

“Getting Along”

Genesis 4:1-16, Romans 14:10-19;
1 Thess 5:1-4, 13-22; Matt 5:19-24 and 25:31-40

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Oh! I'm not alone. Have you ever done that? Have you been so engaged in something and then looked up and all of a sudden you realize “I'm not alone.”

I've been thinking about the idea of identity and oftentimes when I think about identity I think about who I am. It gets kind of self-focused, but then I look up and realize “Oh. I'm not alone.” We explore this idea of “who am I” in the midst of a lot of other people who are asking that same kind of question or who have worked out a particular identity.

We have thought about how it is in faith, through the grace of Christ, that we are engaged in what we call the family of faith or we're engaged with Christ, and in that we find a sense of identity, a recognition that God loves us, calls us, encourages us. In the moment of doing all that, when we notice where Christ is leading us, in many ways he's leading us not only to God, but to each other, to be together.

Throughout scripture it feels like we are encouraged and invited to be part of a family. God calls a people. God puts us together. That early story: Am I my brother's keeper? Immediately it's apparent that God thinks so. We are to be together. If we look around a little bit, it makes sense. After all, there are all kinds of studies that show this kind of thing. There are studies of children who have gotten very little attention in their first few years of life and there's a failure to thrive if they're not picked up and held, if there's not this love and caring going on, a human relationship with the baby.

I was looking at some research just the other day that suggests that throughout our lives if we're lonely, we're more likely to be sick. There's this need to be together. It seems built in, perhaps designed. And yet, there's also this sense that it's not always easy to be together, to be a family, to be a community. There's a statement that sometimes people say about one gender or the other: it's hard to live with them or without them. And yet we know that there's this sense that we're called to be together. We need to be together. So how do we work that out?

In one of the classes I took this summer, one of the professors was looking at movies and how he saw in these movies these different themes. Identity was one and relationships was another. One thing we might do is get a screen so that we can look at what goes on. We can go to a movie. We can go to a movie about friends, about family, about lovers, about all kinds of relationships, about communities. And we do. There is some value in that. It helps us see another way people interact, perhaps. But there's also a limitation. I was thinking about this. On my computer, I could bring up a nice YouTube video of somebody making cookies. It would be great. I could see the all the ingredients. They would mix them together, put them on a tray, put them in the oven, and by the magic of video they would take them right back out and they would be ready to eat. The problem is, at that point I'm out of luck. There are those wonderful

cookies, and I can't touch them. To really have a cookie, I have to do it myself, don't I? I have to get the ingredients out. I have to warm up the oven. I have to do all the things necessary to really have the experience and to actually eat what I'm making.

That's what Jesus is inviting us to do, is to not just see what's going on, not to just hear what's being talked about, but he's inviting us to participate in this life together—the life he calls us to. We recognize that sometimes there's a real struggle with it. How do we do that? That's what all these verses are really about. How do we do that? We begin to care about each other. We begin to recognize that God is directing us to think about what it means to be together. How do we do that?

Paul kicks things off by saying, "Stop judging one another." Jesus invites us to pay attention to who we are and to the others. It's so easy in our relationships to have things break. So Jesus invites us to reconcile, to try again, to work it out. Then we think about all the things Paul says about how easy it is to use them for judgment? How easy it is to take these things, like the Thessalonians passage I read where it says to be encouraging, to be helpful, and—let's see; be patient and I'll think of it. A few of you got that. The third one was to be patient. Seek to be good to one another. So we could take those things and say, "Well, you're not being very encouraging," or "You're not being very helpful," or "You're not being very patient," and turn them into a rule. I don't think that's what these are. These aren't just things that we do because we have to do them.

It's a little bit like a recipe. If I have a recipe, I can use it to get what it makes, but I don't have to use it and then I don't get what it makes. These are a little bit more like that recipe. They are available to us, and the result is what it makes.

I was also thinking about them as being a little bit like blueprints. Now, you can build a house without blueprints, but it's a lot easier to make mistakes. There might be times when those walls just don't line up quite right. So there are consequences to not using the blueprints. It's hard to build the house that you want without them.

On the other end, there's probably a building inspector who's going to come to see if you've done things well enough. We get a little bit of that sense from what Jesus is saying. There's a building inspector out there that might want to pay attention to how we're building our house. But the whole purpose of it is that we build a house, that we build that place where we live together. That's what these are for. They invite us to think about how we can live together.

We are invited to come around the table, to become that family of faith, to become the children of light the way Thessalonians describes it. We do that by following Christ and listening to his guidance. By listening to the Apostle Paul and how that provides us a way of doing things. So the question is not how can I judge somebody for having done those things, it's more like is there anybody in my life that I need to be reconciled to? Where's my next opportunity to encourage someone? These aren't opportunities like buying a piece of the Brooklyn Bridge. These are opportunities that will have impact,

not only on my life, but on somebody else's. When is the next time I can help someone? Which is the next circumstance in which I need to be patient? Am I looking for the good in what I'm doing or am I just looking for something for myself?

These are all ways that we can follow Christ into the relationships he's given us. It helps, of course, if we rejoice in the grace he's given, pray unceasingly, and be thankful. So the relationship with God continues to be important. Rejoicing in who God is, praying and keeping in contact, and thankfulness that we have that grace as we try to follow Christ to do these things and to find out what kind of community we can make.

I think in Romans it talks about righteousness, peace, and joy being the result of this. We end up with right relationships (righteousness) that work out in ways that are harmonious (peace) and I think that's what creates the joy. These are invitations for us as we try them out, as we try to look for the next place in our lives where we can do this, where we can be reconciled, where we can be helpful, where we can be encouraging, where we can be patient, where we can seek the good that we didn't recognize before. We are invited to the table of a good God who wants to take us on that journey, to sustain us on it, that we might be God's good people. Amen.

Gracious God, as we read these passages we're reminded that as you come into our lives, as you give us an identity as one of your children, that you invite us to be children of light, of goodness, of grace trying to see where we can do good for one another. You have given us a lot of different ways of looking at that. Help us recognize as we step out the door today where the next instance is where we can do what you call us to do and find the wonder of the journey that you're taking us on. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.