

“The Fellowship of the Children”
Isaiah 66:10-14; 1 Corinthians 1:1-20;
Matthew 18:1-6

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Through the season of Lent, we have been talking about the nature of the struggles we encounter. The first week we recognized that the struggles we encounter lead to broken relationships and the need for reconciliation. The next week, we looked at how Jesus invites us to think about what he said, realizing that in doing so we can come to conclusions that can divide us, and can add to the need we have to be reconciled. Today we continue to think about the ways life gets in the way of being a disciple of Christ.

One of the things that follows from the idea of reaching conclusions is the way that today we all are expected to reach our own conclusion. There was a time when most people agreed that there was one truth. Now, in this post-modern time, there is a movement among us that we each have our own truth. We're not expected to ever find something to agree on. There's a trajectory out there that suggests that we should all just find our own truth and if we follow that then we will have the life we want.

It feels to me like this fracturing of the ability to agree, leads us to an individuality that fits with our vision of being self-made people, being individualists. Yet where does this individuality lead? I think it leads us to a place of loneliness, of isolation, of separation. It's hard, then, to even enter into relationships with other people because, after all, what do we have in common? We often, I think, search for the thing we might have in common.

I don't know that Paul was speaking into this kind of situation exactly in his time, but he seems to be speaking into it in our time when he talks about the divisions that were going on in Corinth. Everybody was beginning to divide up and take after a particular teacher. There was already some of this in the Jewish faith. Different rabbis had different schools and they debated each other and broke up into groups, so part of this was a natural way that they expected things to go. But Paul says this natural way of dividing and fighting with one another, having this rivalry over who is right, is not what being a follower of Christ is about. Indeed, what he says is, “Is Christ divided?” Can we hold onto the one who is our leader in spite of the ways we see the world differently? Can we hold on to Jesus? Can we recognize in him what God is doing? We don't all need to be crucified. Christ was crucified. He asks us to look to Jesus. Where does that lead?

One of the stories of one of the places I'm going to visit, a place called the Northumbria Community, is that years ago they began to come together in workshops and through that, sensed that they wanted to celebrate Easter together. They found that as they celebrated together, they wanted to spend more time together. They began to realize that it wasn't just one worship service; it wasn't just one moment. It was all of life. Somehow they were in life together. Perhaps they read the Corinthians passage where

Paul writes we are called into a fellowship of the Son. They began to recognize the importance of fellowship and the breaking down of divisions.

As they began to form this community, they looked back at the way other people had formed communities and they realized that one thing a community does is to think about who they are and how they are going to live together. In the old monastic communities it was called a Rule of Life. They had a Rule which they lived by and they saw that Rule as freeing them up. The basic way of getting along was taken care of so they could be freed up to do the prayer and care and worship that the community was there for. The interesting Rule of Life that the Northumbria Community came up with was pretty simple: we are going to be available and vulnerable. That probably takes a little bit of explanation. It certainly feels to me like it flies in the face of the world around us and what it encourages us to do. In some ways the world around us seems to suggest that we each become citadels ourselves. We create our own fortresses and we protect ourselves from all the things that are going on in the world around us—people with different ideas, or whatever it is. So how would they get to this idea of availability and vulnerability?

First, they recognize that scripture invites us into relationship with God, so the first piece of availability is to be available to God. We could say, “Well, God, let’s see. I have time for you on Wednesday at 5:30.” Is that being available to God? It doesn’t feel very available, does it? So their first recognition is that we need to be available to God. Then as we recognize that we are to be available to God, the next step is to open our heart to God. Our heart is like a place of prayer, so that is a place where we start with that openness. It will lead us places. It will lead us to listen to scripture like we read today where we hear Jesus saying if you want to be greatest in the kingdom of God you must be children. In fact, you must be like children to enter the kingdom. Then he goes on to say that the important thing is to welcome the children of God. So the other piece of availability is to be available to each other. If I only can figure out when to be available to somebody by looking at my schedule, it doesn’t feel very available. Jesus is talking about welcoming the children of God; welcoming one another into relationship. He says not to block access to any of God’s children. Welcome one another. That’s availability.

When they are talking about availability, they are talking about welcoming one another, having that hospitality, not putting up a Do Not Disturb sign. It sometimes feels like our society is saying we should put up the Do Not Disturb sign all the time because we are so enthralled with our own stuff. Instead, we are invited to be available, first to God as God comes to us in Jesus Christ, and then through Christ to one another.

So you see where they might have gotten availability. It’s kind of a nice thing to do. We can go there. What about vulnerability? That one seems even harder to me. Who are you vulnerable with in today’s world? What does it mean to be vulnerable?

When Jesus told the disciples that they should be children to enter the kingdom of heaven, he was pointing to some of the most vulnerable people in the society. They

weren't even considered fully human because they weren't adults yet. They had no power. They didn't get to decide where they were going. There was a vulnerability and a humility in them that Jesus thought was important in entering the kingdom of heaven. I can see that with God. I'm going to be available to God, but I'm going to block off this part of my life. I'll show God my best side, or talk to God about the things that don't bother me or that I don't want God to change. To truly be vulnerable with God, however, is to bring my whole self, all of who I am, to recognize my own faults and failures and let God show those to me because it is through that vulnerability that God heals and we experience the fullness of love.

If we don't share any of our vulnerability with somebody else, it's hard for somebody else to show us the fullness of the love they have for us. If we're not going to be vulnerable with God, if we're not going to come as who we are, recognizing our limitations, our failures, our successes, we realize that we don't even know ourselves fully. It's only with God that we are fully known. It is then that we become vulnerable with God. We are not only available to God, we're vulnerable. That vulnerability with God goes all the way through to not only accepting that love that God gives us but recognizing that being in relationship with God might change me. I might enter into this and realize the wonder of God's love and find that God wants to lead me somewhere that I didn't know I was going. There's a transformative power. Really, to be open to a transformative power we have to be vulnerable, able to accept it, willing to let God work, to see how Jesus is leading us. It then leads us to care for one another the same way, to have a vulnerability between each other.

When children come together and there's not a parent there telling them exactly what to do they are on pretty even footing. They come there vulnerable to what the other will be and do. For us, as we work at coming together and being vulnerable, there is a certain amount of trust that is involved. I think what's underneath it is a trust in God, a trust in the saving power of Jesus Christ, because without that it's hard to trust in another human being. We know our own struggles and failures, but as we have trust in the love of God and the grace of God in Jesus Christ we can begin to trust one another, or at least be open to one another in a way that allows a loving and sharing relationship to work. We can recognize, then, that if we are available and vulnerable, we can enter into a fellowship of God's children, a fellowship of the Son, that invites us all to participate.

There are ways that we can go about doing this. If you think about your own life, what are the ways that you might be available and vulnerable with others and with God? Certainly in prayer. Certainly in times when we gather in fellowship. Perhaps he even invites us to do it in all of life; not just in times when we're in the fellowship of the Son, but as we go forth in the world that we express the availability and vulnerability that God expressed with us. God sent his son to show his love and grace with us and made himself vulnerable to us, vulnerable to our choice to accept or reject him.

It is interesting to me the way God works. He comes and invites us first to be available to God, to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, then our neighbor as

ourselves, and in that to recognize the role of vulnerability and humility as it enables our relationship with God and our relationship with one another.

It's interesting to learn from Christians around the world, to be challenged, to think about what Jesus is saying. What does it mean to enter the kingdom as a child? There is a certain availability and vulnerability he's asking us to bring to be his disciples, to enter into the kingdom.

Let's pray:

Jesus, it feels challenging to me to think that you would bring a child in front of us and tell us to be like that child, indeed to be children that we might enter into the kingdom of heaven. You tell us that we should welcome your children with the hospitality, the availability, and the vulnerability of a child. We come in humility, knowing that we don't know it all, that we are your children, that we are dependent on you, and that it is by your grace and love and by your leading through scripture and through fellowship that you continue to guide us. Indeed, God, we get to come in prayer to listen and to express and to acknowledge our trust in you. Lord, let us be your children, available and vulnerable to you, and to live out the grace you've given us in Jesus Christ. Amen.