

Something Money Cannot Buy

Psalm 47; Romans 12:3-13

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You may have heard about this elementary school class. The children were invited by their teacher to bring a symbol of their family's religious tradition to share with the class. A Roman Catholic child brought a crucifix and explained that it represented God's love for a broken and suffering world. A Jewish child brought a mezuzah and explained that it hung by the door of his home as a reminder of God's commandments and faithfulness. A Baptist child showed up with a casserole dish and explained that, as far as she could tell, it must be the most sacred symbol in her tradition because they ate together so often.

I can see why a Baptist child might think a casserole dish is a sacred symbol for us because we do eat together often. And that's a good thing, isn't it? It certainly is a biblical thing. The New Testament is filled with examples of the early Christians "breaking bread together." So at our Deacon Family Ministry Supper this evening, with tables overflowing with casserole dishes, we will do what Christians have done for centuries: share a meal together and enjoy *koinonia*. That is the Greek word for fellowship. We normally think of *koinonia* as the fellowship we have with each other, horizontal fellowship, but Paul used the word more often to refer to the fellowship we have with Christ, vertical fellowship. When we receive the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, Paul said that we have fellowship with Christ. In fact, the word that is translated as Communion is the Greek word *koinonia*. When we take the bread and wine and remember, we have Holy Fellowship with Christ.

That vertical Fellowship is the model for the horizontal fellowship we enjoy with each other. Now I know that fellowship for some of you may conjure up images of retreats, maybe sitting around the campfire, singing Kum ba Ya, and sharing our innermost feelings. And you may be thinking that you don't need all that touchy-feely stuff. That's just not your makeup. Fellowship may be touchy-feely at times, but let me assure you that it is a far stronger word and experience than that. Consider these examples of fellowship:

- A church committee meeting where things get tense. There is sharp disagreement among committee members. Tempers flair. Things are said that probably shouldn't be said. Finally a vote is taken and a decision made. The meeting ends with a comment like this: "Jim, you know that I'm totally opposed to your idea, but I've been outvoted. That's the way we do things here, so you can count on me." That's *koinonia*.
- A funeral service for someone you've never met and it's a three-hour drive away. You're there because it is the funeral of your friend's mother. You never met her. Nevertheless, you know that she was important to your friend, and your friend is important to you. So you're there. That's *koinonia*.
- A class where bonds of love are deep and sustaining. You've been in the class for many years. You wept with friends in the class who went through divorces, cancer, rebellious children, and you laughed with them during better times. You've often wondered how people make it through life without something like that. *Koinonia*.
- Or a meal at G's Restaurant after a hard morning of work at Lincoln Village. I'm not sure how this tradition started, but it sure has become an important part of the day on Thursdays and Saturdays.

Koinonia is a strong word and experience. It comes from a word that means "partnership." We have a partnership with Christ that we acknowledge every time we take the bread and wine. And we have a partnership with each other, a partnership to work together, to worship together, and to love each other genuinely. If you've ever experienced true *koinonia*, you know that it is one of those priceless gifts that money cannot buy.

The Apostle Paul knew this too, and he knew that it doesn't just happen. In the New Testament text for today, he told the Christians in Rome that they had to work to make fellowship happen. In this text, he gives them three important teachings about *koinonia*. How could they make it happen? First, he tells them that they must not forget who they are. Then he tells them to distinguish between unity and uniformity. And then the last thing is the most important, and I'm going to save it until the end.

Don't forget who you are. That's Paul's first word of instruction. This is what he says in verse three: "I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment." Nothing will destroy fellowship more quickly than when one person begins to think of himself or herself more highly than he or she ought. That exaggerated sense of self-importance creates jealousy, anger, resentment, and all kinds of conflict. Ironically self-aggrandizement is normally born out of insecurity. The emotionally secure person has no need to exaggerate his or her importance. So Paul gives them this warning: don't forget who you are.

I want to brag on Weatherly for a moment. One of the many things I love about our church is the sense of equality that is practiced here. Men are not more important than women. That's not true everywhere. Clergy are not more important than laity. That's not true everywhere. We work to be a community of equals—part sinner and part saint, each of us—and do our best to practice Paul's instruction to the Galatians, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Paul says that if we want to have *koinonia*, this gift that money cannot buy, we must not forget who we are.

This second thing Paul says is equally important, if not more important. Paul tells them that they must distinguish between unity and uniformity. Paul notes that the church in Rome had "many members," and the many members had many gifts. Some had the gift of prophecy, some service, others teaching, or exhortation, or many other gifts. And he told each one to exercise his or her gift well. If you have the gift of service, then serve well. If you have the gift of teaching, then teach well. Notice what he did not say. He did not tell them that they all must prophesy or that they all must teach. He honored the diversity of the group. Their challenge was to find unity, not uniformity.

Do you see the difference? Uniformity means that everyone is alike. Everyone believes alike, acts alike, holds the same values. You see this frequently in autocratic churches where some domineering person, often the pastor, expects everyone to believe the way he does. Little toleration is extended to dissenting opinions. Diversity is considered liability. Uniformity is of highest importance. Now, I'm familiar with these kinds of churches, as some of you are. And I know that out in those pews are men

and women stifling their real beliefs, squashing them, holding back, unable to explore where God is leading them, because they don't feel permission to be honest. That's very unhealthy and does not lead to *koinonia*.

Seek unity, not uniformity, Paul said. The church is like a body. It has many parts: hands, feet eyes, and many others. The diverse parts work in unity to create a healthy, effective human being. So too in the Body of Christ, the church. It takes many different parts, different beliefs, different perspectives, to create a healthy and effective church. Paul says that if we want to have *koinonia*, this gift that money cannot buy, we must work for unity, not uniformity.

Each of these teachings from Paul is important, but surely this last one is the most important. Without this last one, *koinonia* will never exist—between Christ and us or between others and us. Paul says, “Let love be genuine.” Sincere. Real. And isn't that what everyone hungers for, a genuine, respectful partnership? Paul even described genuine love. It hates what is evil and holds fast to what is good. Think about that in terms of relationships. It hates what is evil in a relationship and holds fast to what is good. That is healthy. Genuine love is characterized by mutual affection and shows honor to the other. It never tires, but is patient, persistent and hospitable. That's healthy partnering. That's *koinonia*, something money just cannot buy.

So if our children happen to grow up thinking that a casserole dish is a sacred symbol, so be it. Those casserole dishes represent Deacon Family Ministry Suppers, meals taken to couples when they have a baby, meals when someone comes home from the hospital, or meals at the death of a loved one. That is the partnership we have with each other, a partnership to work together, to worship together, and to love each other genuinely. It is based on the partnership Christ has with us. It's something money cannot buy.

Closing Prayer

Lord, the love we see in the cross is genuine. That is something for which every one of us hungers. Help us to imitate that kind of love in the relationships we have here. Amen.