, it is something we do. We are to be genuine and loving in all our words and actions towards each other. And that sort of thing only really happens when we are closely connected in fellowship with each other. Paul speaks of “*the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament.*” It's the joints and ligaments that connect the parts of the body. We experience that connection as we spend time together, as we lean on each other and cooperate with each other. And that happens the most in our small groups.

So, what can we say about all this? Have we grown? Can you see a bit more of Jesus in us? Some might say; 'Well, I can see I am still very young in the faith. I have much to learn, to know about the Bible, to get to know Jesus personally.' Or maybe you say, 'I've been in the church for years, but I've stayed in a rut. I realize now that I need to grow. I'm glad there's opportunities with small groups to help me grow.' The remark was once made that the church was a hundred kilometers wide, but a millimeter deep. We can't afford to be shallow. Our culture is rapidly changing and becoming anti-Christian. Will we have the maturity to stand for Jesus? Or will we be tossed back and forth by the rapidly changing views? Are we mature enough to teach others the faith? Have we grown to the point we show Christ in our lives by our example? Really, all of us have growing to do. Together with Sunday worship there is no better way for pastoral care and the opportunity to mature than being in a small group. It's that important.

SERMON OUTLINE – MATURE TOGETHER

- Growing old is inevitable. Growing up is a choice.
 - Cute as they are, our children need to grow up.
1. Why do we need to grow up?
 - *“tossed back & forth”*- following fads
 - *“craftiness of men”*- naïve & conned by the world
 2. What does grown up look like?
 - *“become mature...the fullness of Christ,”*
 - *“Your attitude should be the same as Jesus”*- compared to him, how is our maturity?
 3. How do we get to grow up?
 - *“Unity in the faith”*- shared understanding of the Bible
 - *“Knowledge of the son of God”*- knowing Jesus personally, walking in his steps
 - *“truthing in love...joints & ligaments”*- a loving fellowship
 4. How are we doing? Growing?
 - ‘I’ve grown...I’m in a rut.’
 - We can’t afford to be shallow
 - Small groups essential in helping us mature

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. **Responding to the sermon, what was new, challenging or a timely reminder? What will you do with that?** (e.g. ‘... we are to grow spiritually mature..., spiritual maturity looks like Jesus... the two factors of growth’.)
2. **Where would you place yourself on the maturity scale?**
 - Still young in the faith with lots to learn
 - ‘...tossed back & forth’, following the culture
 - ‘I have stayed in a rut...’
 - I am starting ‘...to walk as Jesus did.’**What does spiritual maturity, being Christlike, actually look like? In other words what are we aiming at?**
3. **How might we go about helping each other grow and be more like Jesus?**
 - ‘unity of the faith’- learning from each other
 - ‘personal knowing of Jesus’
 - ‘...in prayer and aware of Jesus’ presence.’
 - ‘...doing what Jesus tells us in his Word’.**How would a small group help with that? What will you actually do as a result of the small group festival?**

