

Serving in Unity

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn now to God's word to 1 Peter chapter 4 and the passage we read. If you're visiting with us today, if you haven't been here before, on our Sunday mornings, over the next number of weeks and over the past number of weeks, we're looking at a theme of discipleship.

We are seeking to just develop a discipleship model within the congregation in a gentle yet intentional way.

And we're looking at some of the core themes of discipling one another. And that's a great thing to do. And today, it coincides with what we call serving Sunday.

So we have a Sunday, once or maybe a couple of times a year, when we just highlight the importance of serving as a Christian and serving in the church.

I'll speak a little bit more about that during the sermon. But we're going to look particularly at the verses 7 to 11 of 1 Peter chapter 4.

[1 : 08] So if you have your Bible, do keep it open there and we'll look at that passage today in the context of serving because it speaks very much about how we should serve in the church in the context of 1 Peter.

So we find that a common cause, don't we, has a great uniting power, whatever that cause might be. And you could think of lots of different common causes that unite people together.

But as Christians, we actually have that in buckets. We have a tremendous common cause as believers. And in St. Columba's, we're seeking always to unify around that cause, which is really to glorify God and to promote relentlessly the greatness and the urgency of our theme, which is being rooted and growing in Christ as Christians.

And encouraging people, if they're not Christians, to become Christians and to be rooted and growing in Jesus Christ. That is what we recognize as what is at the core of being a disciple because every Christian, you could just name it differently, is just a disciple of Jesus.

And so we want my task and my calling and our calling as leaders in the church is to enable us all to be grace freedom fighters, is to be people who live by and who serve together the God who, in whom we've put our trust, and who is a God of grace, to be fruitful Christians.

[2 : 47] That's really what we want to do and to focus our attention on. So Jesus says in John 15, no branch can bear fruit by itself. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.

Apart from me, you can do nothing. So that's really, in many ways, the clarion call or the words that we want to focus on, apart from me, you can do nothing.

And we do that individually as Christians. We remain in Jesus and we seek to do it together as a community. We need each other. There's all kinds of battles that we face.

And you know what it's like if you're struggling with something, it does help when you know that either other people are struggling or have struggled and who goes through the same battles, we battle our own selfishness and doubt and pride.

And we battle with the thinking that is pressed upon us from the world in which we live. And we have a spiritual enemy, the devil, who is a malevolent enemy, who would love nothing more than for us to abandon our faith.

[3 : 48] So today's theme is related to how we are disciples by serving each other in a loving way that we would love each other and serve one another.

Use our gifts as each has received a gift to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace. We have that in chapter 4 and in verse 10. So what does it look like then to bear fruit as a Christian in the context of serving one another?

How do we do that? How do we do it here in St. Columbus? You know, people often ask, and if you've come fairly recently to the church, or as people often come to the church, and they'll say,

well, what can I do?

How can I serve? How can I be involved? And that's a legitimate question for us. I think sometimes we can make that the be all and end all, almost kind of like a badge, or we need a title, or we need a position, or we need something clear cut, a plan, or a diary, or something that's organized that shows that we're involved in the church.

And I'm going to argue this morning that it's something more than that. It's something much more significant than that, although that is involved. Because 1 Peter here is speaking to the Christian church and to individuals within communities, and he's encouraging them to live out their faith together and serve one another as part of their understanding of love.

[5 : 23] And the love of Jesus Christ. So I'm going to argue this morning from the Bible that we serve one another in two ways. It's organic, okay?

And there's organic serving, and there's functional serving, okay? So really, there's something that just comes from within us naturally.

It just comes organically from our life as Christians. And there's something that's just a little bit more functional, just enabling the Christian community to work together. Do you see the difference?

So, but organic really is the most important. It comes from our very beings, in other words. It comes from who we have become as Christians, because in Christ we're told we are a new creation.

We are new people, and we are to do everything as it says here, through Jesus Christ. He's our strength, and he's our motivation, and he's our example.

[6 : 22] He said, I have come not to serve, not to be served, but to serve and to give myself for others as a living sacrifice. And that's what we've experienced from the living God, is that he has sacrificed himself on the cross for us.

We're born again into that reality, and we are saved by His grace. We have a new King, and he is our identity as children. And so we love one another out of the great grace and out of the great reserves of His love for us.

So what I'm saying that is that so organically or fundamentally we serve because of who we have become, who we are, rather than serving because we feel it's a duty who we want to be regarded as, maybe.

It's the core of who we are as people, in other words, that who we are enables us to be those who are serving others and who are in relationship because we're in relationship with Jesus Christ.

Can I just say, well, what does it look like? What does that organic serving look like for us in our Christian lives? Well, I'm going to go back to the same analogy that we used at the beginning of the series, roots and fruits.

[7 : 41] So in other words, kind of what we are under the surface will be reflected in the fruit that we bear with one another. So and that happens as we unpack this passage.

In verse 7, therefore it says, the end of all things is at hand, therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.

And so that really links into an understanding of what we are beneath the surface and what we understand, what our perspective, what our worldview is underneath the surface in our own hearts.

And it's saying, as we have the right understanding of who we are in Christ, then that influences everything we do. And I would argue that there's three things here.

There's urgency, there's discipline and there's prayer in terms of how we live our lives, you know, the end of all things at hand. There's this recognition, the perspective that we have is because we recognize this isn't all there is, you know, it's not just we only live what, you know, this is what we do and this is how we live.

[8 : 45] We recognize that the end of all things is near. In other words, we recognize that this life that we have is only a very short introductory chapter to something much greater and something much bigger and our lives are a fragile gift within that context.

No guarantee of tomorrow because we know who Jesus is and we know his reality and that this is not all that life is about.

And so there's a sense of urgency about loving and serving and following Jesus because of that, because the end of all things is at hand. Also it involves discipline within that, therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded.

And it's a great picture here of being clear-headed as a Christian in the root of your life and the way you think that you're guided by the, that we are guided by the Holy Spirit in our lives, almost like,

he's like a diaphragm around us regulating and protecting how we breathe spiritually and there's a sense of self-control in that and a self-discipline.

And what Peter is saying here is that as Christians, underneath the roots that we're not, we're not intoxicated in our lives. We're not intoxicated and under the influence.

[10:01] He says he's being sober-minded. It's much broader actually than just alcohol here. It's just not being intoxicated under the influence of power or lust or selfishness or any drink or anything that leaves us spiritually and sometimes actually literally gibbering irrational and thoughtless.

That there's that discipline within our lives that we know what matters to us and we have a self-control and a sober-mindedness that recognizes that, that lives in that way, that focuses and we're not infatuated or we're not intoxicated by what sometimes the world regards as important or what sometimes we think as important.

There's an urgency and a discipline in our hearts that leads us to being prayerful for the sake of our prayers. If our life is filled, if we're infatuated or intoxicated with everything else in life, then there will be no, a gante, there will be no time for prayer for us or a sense of urgency.

And this rooting our life in service comes from recognizing the priority of being in a living relationship with God through prayer.

And that daily prayer and that daily walk of prayer and life of prayer is so significant for us. Without me He says you can do nothing. He keeps saying that. Without me we can do nothing.

[11:32] And it's that which provokes our great love of others and our great love of serving. And so you ask and I ask, what's it that pushes out prayer?

What's it that pushes prayer to the peripheries, to the edges of our lives so that it's just at best perfunctory? We're just going through the motions. It's not really that. We don't really feel that without me you can do nothing.

It's just, it's just something that, oh, it's a ritualistic thing that I should do. So I think as we're rooted in Christ that that sense of perspective, self-discipline from the Holy Spirit and prayerfulness is what is the roots that enable us to serve each other well.

And then the fruits of that is given really in verses 8 and 9 about above all, keep loving one another earnestly since love covers a multitude of sins, show hospitality to one another without grumbling as each, as, oh, well, we'll just do these two verses there.

Because that's the fruit of being rooted in Jesus Christ in terms of service. So what does organic serving of the Lord look like?

[12:46] You know what it looks like? It looks like making friends. That's what it looks like. That's what organic serving of one another looks like. It's about making friends.

That's the core of how we want this church to understand what serving one another means.

It's about loving others because God loves you. It's about being able to make friends. It's freeing us up to give of ourselves in a, not primarily in a planned or organized or monitored way, but in a very real way.

It's about loving other people deeply, love one another earnestly or deeply. And you know, I'm going to take the next bit there which talks about hospitality. You know this because I've mentioned it before here, is that hospitality means the love of strangers.

It's much broader than it's not talking about a dinner party. It's talking about making people you don't know, people you do know, making friends. That's what it is.

[13:54] It's about, probably it's not a great word, we should use a different word today, but it's making people who are strangers, no longer strangers, it's making them friends.

And that's the core of serving one another. It's about recognizing that's what we're doing. We're actually, we're loving people deeply by becoming friends with them, opening our time, our heart, our home, our life, our souls to others.

Having a listening ear, prayerful support, intangible, sacrificial, not something that's organized or monitored or regulated within a church context.

It is organic. That's what I mean by organic. It's recognizing that discipleship is about making strangers friends, making people you don't know, people you do know, befriending others.

That is what is a huge, significant and important part of gospel community together. It's a huge part of what we're striving and have striven to do because, you know, we're not, we're not a natural community.

[15:03] Well, no church is, but we're not even a natural geographic community. We're all from all over the place, so we've worked hard to try and develop a sense where, as Christians, we express our service by simply befriending other people that beforehand we haven't known.

That's why we do things like bake and roll Sunday, which is next Sunday, by the way. It's an opportunity to invite people or to go and to be in a place where you're becoming known and becoming friends.

So the fruit of being rooted in Christ is hospitality, a deep, earnest commitment to other people. And what does that mean? What does, you know, what does deep friendship look like? You know, how deep? What does it look like? Well, I'll tell you, one thing that it looks like. It means that we make the effort not to grumble, okay?

That's one of the ways in which we become deep friends with others is by showing hospitality to one another without grumbling. You know, and that's one of the keys to making a deep friendship, isn't it?

[16:24] Is we're not saying, well, I suppose I'm a Christian, I better make friends. Really the friendships that I make, I can't be bothered with the people because they're so sinful and grumbling about the type of people we have to spend time with and finding faults with them because there will be.

There'll be faults with all of us as we get into a relationship with one another and there'll be sins that you'll simply want to grumble about. But it's a love that says here that covers a multitude of sins. That's the two come together without the grumbling and covering a multitude of sins because there are sins to be covered that you could naturally grumble about. It's not saying that you're going to be sinless and it's not going to be saying there's not maybe human reasons for grumbling, but it's saying that to love one another deeply is to do it in a Christ-like way that works against finding fault or grumbling or doing it with an unloving attitude.

So it's really a challenge to our attitude to how we serve one another. You know, and I guess within that there's a challenge to us to make friends with those or to be hospitable and to be loving and to love each other deeply, not just with those who we regard well and not just with those with whom we have no complaints about.

And that maybe goes for the way that we think about in that reacting church as well because there's lots of things. There's lots of sins and there's lots of rubbish that goes on in the church, but love covers over a multitude of sins.

[18:06] It's not saying that sins don't matter, but it's saying how we deal with these things. We love people and cover over a lot of things and we don't grumble.

We don't grumble. That's the great thing is that if the faults and failings of others are so great that you feel you can't cover them over, then the response is not to grumble about them.

The response is to in love, loving deeply deal with these things. And sometimes we're not so keen to do that because ultimately it's probably not such a big thing after all.

It may be more about us than about others. So the great challenge to serve one another in a loving way, in an organic way, is to wrestle with all these things, the selfishness and the grumbling and the complaining and the exposing of other people's failings and rather do it in a Christ-centred spirit.

So we do it by making friends and we do it also, I think, by serving others well and faithfully, show hospital, eat, receive whatever gift he uses, good stewards of God's grace and to do it in a strength he supplies.

[19:27] And we should remember that we are to be good stewards and to be good, a good steward is to be a faithful steward and it's such a beautiful characteristic that we serve one another well by serving one another with the gifts God has given us in a faithful way.

Show that in church, in the relationships, in the community, your word is your bond. If you say you're going to do something, if you're going to meet someone, if you're going to help in some way, that your word is your bond, that you don't forget, that you're conscious about using your gift to serve others graciously, not to be praised or not even just because it comes naturally because you do it in the strength and the power of the Holy Spirit.

And that kind of friendship, which is so often unseen, is the root and the key to a fruitful and Christ-centered community.

So it's organic. It's what we do. It's what we are. It's what we are because of who we are.

And it's something that comes from within us. But it's also much more briefly functional, okay? And the same way we functionally serve one another as an organization, as it were, as a family, as a people lovingly and faithfully, because, you know, the church needs lots of people to serve in order to make it function in terms of worship and in terms of community and in terms of doing things, we need to functionally use one another's gifts.

[21 : 19] And that's hugely significant also that we serve in that way. Part of discipleship is to enable the community of the church to function as a church, whether it's admin or IT or music or welcoming or teaching or leading or hospitality or catering or cleaning or organizing or preaching or counting.

If there's an area of need and there's an opportunity to serve in that way, then it's great to be able to do that. And so today we've got a table at the back.

Roger and Laura happened to be sitting on it just because they came in late. But that's one of the things about coming in late. You end up in the table that you shouldn't be on. But we love them with all our hearts.

And someone else is going to be there at the end of the service and we'll have a list of all the things you can use. In fact, probably Roger and Laura could do it because they're great servants.

And we could just have a big list. And if there are areas that you would like to be involved in in service that you're not, that there may be an opportunity for you to serve in that.

[22 : 20] Or if there's a gift that you feel you have that isn't being utilized, you can say there's an express that and we'll take note of that. Or if there's a need that you feel isn't being fulfilled, then...and you feel you can fulfill that need.

And if it fits in with what we are and what we're doing in terms of our character and our vision, our priorities and our goal and our commitment, then we'll look at these things. So it's a great opportunity. And also, if you've been serving in an area for ages and you're absolutely knackered and you want to take a break, just go at the table and say, I would really love if someone else could do this for me now.

Because we don't want people to feel enslaved or that they can never give up something that they've been doing for a long time out of guilt. We would love people just to feel free to say, I've served in this area and now I need to step back.

Because we're here to support and encourage and help each other. We're not here to beat anyone with a stick of service. It is to be organic, but also to be functional.

And so there is that...that will be that table today after the service, which you can go to and look at. So can I just conclude then by just saying a couple of things?

[23 : 35] There are two questions. One is, what's the opposite of serving in love? Because we look in our discipleship, and so discipleship is about serving because it's about loving one another deeply, organically, functionally, okay?

What's the opposite of serving in love? Well, it's the opposite of all the things that are in this passage really.

It looks like living in a way that reveals that we love lots of other things before Jesus, that we don't recognize in any way our dependence on His grace and our need for prayer, but rather we're kind of self-assured without Him.

And I'm like, I can do everything in my own strength. It's about living for the day. It's about spending lots of time being critical and grumbling about the church and about other people.

That's the opposite of serving in love. It's about saying, well, you know, the church doesn't appreciate me. Other people don't appreciate me. They make so many demands. They don't appreciate my gifts.

[24 : 36] Why can't others be on time? Why can't others serve better and be more like me? I always give my best. Why don't other people give their best? I'm offering my time for others, but they're not really my type, my age, my kind of people.

We crumble, we give up easily, we cancel enough whim, and it's all a bit, ugh, do I have to?

Really should I? And you know, do you know the worst people have offered that? Ministers, apart from Thomas.

Ministers like me. So easy to serve out of duty or to serve out of ritual, to serve out of guilt, or to serve out of pride, or to serve for all wrong, manner of wrong reasons.

And this is a reminder to us that when we serve like that, we're ignoring our own heart, and we're ignoring our own soul, and we're ignoring the need to do what we do through Jesus Christ and for His glory, and because of His service to us, I came not to be served, but to serve.

[25 : 51] And it's this amazing reality of knowing and needing His amazing grace. So it's sometimes good to look at the opposite, isn't it, of what's in the Bible, to remind ourselves of what it is to serve Jesus Christ the wrong way in a way that will be kind of ultimately destructive.

What's the opposite of serving a love, and then why ultimately bother? Well, why would we bother? Why bother serving? Why bother being vulnerable?

Why bother giving and expending our lives in the service of other people that's so fruitless?

Sometimes we think. And yet we know ultimately it's the most fruitful way that we can live. It brings praise to Jesus, and that we see that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever.

We find that in the last verse, but also in Matthew chapter 5 and verse 16, Jesus says, in the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

[27 : 08] Now that's really interesting because I think that is telling us that our community is not to be insular, but we share our community with others who are not Christians so that they will come to know Jesus and praise Him.

By all men, by this, all men know that you're my disciples if you love one another. Therefore to serve one another in love this way is actually missional.

It is to have an outward look. It means that it's important that we are introducing our people, our friends who are not Christians to our gospel community.

And with the confidence to do that, that they'll not be beaten down, criticized, ignored or rejected.

And that's a huge challenge to us all, that we recognize the significance of that.

I hear a lot of people praying, and a lot of people praying for revival in many different contexts, and that's a great prayer. But I do wonder sometimes, because revival isn't happening, is God saying, you know, why would I send a people to a cold, grumbling, inhospitable community?

[28 : 32] And it's a challenge to us as to God's sovereignty in these things. I'm not saying that that is ever the case, and I don't think that's the case here, but it's always, isn't it always a challenge that the gospel always starts in our own heart?

And it's always not necessarily asking God to do lots of things that He hasn't necessarily promised, but that we can ask for, but it's also asking that we'll repent and return and be renewed and refreshed every day.

So it brings praise and glory to Jesus when we serve one another in love. And it brings glory to God, you know, in that passage, just that we read in 1 Peter, it speaks about it being to the glory of God.

And that just means it's weighty, and it's worthy of the living God. It's the heart and core of who God is.

When you think of a weighty God and the glory of God, what do you think of? Deep theology, new truth that you've never found out before. All these things are significant and important.

[29 : 39] Holiness itself, this is holiness. This is what it is to be holy, and this is what gives weightiness and glory to the living God when we live like this.

He has made us to serve in love, and our vision of discipleship in St. C's is to help one another to do this.

And if you're not a Christian, can I just encourage you to think of Jesus Christ and consider Him who didn't come to be served as the King of Kings, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for you so that you may know His grace and forgiveness and glory.

Let's pray. Father God, we ask and pray that you would help us to serve you in love, and that you would help us to do that naturally in a spiritual way, if that makes sense.

That it would be through our dependence on Jesus and our need for the strength of God and the Holy Spirit to take away that grumbling spirit which often lies behind our witness and our work and our service and our Christian life.

[30 : 54] Help us not to grumble at you and help us not to grumble at one another but to love each other deeply, earnestly, committedly for the glory of God.

Father, we pray and ask that you would help us to live for your glory, that you would forgive us when we make mistakes, and we thank you that you are a forgiving God and that we can come to you in a fresh way every day to serve you and to serve one another in love.

We pray for the church here, we pray for all the... and thank you for all the people who spend so much time and energy serving, and we pray that they would do so with love, that they would enjoy serving you here, that they would work hard at praying through it so that it doesn't become a weighty burden or a cause for grumbling.

Thank you for the unseen work that is done by so many opening homes, going for coffee, spending time with people, loving them, giving them lifts to the air, all kinds of things that are just very simple, gentle and unseen ways in which they love their brothers and sisters.

And we thank you for all the work that is done here to make this service happen on a Sunday and all the hospitality and all the work that is done.

[32 : 20] Lord God, we commit it all to You, we thank You for it, and we pray that You would help us to love one another deeply and both functionally to enable us to work as... and grow as a church, but also organically in our lives, just as something that comes from our relationship with You.

We need You, and we pray that You would help us. Amen.