

March 14, 2004

HUNGERING FOR COMMUNITY

Ephesians 4:22-5:2; John 15:1-17

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My dad called last week. When Dad calls it's important. After the hellos, Dad quickly came to the point, Lenny died, he said. What a shock. Dad was clearly shaken.

Lenny was my first youth pastor. Actually, he was a youth volunteer. He was only a few years older than us. He was like a big brother to us all.

Lenny was also like a son to my parents. He grew up in a tough neighborhood in a tough family. My parents become his surrogate parents. My kids still call him Uncle Lenny.

No sooner did I hang up the phone than it rang again. It was my brother. He'd just heard Lenny died and he was shocked and shaken. Therein lies a sad tale.

Lenny was Jim's youth pastor, too. I went off to boarding school when I was fifteen and about that time my home church went through a terrible period of conflict — my brother was in the center of it and, in part, the subject of it. Those dark days deeply wounded Jim and he's still recovering from it. He left his childhood faith and is trying to find his way home.

We talked about Lenny for nearly an hour. What struck me in our conversation was that Lenny stood by my brother through the darkness. Jim can't remember an unkind word. Lenny was a tower of encouragement, acceptance and love.

We agreed that Lenny was the real deal, a genuine Christian man. Then I ventured an opinion, Jim, I said, Lenny is proof that the Christian faith is true. In the midst of that darkness, he was the real thing.

Jim paused for a minute and said, You're right.

It dawned on me in a new way: my faith is the result of people like Lenny Miller. Many of those people gathered for his funeral last week. Don Benson was there. His daughter, a high school friend of mine, brought him. He's feeble now, Dad told me, but he was there. His wife died a few years ago. I remember the Bensons. They were friends to me and my friends. Every Sunday night we were invited to their house for pizza. We consumed tons of pizza as we talked, laughed and shared our lives with adults who loved us.

I remember the Sroufes too. They weren't at Lenny's funeral. They died several years ago. They were Dave's parents and they had us all over for Sunday dinner — every Sunday. It was always a roast, potatoes, vegetables and lots of conversation. They loved us, accepted us, included us.

Bruce Baker was at the funeral. He and his brother Danny were my best friends. I can't tell you how many times I spent an entire day at their house. Bruce and Danny's parents were like parents to me. I always knew I was welcome, accepted and loved.

All of them were part of a very imperfect community of faith. Yet, in that church Christ lived and worked. I didn't know it was happening, but I was learning to love God and my neighbor. It happened in a community. In that community, I developed a hunger for God. My soul hungers were fed there. I began my spiritual journey surrounded by friends on the very same journey.

That's the way it's supposed to be, according to Scripture. John 17 is a case in point.

The gospel of John is a deep and long reflection on the meaning of Jesus Christ for life and for the world. By the time John gets to chapter 17 Jesus is talking about life in the new community he's creating.

Look, John says, being a follower of Jesus has serious and necessary consequences. So, Jesus tells his disciples and us, I am the vine. You are the branches. In other words, faith connects us to the life of God. When we give our lives to Jesus Christ, we receive God's life in return. Jesus put it right up front in John, I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly. And, in that most famous verse, John 3:16, whoever believes has eternal life. That means more than life that goes on forever. It's life here and now with the quality of eternity.

So, John 17 says, stay connected to Jesus Christ and nourish that new life from God. How? The text offers two ways. First, Jesus says his disciples stay connected by paying attention to Jesus' teaching. When we pay attention to Jesus' teaching and obey him, that word reshapes the way we think, act and live. We get re-structured, re-made, re-formed by a divine word.

The second way to stay connected to Jesus is to love God and each other. Look, Jesus says, I really love you. Stay in that love. Don't leave it or me. And, like I've told you a thousands time, love each other the same way I've loved you.

In other words, staying connected to Jesus, the vine, is communal. We experience the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ in the community faith creates.

This text joins the rest of the Bible in saying,

CHRISTIAN FAITH IS NOURISHED AND GROWS IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

Notice that two important words can begin that sentence. Your faith is nourished and grows in Christians community. Or, The Christian faith is nourished and grows in Christians community. Both are true.

Being part of a Christian community is necessary, crucial and non-negotiable. It's part of the deal.

Lenny Miller's impact on me and my friends was not theological his prowess. He was not an educated man. Nor was it the fact that he was a very good man that touched my soul. And he was a good man. It wasn't even his passion for God that affected me.

Lenny Miller loved me. That's what made the difference. He encouraged me, included me, trusted me, put up with me. And I hadn't earned any of his trust or patience. In the face of everything that makes teen-age boys difficult to love — Lenny loved me. That's it.

I've seen the love of God. I've experienced the grace of God. It was in that very imperfect community of faith — in people like Lenny, the Bensons, the Sroufes and the Bakers.

THE LOVE AND GRACE OF GOD ARE SEEN AND EXPERIENCED IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH — OR NOT.

That means not just any church will do. The New Testament describes Christ's Church as a new community. It's not an ordinary place. It's different.

Ephesians 4 is one place we can see what the new community, Christ's Church, looks like. Everything the Church does, Paul explains, should point at building itself up. All church life, including its governance, is a body building experience. Our pursuit of Jesus dream, our covenant commitment, all of it should build us up. So what does that look like?

Or, what's so new about this new community? According to Ephesians 4:

Æ It's a place where people tell the truth and abandon dishonest words and relationships.

Æ Here we use speech to build people up so that each conversation gives grace to the hearer.

Æ We're learning how to manage our emotions, especially our anger.

Æ We work hard so we can share our wealth.

Æ Jesus' people are kind, tenderhearted and forgiving.

I learned all that in the Bible of course. But I've experienced it in churches like this one and people like you. There are people like Lenny scattered all across Christ's church. The problem is that there's not enough of them.

The church needs to change. This description of the church could create a reformation if obeyed. And, I suspect, we want to be like this vision of the new community.

But what's revolutionary about this text is not the description itself. Beneath this vision of community lies a revolutionary fact of Christian life. Why tell the truth and use speech

to spread grace instead of harm? Why work and share the wealth? Why restrain anger? Why be kind and forgiving?

The reason: because, Paul argues, we are members of each other. We belong to each other and, more importantly, we are connected to Jesus Christ. We're careful how we treat each other because we're dealing with God's dearly loved children, our family of faith. We want to protect, defend, care for and tend each other. We're connected to each other and to Jesus Christ.

Even more revolutionary, is a fact of community life that lies beneath that connectedness. Forgive like God forgave you, Paul argues. If God's life lives in you, act like God. Period. Be imitators of God, is the way Paul puts it. And we can because we're connected to God by faith in Jesus Christ. We have God's life in us — and around us in the community.

I think we all long for a Christian community like that. We need friends, real Christian friends. An old Arab proverb describes such a friend,

A friend is one to whom one may pour out all the contents of one's heart, chaff and grain together, knowing that the gentlest of hands will take and sift it, keep what is worth keeping, and with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away.

We have such a friend in God. Jesus tells us so. I'm your friend, he told his disciples. And we have such friends in the Christian community. We need more of them. We need to be a hospitable place because our God is a hospitable God. God, our friend, welcomes us to his table, includes us in his family and wants to walk with us on the journey.

Hospitality, whether God's welcome or the hospitality found in the Christian community, is a wonderful experience. Over a year ago now, I was honored to preach at the Memorial Church at Harvard University. My friend, Peter Gomes, invited me to the pulpit he so graciously and eloquently fills most Sundays.

After church he invited Gloria and me to join him at his house for Sunday Dinner. We both invited friends to be part of the occasion. We gathered in his elegant dining room and he warmly, graciously and elegantly welcomed us.

As we sat down at the table, Peter made a short speech. He told us Sunday Dinner was very important to him. When he was boy in a Plymouth, Massachusetts, Sunday Dinner was the best meal of the week. His community and church were quite modest, even poor. In that African-American community Sunday was the most important day of the week. Everyone dressed up and went to church where, no matter who you were or what your station in life, at church you were somebody.

After church, Peter's family always gathered for Sunday Dinner. Often guests joined them. It was a big deal. In fact, Peter said, in that church and in his family, they

understood that Sunday Dinner was a foretaste of the Kingdom of God when all God's children sit at God's great banquet.

So, Sunday Dinner features the best food and drink available. And Sunday Dinner must include friends and family in conversation around the good gifts of God. We've just feasted on the Word of God in church, Peter said. And now we come to the feast of good food, drink and friendship.

And it was a feast — in every way. The food was delicious, the drink sublime and the conversation delightful. Peter guided the conversation as we wandered through each other's lives, the world and Christ's church.

At the end of the feast Peter stood up and said, And now I must leap to my feet and propose a toast. Then he started, working from his left to his right around the table. He summed up what he'd learned from and appreciated in each of us during the meal. He ended with me, his honored guest and graciously and elegantly thanked God for me.

He sat down, turned to me and said, You may respond if you wish. Poorly and inelegantly I did my best. And I learned something that day. Hospitality lies in the very character of God and should be part of life in the Christian community. In fact, that kind of hospitality is a powerful sign not only the age to come, but of the grace of God here and now.

My friends, Jesus said, love each other as I have loved you — and when you do you will see and experience the love of God. That's how to stay connected. Amen.