

To Build a Community

Colossians 3:12-17

Last Saturday morning a young couple began a time of preparing for marriage early next year with Sue and me, investing in their relationship as they prepare for married life together. We shared with them the text for our own marriage, which is Colossians 3:12-17:

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Next Sunday, God willing, we will be blessed to see God at work as a baby is baptised here, the latest addition to the family building their family life together. And I think of that child's grandparents, celebrating 50 years of married life together in recent months.

Last Saturday night, Sue and I joined a small connect group/care group/friendship group for the first time to celebrate Christmas in July. Next Friday, a group of young people begin the journey of instruction together to receive Holy Communion for the first time.

All of these are examples for me of people — no, more than that: of Jesus' people, his disciples — investing time and resource... more than that... investing themselves into building relationships, building community, being formed by the Spirit as church. I am absolutely sure that you can name many other examples. I pray so. Next Sunday, we want to welcome some people who are new to St Paul's. Will they find a community? Will they find us as people who focus on Jesus? Building community. Building a community of faith in Christ. All of these things, these events, these people... that's what God is doing. He's builds his community. He builds by the Spirit who works through good news... good news of grace... good news of Jesus. For our Christian community, God is all, and God is in all.

In the midst of all of this, though, came the news that Pastor Aldi will not be continuing his call as Assistant Pastor here. This news has hit hard! It brings all manner of question, all manner of emotion, all manner things said. What does this mean? What does it mean for Pastor Aldi and Anita and their family? I thank God for you who have reached out to them, and to many people who hurt for many reasons in this community. What does it mean for the many people who hurt and who have been hurt for some time? What does this mean for us?

Since I've arrived here at St Paul's, I've set out to listen, to listen very, very closely; and when I think I have listened, I listen again. I don't know how you measure listening... except that's it pretty obvious that God has given us these two ears and a hearing heart, and but one mouth. I've listened and heard fear. I've listened and I've heard hurt. I've listened and I've heard accusation. I've listened and I've heard anger. It's got to stop.

The teacher in Ecclesiastes says, "I saw all the deeds under the sun, and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind. I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun... so I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labours under the sun."

Is that us? We hurt. We are wounded. We're bleeding. I've listened and this is who we are. I heard people this week talk of their pain for the community and their pain brought about because of the community. My friends, I heard people say this shouldn't be so! What have we done?? There's discontent... Is it a holy discontent? Things cannot go on the way they are and have been. Now it stops.

Our rich history, our wealth, our reputation... all vanity for a wounded healing community without the healing of the wounded healer. I think we now are aware of our true wounded self. We need healing. Dear friends in Christ, I've listened for 6 months and we are wounded and bleeding. We are in need of help outside of our own work, and we cannot be the same.

Lord have mercy! Lord to whom shall we go? Listen! Listen anew. Listen again. "I am with you always. I forgive you all your sins. As I have forgiven you, so forgive one another. I am here among you as one who serves. Follow me." Jesus the same, yesterday, today, and always.

Hear again today, people of God, people of St Paul's... Christ comes among us. Christ comes for us. He comes with his wounded hands to lay them on us to heal us... if we will only listen.

He comes among us to renew and reform us. I've listened for 6 months and now is the time for me to speak. For we need to be re-formed in Christ. We are called to go. We are sent. We have things we to do. But we cannot do any of these until our wounds are identified, until our wounds are healed. We cannot continue the way of fear and hatred and gossip and anger. Christ is here. Christ is here to heal and to show us our collective scar to bring healing to one another, peace to another.

And I listen, and I hear God speak a new word... a word of healing and grace... a word of hope and restoration... a word of life in the valley of the shadow of death. I've heard God speak Jesus... living Word, transforming Word, renewing and forgiving word; changing and re-forming Word. God for us. Here.

Jesus. God. Father, Son, Holy Spirit comes to build, to build his community, not primarily through bricks and mortar but through His Son — speak, Jesus: forgiveness, to build care to support the hurting ones. Jesus comes to build hope in despair. Comes to build a community, his community of faith. Here.

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. [Colossians 3:1-4]

This is a resurrection Easter Word to put to death the old, and raise up as new:

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. [Colossians 3:12-17]

As I've said, when Sue and I were married, these words formed our wedding text. I was always fascinated that the peace of Christ in our hearts called us and formed us, and called us anew and reformed us into one body — a relationship so close and special that, despite my selfish sinful pride and stupidity, God has made us joyfully one over almost 36 years of marriage. I thank God that I'm not the same as I once was. God has taught me grace by receiving it from Sue, and he's taught me grace to give as we've grown more and more to be one.

That's his gift. That's his promise. That's also his call for you, for me, for us at St Paul's. Always has been, always will be.

I've listened, and many things here cannot continue. It's time for us to listen anew to God, to be rebuilt, and to be gospel builders with Jesus; to speak the gospel of grace, the gospel of forgiveness, the gospel of hope. To heal... Wounded, but not without hope; healed, to bring hope to the wounded around us. Amen.