

READING

1 John 4:7-21

SERMON:

**Formed For God's Family - Fellowship**

Most of us know John 3:16

**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.** (John 3:16 NIV)

Words of Jesus. Words known by many. Words loved by so many. Words that give us hope, that sure and certain hope that the death and resurrection of Jesus brings eternal life. But what about 1 John 3:16? Any guesses?

**This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our Christian brothers and sisters.** (1 John 3:16 NIV)

John 3:16 tells us of God's love. 1 John 3:16 gives us a definition of love or an outward expression of love. Love is words *and actions*

God says 'I love you' and through Jesus, God the Son, we see action. Jesus died for us, that is love, and because of this we ought to love each other. As 1 John goes on to say in his letter

**If someone says, "I love God," but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we have not seen?** (1 John 4:20 NLT)

Last week we saw that we needed to love God with everything about us – that is our first purpose; this week, we look at loving others within the church. When we become a Christian we enter into the family of God. We are to be part of God's family and the first step to being part of God's family is choosing to belong

**1. Choosing to Belong - Membership**

Notice that - choosing to belong. We are not forced into it; it is us who need to make the choice. It is me who has to make that journey and want to belong to the church, the family of God.

Church is another word like worship. Just as last week, we saw that worship is not singing, or praying, or what happens here on a Sunday, but is the whole of our lives given to God, so church is not the building, or the institution but the people. We, the people, are the church and so when one becomes a Christian one then decides to join a church, i.e. a collection, a group, a congregation of God's people.

Sadly there are people, Christians who are *floaters*. I don't mean that they have joined the Natural Law Party, remember the group that were, and apparently they still exist, but not as a political party, who were into yogic flying - but there are Christians who float from church to church and never choose to belong anywhere – but in doing that they miss out. They end up belonging nowhere and getting dissatisfied.

The Christian life is a matter of belonging. We belong to God, and as a living sacrifice we have handed over ourselves to God, so we belong to God. Turn with me to Romans 12, page 1139. Romans 12 begins

**“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.”** (Romans 12:1 NIV)

But then in verse 4 we read

**Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.** (Romans 12:4-5 NIV)

We need also to belong to a church, remember that is a group of God’s people,

**so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.** (Romans 12:5 NIV)

And each of us belongs to each other – that is the true meaning of membership. In this world today we live too much by the acronym WIIFM, **What’s In It For Me**. But true membership means that we say WIIFO, **What’s In It For Others**.

But there is more to being Formed Into God’s Family, in Fellowship, than just choosing to belong. Just as when one marries, it is more than just living in the same house. In marriage, it is a good thing if the two people who are married to each other are friends. As friends we share. So in fellowship we need to be

## **2. Learning to Share – Friendship**

We are made in the image of God and therefore as such we are made for relationships. God is in relationship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We too are made to be relational; we are not a solo act, even if some try to be. In the early church we read that

**All the believers were together** (Acts 2:44 NIV)

And in meeting together friendships were deepened. Think to yourself about a close friend you have. Why are you close to that friend? It was because the two of you have spent time with each other, especially in the early days of the friendship and in those times together you shared things, you know, stuff. Developing friendship takes time, time spent together. If the only time you meet with people is on a Sunday morning then you will never have time or space to develop a friendship with them, never really have time to share. We need to make time for each other.

Part of Fellowship is learning to share.

But what should we share?

- Our Experiences – Proverbs 27:17 says

**As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.** (Proverbs 27:17 NIV)

As a child is growing up we send them to school. This achieves two things. Firstly it means that for six hours a day they are off our hands as parents - but more importantly they acquire knowledge from others which would take them a long time if they were to learn it by picking things up, or just relying on their own experiences.

So for us, as Christians, we share our experiences of God, of his word, of our lives together. This shapes us, this sharpens us. One person put it like this

**By conversation with another; wise people sharpen one another's minds, and excite each other to study God's Word; Christians sharpen one another's graces and virtues, or stir up each other to the exercise of them, and the gifts which are bestowed on them, and to love and to good works.** (John Gill)

As we share our experiences we help each other grow, we develop friendship.

- Our Homes – besides sharing our experiences we need to share our homes. 1 Peter 4:9 says

**Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.** (1 Peter 4:9 NIV)

The early church met in each other homes and were willing to open up their homes to others. I can remember going to a meeting of some people who belonged to a church that I did not know. The meeting was in someone's house and it was dark, the street lighting wasn't too good, but the road was a fairly main road, in a countryside sort of way and relatively straight. And you know the problems trying to look for house numbers in the dark. I then spied four cars all parked in the same area and I knew it was the house because there were no other cars around – and it was. The people were opening their home.

As we share our homes with others, either in small groups or in a one-to-one situation we can learn to share and deepen that friendship. In a setting like this morning we can celebrate, we can praise God together, we can learn, but develop friendship, share thoughts and feelings is more difficult.

- Our Problems – Also we need to learn to share our problems with each. When someone says "How are you, today?" we should not take the good old British line, "Fine" when inside we are hurting like mad. Galatians tells us

**Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.**  
(Galatians 6:2 NIV)

Or as another translations puts it

**Share each other's troubles and problems, and in this way obey the law of Christ.**  
(Galatians 6:2 NLT)

and I love the next verse in the New Living Translation

**If you think you are too important to help someone in need, you are only fooling yourself. You are really a nobody.** (Galatians 6:3 NLT)

But I can't help people, I can't offer advice. But it only calls on us to listen and in listening we so often do our best work.

To deepen a friendship we need to share our experiences, our homes and also our problems – but all this takes time.

And we haven't finished with fellowship yet.

### **3. Doing My Part – Partnership**

Fellowship means teamwork, means partnership. In a marriage you see how couples work this out' different tasks are taken on by different partners in the marriage. Sue and I were on a church weekend once and during the weekend a question was asked, 'What roles do you have in the home?' I can remember putting two words, husband and father, although the role of father has changed since the girls have got married and left home. Then the next question was, 'Do you enjoy/feel called to your role?' For me the answer was yes and no. Yes I do feel called to be married to Sue – just as well after all this time, but some of the tasks I do, I do not enjoy. I do not enjoy getting home on a Sunday evening after the service and then putting out the rubbish, but Sue agreed that that was my task.

As a people

**...we are God's fellow-workers** (1 Corinthians 3:9 NIV)

Or it can be expressed as

**We work together as partners who belong to God.** (1 Corinthians 3:9 NLT)

We are in partnership in the greatest enterprise that's ever existed. We get to be part of God's plan for the universe. That's what it is all about, when we cooperate and participate together in the family of God. I have a part to play in this enterprise. I have a part to play in the Body of Christ. And when I cooperate with others, more gets done than I, as an individual, could ever get done by myself.

As we belong to God this means we work together in partnership with the right attitude. There is an attitude - a heart attitude that is key to me, to you, to all of us - that we are doing it for Jesus Christ. Am I depriving the church of my part in the partnership because of the attitude of my heart?

So we have that we are formed for God's family, for fellowship and to do this there is  
 A choosing to belong – membership  
 A learning to share – friendship  
 A doing my part - partnership

And then there is

#### **4. Loving Believers Like Family – Next-Of-Kin**

We are told to be devoted to one another. Romans 12:10

**Be devoted to one another in sibling love. Honour one another above yourselves.**  
 (Romans 12:10 NIV)

The word translated here for *devoted* is *philostorgos* which some translations have as *affection* or *kindly affection*, but the word carries the weight of family love, the

**cherishing of one's kindred, especially parents or children**

It is talking about the strong family ties which means that in a good family there will a standing together – there will be a willingness to suffer for other members of the family. As Jesus said

**Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.**  
 (John 15:13 NIV)

Are we prepared to do that for each other? Are we prepared to be like next-of-kin?

- Are we prepared to stand with our family? And here I speak about our Christian family, not our biological family. Am I prepared to stand with my family against attack from outside of the church or do I run the family down, by speaking ill of other members of the family to those outside of the church? What impression do they get of the family of God if we do that? Surely we should praise each other up, talk well of each other.
- Am I prepared to stand with the family as we work through internal difficulties or am I ready and quick to condemn, ostracising others? There was a church in Cambridge, a large church where there were some internal difficulties and it was decided to call in a Mediation Team. Mediation takes time, it is a process bringing groups together to listen to them, to have them listening to each other to try to sort out the problems they were having. The process went on for eight months and cost the church some £8,000 and after all that time it failed. It was not the process that failed. For mediation to work, all parties have to want to come together, sadly some didn't. For mediation to work, all parties have to go with the process, but people kept dropping in and out of the process. There was no standing with others in the family wanting to work things out.

So as followers of God we are

- Choosing to Belong – Membership
- Learning to Share – Friendship

As one who gives myself totally to God, I am

- Doing My Part – Partnership
- Loving Believers Like Family – Next-Of-Kin

Our strapline is

Accepting

Developing

Belonging to

Christ

- We need to belong – or are you still floating around from church to church to church and attend here and attend there. Or maybe you go to the same church, when you have nothing else on but you call this your church. In reality, you've never got committed. You need to choose a church.
- We need to develop sharing, sharing our heart with each other. And where do you do that? In a small group. You don't learn to share in a meeting like this.
- We need to accept our part in the partnership – to do your part. That's partnership. Find your niche. Find your place to give back, to make a contribution. If you're in the family of God, you have some family responsibilities. God expects you to do your part in the family. You don't just be a passenger when others are doing their part.
- Then you move to this last level. As the Family of Christ we are to be devoted to each other. Like Christ will we lay down our lives for other members of the family?

This afternoon re-read those words from I John that we read earlier in our service. If you can't remember what they were then read the whole of 1 John, it's not long. Read it slowly and thoughtfully and think about those words in chapter 4 as a test of our love for God – the test is our love or hatred of one of his people and then ask when you last did a good act for someone here and when you last bad-mouthed someone here to another person and then remember

**“We love each other as a result of his loving us first. If someone says, "I love God," but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we have not seen? And God himself has commanded that we must love not only him but our Christian brothers and sisters, too.”** (1 John 4:19-21 NLT)

PRAYER

You know, Father, next to salvation, the greatest gift you have ever given us is the opportunity to be a part of your family. Thank you that we don't have to go through life disconnected and isolated. Thank you for creating this family at ADBC for all of us.

Dear God, I want to be a part of your family and I want to learn to love my spiritual family just like you do. Forgive me for taking it casually. I want to grow fellowship:

So today I'm choosing to belong. I'm not going to float around anymore.

I want to learn to share and make time to develop real friendships.

I want to do my part in the family of God.

I want to learn to love other believers like brothers and sisters.

Teach me the meaning of real love. In your name I pray,

Amen.