Sharing Together in the Body of Christ: A Welcoming Family that Relies upon One Another

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Preacher: Josh Johnston

[0:00] But this evening, we are going to be hearing from Josh a little later on, and we're going to read together, first of all, in the Bibles in two places this evening. You might like to turn to Genesis chapter 11 and to Romans chapter 12.

So Genesis 11, beginning in the first book of the Bible, and then coming in at chapter 12 of Paul's great letter to the church in Rome.
And a little later on, I'm sure Josh will be explaining why we're reading in both of these places. But Genesis chapter 11, a rather famous story, the scattering of people in their arrogance against God, in their setting themselves up to be their own gods.
And the Lord scattering them. So here's the story. Genesis 11, verse 1. Now, the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they settled there.
And they said to one another, come, let's make bricks and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar. And then they said, come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens.
[1:29] And let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of man have built.

And the Lord said, behold, they're one people. They have all one language. And this is only the beginning of what they'll do. Nothing that they propose to do now will be impossible for them.
Come, let us go down. And they're confused their language so that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of the earth.
And they left off building that city. Therefore, its name was called Babel because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there, the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth.
Well, let's turn over to Romans chapter 12 and reading from verse 3. Paul is now talking about what God has done in bringing together the church of Jesus Christ.
[2:44] For by the grace given to me, I say to every one of you not to think of himself more highly than he ought, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of the faith that God has assigned.

For as in one body, we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function.
So we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members of one another.
Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. If prophecy, in proportion to our faith. If service, in our serving.
The one who teaches in his teaching. The one who exhorts in his exhortation. The one who contributes in generosity. The one who leads with zeal. The one who does acts of mercy with cheerfulness.
Let love be genuine. Abhor what's evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.
[3:56] Don't be slothful in zeal. Be fervent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in tribulation. Be constant in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of saints. And seek to show hospitality. Amen. May God bless to us his word.
Good evening. Do open your Bibles again to Genesis chapter 11. That's where we're going to be in first.

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And then we'll turn slightly later to Romans 12. Whilst you turn that up, let me take this opportunity to plug a book. This is a really excellent book.
Remaking a broken world by Christopher Ashe. Which traces basically the story of the people of God throughout the whole Bible. And you'll hear bits and pieces of it throughout as we study together.
[4:58] But well worth getting hold of and having a read. No man is an island. Those were the famous words of the poet John Donne.

I was never very good with poetry. So I'm sure it'll be a relief to others that I won't be quoting anymore. But I've been assured that what he is saying is that no one is self-sufficient.
We aren't meant to live life alone. Indeed we've seen that recently haven't we? As people have been shut up and locked away from one another.
Who has done well in the isolation? I heard one politician this past week saying that any plan in the midst of this crisis.
That involves forcibly keeping people in isolation for long periods. Must be resisted. Because he said. That existing isn't living.
[5:56] Human flourishing doesn't happen when we're cut off from one another. Even introverts will testify to the trials of lockdown. But let's not just take the words of a poet and a politician on this.

Because that's a truth that permeates the whole of the scriptures. So we're going to spend the first part of this evening looking at a bit of a Bible overview. Before narrowing our focus somewhat onto the life of the church.
So firstly this evening. We see God and his gospel are about gathering. God and his gospel are about gathering.
Sin scatters and the gospel gathers. That's the pattern that's found throughout the Bible. From creation to new creation. The story is one of gatherings and scatterings.
Think back to the creation account in Genesis. God created the world and he placed man in the garden. It wasn't good for him to be alone. So he's given a woman to be his partner.
[7:01] And the picture of the garden is a picture of paradise. Everything is as it should be. It's lush. The river flows out of the garden to extend that lushness to the surrounding land.

And the garden is marked by peace. By fruitfulness. And by God's presence. With Adam and Eve. They're working together harmoniously. Under God to tend to this garden.
And to spread it to the entire world. That's the start of the Bible story. Perfect harmony. But what happens as soon as sin enters the world? It's fracture everywhere.
The bliss turns to the blame game. It was her fault. Blame her. The abundant garden gives way to our edge ground. They're removed from the garden.
They're scattered. And the harmony becomes homicides. Brother turning against brother. And after the sordid events that follow. From Genesis chapter 3 to 10.
[8:02] We're given a summary. Through the Tower of Babel that we read. Of humanity's state after the fall. A summary of what happens when God's word is sidelined.

In order for humanity to try to take his place. So look at Genesis 11. We see in verse 1 there that twice it says they speak the same language.
They've one language. The same words. It's perhaps like when we would say of someone that they speak the same language as us. Meaning we understand things the same way. We look at the world with the same eyes.
But look at what happens. Verse 3. They set about making bricks. And they want to build a city and a tower that reaches to the heavens. We might think at this point that perhaps they're striving after a renewed relationship with God.
To be in his presence again in the heavens. But that's not their motivation. Look again at verse 4. They say that they want to make a name for ourselves.
[9:09] That's what they're doing. Just like Adam and Eve in the garden. They want to be equals with God. Importantly. At the end of verse 4.

There's even a hint of concern that they don't want to be a scattered people. Do you see that? Let us make a name for ourselves lest we be dispersed over the earth.
They don't want that to happen. But their answer is to attempt unity. To attempt to gather by means of human power. Likely by treating the tower as some form of religion.

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To raise them up to the place of the gods. And then to use this position to control and to keep people. Well what happens when a man-made religion or a man-made social construct tries to control people?
It may appear to be effective for a time. But it won't last. We can see that even today, can't we? In the progressive agenda. The great shibboleth of contemporary society.
[10:12] Inclusion. Well even that's fraying at the edges, isn't it? As it becomes clear that everyone's view on the world can't all be correct at the same time.

So we can see the feminists and the trans agenda at odds with each other. Because they can't both be right. Well what happens here? Versus it.
They end up dispersed all over the place. Their common tongue exchanged for confusion so that they couldn't understand one another.
Sin scatters. Sin leads to scattering and the opposite of flourishing. That's the trajectory for humanity when they go their own way.
So it's no surprise then that immediately after this summary story in Babel, that we're introduced to Abraham and God's promises to him.
[11:11] Because it's only the gospel that can truly and lastingly undo the effect of sin and regather people.

And that's central to the promise to Abraham, isn't it? To make a people of the Lord's own. And so this pattern of gathering and scattering continues. We see it at all the key points throughout the Bible story.
The great rescue of the Old Testament, the Exodus, is a rescue to gather God's people again at Sinai. Gathered with God. And then heading to a place that will be lush and flourishing as they head together to the promised land.
God's rescue acts are about gathering. And so we see in Israel's high point. They're gathered in the promised land under God's king and they're flourishing. But then their low point exile.
They've been scattered again because of sin. And it's the opposite. It's a disaster. Because they wanted to make their own rules and go their own way. And all that is a very quick backdrop to the arrival of Jesus.
[12:24] He's the one, finally, through whom God will gather his people. And so even at the announcement of Jesus' birth, there is a realization that this is the one.

He is the one who can undo the scattering. Mary sings as much in the Magnificat. Even the genealogy in Matthew is carefully selected to highlight key events.
Abraham to David, 14 generations. The promise and the fulfillment in shadow form. Then David to exile is the next 14th. And it's the re-scattering.
But then the last part of the genealogy is exile to Jesus. The one who would fully and finally fulfill God's promise to bring his people together.
To make them to what they're always meant to be. And then we see in Jesus' earthly ministry that, again, it was about gathering. Crowds flocked to him.
[13:22] He gathered his disciples and tasked them with a gathering work. Be fishers of men. And then as Jesus approached his death, listen to what God spoke through the high priest Caiaphas in John's Gospel.

Caiaphas says, John goes on to explain that Caiaphas did not say this of his own accord.
But being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation. And not for the nation only. But also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.
That's what Jesus' death was going to do. Jesus is the great gatherer. Those who trust him can look forward to all that God had promised. They can know the fall undone.
They can be gathered again to God's presence and new flourishing. They can have Eden recovered. But everywhere and forever. And so after Jesus' death, we see an undoing of Babel.
[14:40] At the day of Pentecost. From confused languages. Mixed languages. Everyone can then understand as the spirit is poured out. Sin scatters.

It's a devastating effect. But the gospel is about gathering. That's what God is doing in the world. He's gathering a people to himself.
Not a collection of islands. But a people who are one. But he isn't just gathering a big crowd for the sake of numbers.

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No, in God's wisdom, the church declares his grace to the world and to the heavens. It declares to them the glory of all that he's done.
By bringing together all kinds of people under grace. So we aren't just a big crowd in the church. No, he's gathering a biblical community.
[15:39] Gathering people together in one body. The church. And so secondly this evening. We see believing begets brotherhood. Believing begets brotherhood.

The nature of what it means to be a Christian. Means that we cannot go it alone. The Christian life is not private and individualistic.
As truly as Christians are joined to Jesus. We are joined to each other. We are going to look at two phrases that are commonly used of the church.
First, the church is one body. Which is where we are going to major. And then secondly, the church is a family. They are both used to explain the closeness of the bonds that we have with one another.
They both illustrate that God is not just simply gathering a big crowd. So first, the church is one body. Or to put it another way, we have union with Christ.
[16:47] Thus union together. Phil spent some time last week on the truth that Christians are united to Christ. And it is an unalterable fact that Christians are joined inseparably to him.

And because that's true for all Christians, we need to ask, what relation then does one Christian who's joined to Christ have with another Christian who's joined to Christ? And the answer of the New Testament, the answer of the Bible, is that all Christians are one.
We are united to each other as we are united to Christ. Turn over to Romans chapter 12. Following on from a deep and rich exposition of the grace of God poured out to Paul, Paul here moves to the church's response to that grace.
And so in Romans chapter 12 here, verses 3 to 8 are taken up with how we ought to think of ourselves. And so how that shapes the use of our gifts.
And then that flows on to verses 9 to 13 and following. How we should think of and treat the church. But look at Paul's words here in verses 4 and 5.
[18:13] He says, For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

Our union with Jesus extends to union with all Christians. Many members, different parts, but all put together in one body under Jesus Christ the head.
So look again at verse 5. We are individually members of one another. So look around. Look at those who are gathered here with us.
They're part of us. So imagine trying to live life consciously, trying to not use parts of your body. How daft it would look to see someone walking down the street, forcibly closing their eyes, because they decided not to use them.
At what point would you intervene when the car is flying along the road and they're about to walk out into it? It's silly. Or imagine trying to see someone cook or paint without their arms tied to their body, flailing around.
[19:40] There's a slapstick scene in a film where a knight has lost a sword fight. He's left limbless, and he refuses to see that he's beaten. He's just a torso with a helmet on, and he's shouting, come back here, I'll bite you.

It's preposterous. But so too is the idea of Christians knowingly maiming themselves for the Christian life.
For when we feel to invest ourselves in the life of our church family, that's what we're doing. We're maiming ourselves. Remember that silly image.
I'll bite you. It's preposterous. It's preposterous. Now what Paul goes on to say in verses 6 to 8 is that there are all kinds of gifts within the church, and in this chapter it's not an exhaustive list.
And of course, the chief way that different parts of the body are built up and encouraged is through the varied ministry of the word. We're not going to recap what's been covered in previous weeks as we worship, as we gather, and what Phil was talking about last week.
[20:52] But notice that whilst members of the body need each other, what Paul says here, it isn't just needing each other for word ministry. There's no question that that's central and crucial to our shared lives together.

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It's right that Sundays are a real focus of our shared life of faith. Indeed, so is the prayer meeting, so do come along on Wednesday early. These are key corporate times together.
And it's also right that when we gather in smaller groups that they are centered around the word. That's why our growth groups meet to study the Bible. But our shared life involves more than that. Look at the other examples that Paul gives. He says in verse 6, having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.
Verse 7, if we are able, let us serve. Verse 8, if we are able to contribute, then do so with generosity.
[21:55] Don't think that contribution is talking about the offerings to the church, but rather contributing to those in need. He's saying, if someone in the church needs help, give them it.

And do it generously. No strings attached. No ulterior motives. And then again in verse 8, if we are able, do acts of mercy and do them cheerfully.
Out of love. It's a picture of closeness, isn't it? A picture of family even, we might say. Isn't it a delight to do for a family member something that's a real help when someone's struggling?
We don't do it to lord it over them. We don't do it to brag about it. We don't do it so we can use it to call in a chit later on. No, just helping them because seeing someone we love flourish is a source of joy.
The Christian life is a battle. We're at war with the world, the flesh, and the devil. We're not robots. We're real people who feel and hurt and struggle.
[23:05] And so what a boon it is to have brothers and sisters who can encourage us and love us in simple, tangible ways even. To do that, you don't need to be a preacher, you don't need to lead a Bible study.

I think of a dear sister in the church who throughout lockdown was an immense encouragement to so many people simply by being thoughtful.
Sending cards for birthdays or to people in hospital, dropping off home baking, sending packages of toys and coloring books for those with kids who are stuck inside.
Isn't it an encouragement to receive tokens of kindness like this? It's encouraging because it reminds us that we are not alone in the Christian life. We were never meant to be alone in the Christian life.
And we see in these things evidences of God's grace in other people and that in turn reassures us of his ongoing work in us. So we are one body.
[24:15] That's how close we are. Relying on each other as we are relying on our arms and eyes. But we could speak of our bonds to one another in other ways.

We could speak of ourselves as a family. Theologians speak of the doctrine of adoption. It's easy to see why. Family language permeates the Bible.
God refers to Israel as his firstborn. Earlier in Romans, Paul talks about us having received the spirit of sonship. sonship. John's gospel talks about us having the right to call God father. Submitting to Christ, becoming a Christian means gaining God as a father and Christ as a brother as we're co-heirs with him. And so whilst we can talk of the church as being a body and we're all different parts of it, we can also rightly call ourselves a church family.
We're a household of faith and in a very real way a family. And for many believers across the world, church family is family in a more real way than their blood family.
[25:23] And so we must think of one another as brothers and sisters. And so I'm so thankful that I've seen this modeled in our church when I first arrived. I very quickly felt at home.

I very quickly felt like I had brothers and sisters here and that's a great encouragement. Now, when Jesus spoke of those who gave up all kinds of things in this life for his sake, the cost of being a Christian, whether it be houses or family, Jesus' response was that anyone who does that would receive back a hundredfold in this life houses, brothers, and sisters and then in the age to come eternal life.
when he says that we'd receive a hundredfold in this life, he's surely talking about the church. I heard someone in warning about the pitfalls and wrong motivations for marriage.
They said that marriage is not the answer for loneliness. The church is. Because we have hundreds of brothers and sisters here in this church alone and with them hundreds of houses to be invited into.

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We're living in a mini lockdown at the minute with restrictions on what we can do in our houses and Christians should feel the current restrictions more than anyone because our houses and our lives are ours to share with our brothers and sisters.
[27:01] Believing begets brotherhood. there's no such thing as a Loon Ranger Christian. We need each other and we've been given each other.

James Philip in commenting on these verses in Romans writes, we cannot be ourselves by ourselves to truly flourish in our lives to flourish as Christians we need each other.
care. And so that leads on to our final point this evening. The church is characterized by care. The church is characterized by care.
A healthy church is a church whose members practice loving concern for all of its members. We are our brothers and sisters keeper.
Let's return briefly to thinking about the idea of union. Here's what Kevin DeYoung writes.
[28:06] Union with Christ is the irrevocable work of the spirit. Once united nothing can separate us from Christ. Nothing can make us less or more united.

Communion with Christ on the other hand can be affected by our sin and unresponsiveness to God's grace. He says it's like marriage. You can't be less married union but you can have a stronger or weaker marriage communion.
The same is true for our bonds with each other. It isn't that we are to be a church family that we need to try to make ourselves into that that we need to try to be joined together.
No we are together. Whether we like it or not we are united to one another. The question is what kind of family will we be?
A church has to work to foster communion amongst itself. We are to live out what is theologically true of us. Paul moves on in Romans 12 to tangible displays of care for others.
[29:18] In a sense much of what he says can be summarized under care for one another or love one another. And indeed where he begins in verse 9 and verse 10 is with that phrase love one another verse 10.

Let love be genuine. But you'll notice in these verses that Paul uses the phrase one another four times.
It's one Greek word that's always translated something like one another. We've seen it in verse 5 that we're members of one another. Then look at verse 10 we see it again love one another with brotherly affection.
Outdo one another in showing honor. And then verse 16 he says it as well. Live in harmony with one another. That little phrase one another is a great place to start for any church as they pursue a deepening communion with each other.
The one another commands are spread all over the New Testament. There are close to 50 of them. Things that Christians in response to God's grace are to do and the arena to do them is right here.
[30:36] If you want to take these commands seriously then look around at your brothers and sisters. This is the arena to do it. So as we finish this evening I want to focus on just a few examples of what these things look like.

So Ephesians chapter 4 verse 32 says be kind to one another tenderhearted forgiving one another as God and Christ forgive you.
Two uses of the phrase in that verse. And this comes in another passage speaking about the church and encouraging the church to live the new life which is theirs in Christ.
And Paul says be kind to one another forgiving one another as we've been forgiven. I don't know about you but I find the past seven months utterly draining.
I'm sure I'm not the only one who's not at my best at the minute with all the COVID stuff going around. And so how easy is it for us in the midst of that to skip the kindness?
[31:44] to snap at people. But if I'm finding it hard I'm sure there are others who are finding it even more of a struggle. So how transformative would it be to think of each time we gather as an opportunity to show kindness to our brothers and sisters?

Maybe that would help to lift the collective gloom. or even as we're not able to be out and to socialize as much as we might normally what ways can we think of to display kindness?
Maybe our regular activities in the week aren't on at the minute football or choir or whatever it is we get up to. Could we spend that time baking something and drop it off to someone in the church?

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Can you imagine the joy that such simple gestures bring to a downcast brother or sister? Or perhaps as many of us are not at our best the need to forgive as Paul says in that verse and forgive quickly is all the more important.
At the best of times I get things wrong relationally. It's a regular occurrence for me to get a debrief from my wife on the way home from a social engagement about the many ways I may have unknowingly upset someone.
[33:00] I suspect I'm not the only one who is sanctified in that way. But all the more at the minute, won't it be a spur to our church family for us to be quick to say, don't worry about it?

Whereas if we're slow to forgive, we may find ourselves grumbling against one another despite James warning us of such behavior. We all make mistakes.
We can all say a sharp word out of turn. What brothers and sisters don't wind each other up? Well, how great is the forgiveness we've received?
What lengths has God gone to to gather us to himself? Well, then how much more can we forgive? We've received greatly, so surely we can forgive too.
That's one example from Ephesians. Finally, we'll finish on Romans chapter 15 verse 7. Paul says, therefore, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God.
[34:09] This verse comes as Paul's urging the Romans to follow Christ's lead in welcoming both the stronger brother and the weaker brother. If Christ has welcomed both, then Paul says this church are to do likewise.

And so he says, welcome one another. And as a church family, we mustn't be an exclusive family. There will always be people who we naturally bond with more easily and it happens quickly, but that doesn't mean we can do it to exclude the rest.
To do so would be to maim ourselves. Don't we want everyone who comes through our doors to have the opportunity to become part of our church family? That's the vision that our welcome ministry is aiming at.
Everyone who comes through our door to be part of our church family. But of course, we're all the welcome team, aren't we? Some of us serve on a Sunday formally, but the rest of us serve informally, looking out for new people to welcome, to greet as part of our body, looking out for those in our number who might be a bit more isolated.
It is God who's drawn them here. He has welcomed them. They're part of his body with Christ. If he has welcomed them, then so must we.
[35:35] Having cliques or factions in a church is a disastrous thing. Think of the body builder. The body builder who only ever works out his arms and his upper body.

It could be very impressive, very big, but if he focuses all his time on that, on just one part of his body, then it will be undermined by his puny little legs.
Well, if only parts of our church family are connected in, if only part of the body is functioning healthily, then we could be like that body builder, impressive in parts, but dangerously flawed.
So as we finish this evening, let's practice this. When the service is over, look for someone you don't know, have a chat with them, spend some time with them, try to encourage them.
God is the one who gathers the people together and those he has brought to us are one with us in Christ. Christ, and we can't be our full selves by ourselves.
[36:55] Let's pray. Father, we marvel that you would pour out grace to us and we thank you that you have given us a church family.

So, Lord, we ask for your help. That we would always be seeing ourselves as we ought to so that it would be our delight to put ourselves out that our brothers and sisters might flourish.
Grant us the grace to be a church that has the aroma of hospitality everywhere. To be a church where any visitor can feel at home. So that as a church we might shine forth to the world as a beacon of your glorious grace.
And we pray this in Jesus name. Amen. Amen.

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