

Pray with other Christians...you'll grow closer together

Text: Jude 1:17-23, Acts 2:42-47

Well brothers and sisters in Christ, as the title of our sermon series suggests, there are some things that we need to hear... again.

And so on Good Friday we started this series with an appropriate reminder that Christ's forgiveness of us must translate into our forgiving others... and on Easter Sunday we were exhorted to anticipate and celebrate the reality the Christ's resurrection assures our own resurrection.

And this morning we are going to hear about the importance of praying together as believers.

But before we get to that - brothers and sisters – there is yet another thing that we need to hear, and that is that we have made good progress in becoming the kind of church that advances Christ's Kingdom – and that we are a significant threat to the works of the enemy! The kind of church against which the gates of hell shall not prevail.

I do not say this to boast about ourselves – but to rightfully give credit to the work that the Lord and the Holy Spirit have been doing in us and through us which has, I think, shone brightly this past year.

Prior to the start of the pandemic, you may recall that I had mentioned Valleyview had been experiencing a bit of a decline in our worship attendance in our givings – and it was difficult to discern why this was occurring...

However – when push came to shove last year, it became obvious that the pandemic provided the needed incentive for us to pull together – gather together – and support each other – as fellow Christians.

As a result – both our worship attendance and our givings have increased. When times get tough – it appears Valleyview turns to the Lord, and that is a good thing and we need to hear about it so that we are encouraged to keep doing it, and so we can continue to encourage others to do it as well.

And then there was... is the Blessing Project right? God had something that He wanted us to take on during these circumstances and He provided money and opportunity for us to start learning how to Go Out and engage people and bless them in Jesus' name.

And we had 6 months of testimony in the services, every Sunday, hearing about how someone was able to bless someone in Jesus' name.

And it is becoming part of our DNA now, that Valleyview is about blessing others, that the vision of a church with streams of water flowing out into the community is who we are and we are seeking to go deeper with that this year...

And to that end – God has doubled the funding for it – we've received another donation at twice the amount from last time! And we need to hear this – because its confirmation from the Lord to keep going on Going Out and blessing others and taking that blessing deeper.

Now... all the good ministry and Kingdom work going on at Valleyview is doing damage to work of the enemy, and as we grow and become more empowered in the Holy Spirit, we begin to pose a greater threat to the devil and the deception he has over people.

And the enemy doesn't take this lying down brothers and sisters, we can expect a reaction - a sneaky and subtle counter-attack whereby Satan will attempt to neutralize the threat that Valleyview poses to him, without us even realizing it...

And we need to hear about this as well, so that - as the Apostle Paul says in 2 Cor 2:11 *"Satan should not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes."*

Those schemes include trapping us into unforgiveness, keeping us obsessed with our present circumstances with no perspective, and dividing us... seeking to break down the Christian connection and relationship between us as believers.

So brothers and sisters, we need to hear this morning how the discouragement and frustration of these ongoing pandemic circumstances give the enemy the opportunity launch his subtle and sneaky counter-attack against us.

And I hope that it is obvious to us as to how this discouragement and separation undermines each of us and the ministry of Valleyview and makes it less effective.

It's as obvious as understanding how missing a body part makes it difficult for someone to go about their work... sure you cope – but you're not as effective as you could be. It's as obvious as seeing how someone who is discouraged or distracted at work does not have the energy and enthusiasm to put themselves fully into their job.

But – when we are aware of it, when we know this is what is going on – then we can stand against it, we can resist it, and WE can counter it – so that the enemy will flee from us.

And the good news friends is that what the enemy intends to use to harm us and destroy us – God will use to grow us. Have we already not seen that happen over the past year??

So – what we need to hear again this morning is that we need to cooperate with God, and resist the counter attack of the devil through our praying **together, with** each other and **for** each other.

And this is a challenge, not so much because the pandemic circumstances prevent us from meeting in person – but as I've observed over the course of my time in ministry, as a pastor, when people go through tough times their personal lives – the tendency is to withdraw, pull back and disengage and not share very much – let alone pray together about the situation.

But brothers and sisters this is contrary to scripture. James 5:13-14 says *“Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them...”*

Brothers and sisters, I pray the Holy Spirit works through this scripture and the passage we read from Acts 2 this morning to encourage us to pray together, not to withdraw from each other.

May we instead be like the believers in Acts 2 who are described as being “devoted” - really committed - to praying together.

And when we read about that group of believers, I don't think that when one of them went through some hard times that they would pull back until their circumstances had improved. In fact, we read they were willing to sell property in order help support each other if they had any financial needs.

So let's consider some other scriptural thoughts on prayer this morning that can help us come together and pray with each other – to reinforce, or perhaps rebuild the connection we have in the Holy Spirit, and to strengthen and encourage each other and build each other up in Jesus Christ.

First; we need to hear the truth that praying with other Christians is not public speaking, it is simply speaking to God through Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit with your other brothers and sisters in Jesus.

We often shy away from praying together with other Christians because we equate it with public speaking and that terrifies most people. And we are also worried about whether we will say the right things, or how we will sound, or what others will think of us....

But brothers and sisters – this is why we pray in Jesus' name. Jesus is our mediator, our go between, our friend! And you speak with your friends in public right? And you know that's not public speaking.. So – in the same way - you can have a conversation with Jesus.

And you don't have to be worried about whether you get it 100% right because Jesus hears our prayers in His name - and He edits them for us so they are correct... and then He passes them on to the Father for us – that is why He is in heaven with

God interceding for us, and he says to us in John 14:13 *“And I will do whatever you ask in My name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.”*

So brothers and sisters, my prayer is that the Holy Spirit will move among us to give us courage and honesty to speak to Jesus in front of each other – so that more and more we are praying with each other and for each other.

Now another reason we shy away from praying with other Christians is because we think that spiritual matters of faith and our beliefs are extremely personal and private matters. We think these are nobody’s business but our own – so why would we share those things by praying with anyone.

Well brothers and sisters, we need to hear that the flavor of ice cream you prefer and where you like to shop for gas and groceries or whether you wear boxers or briefs are private matters and up to your personal preference – and if you don’t want to share these in prayer – that’s fine...

But... your faith and experience with Jesus Christ and what you believe are not private matters - it is something you share with other believers and you should pray about it together.

Because brothers and sisters - our Christian faith is based on facts, biblical facts – not our personal preferences or feelings or our own experiences.

The fact that God created this world, the fact that he chose a people for himself, the fact that He sent his son Jesus, the fact that he died for us – publicly, the fact that others can see the difference He makes in our lives, and the fact that Jesus called us his *“witnesses...”* (Acts 1:8)

These are all biblical facts and thus public facts – not private opinions, so my prayer brothers and sisters it that the Holy Spirit would overcome our apprehension about sharing and praying about what God is doing in our personal lives by removing the false beliefs we have which want to keep our faith private – and prevent us from praying together.

And let me add something that I have come to learn this past year through these difficult times, and that is that in such times you come to learn very quickly that the reality of your faith does not – it cannot – depend on how you feel about it.

As we go through these pandemic circumstances, we quickly realize that the external factors we endure play havoc with our feelings and how we feel about our faith. We might even be at the mercy of our body's own chemical make-up and have little to no control over how we feel at all – regardless of our external circumstances.

And if our faith and connection with other believers has been based on how we feel about attending worship, or being involved in ministry or what is required to follow Christ and live as His disciple...

We will quickly discover that our motivation changes as our feelings change and we will be left wondering if we even had any faith to begin with.

So brothers and sisters – what we need to hear is that when we undergo trials, the best thing that we can do for our faith in such times is to allow the external structures of gathering for worship, and connecting with our community and praying together... to carry us through and remind us that faith does not depend on feeling until we come out the other side.

Now – don't misunderstand me, I'm not saying – *stop or change how you are feeling so that you can have faith* – because faith isn't a feeling. Faith is staying loyal to God when you don't feel like it.

And finally brothers and sisters, we avoid and withdraw from praying with other Christians because the enemy – the devil wants to prevent us from praying together.

That is his goal in separating and isolating us - He needs to stop us from being together as a Christian community and praying for each other - because he doesn't want us to experiencing the support and comfort and encouragement or the healing and freedom that come from praying together.

So, he actively works behind these different ways we've talked about to prevent us from practicing prayer as a group. United we can stand against the enemy and overcome his kingdom - but divided we are easily defeated and discouraged.

So, what we need to hear brothers and sisters is that we need to pray together so as to overcome the ways in which the enemy divides us, and how he keeps us apart from each other.

That's why the passage from Jude 1:17-23 is important.

¹⁷ But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. ¹⁸ They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires." ¹⁹ These are the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.

²⁰ But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.

What we need to hear in this passage is how Jude is talking about the source and problem of division in the church, and how praying together is part of the solution to overcoming and preventing that division.

Now the actual scoffers that Jude is talking about in this passage were people in the early church who didn't confess the truth and teachings of the Christian faith, but yet had somehow managed to become influential people and they were spreading false teachings.

Now – we don't have problem with scoffers as such in our congregation – but when we avoid praying together for fear of speaking in public, or because we think faith and spiritual matters are private and personal, or when our faith is based on our feelings – or any other matter that keeps us from praying together and divides us in this way...

We are falling prey to the legacy of these kinds of scoffers who introduced these falsehoods and lies into the church – and we've come to believe them over time...

And we also need to hear a warning about unintentionally acting like scoffers...

Brothers and sisters... nothing will stop people from praying with fellow Christians faster or more effectively than being scoffed at, ridiculed, or made to feel silly when they put forward a need for prayer.

And nothing will kill the desire to pray with others more effectively than when someone experiences being talked down to, belittled, or lectured when they are being prayed for.

Do you know what I'm talking about?

And we are all capable of scoffing at people in such ways when we are not "praying in the Spirit" as Jude mentions here which is all about praying with the help and guidance and the grace and mercy of the Holy Spirit.

You see when we come together to pray when we are going through very difficult times in our lives – we must be careful

that we do not "scoff" at those who open up and share and express doubts, or share their anger and pain, or who feel discouraged or are a bit angry with God.

We must not give simplistic answers, or tell them that they need to have more faith - *which is really just telling them to feel like they have more faith...*

We must not try to fix how they are feeling, or try to defend God when He has not yet answered their prayers...

And while it is certainly true that God works through all things for our good – we must wait for the appropriate time to give that encouragement instead of using it as the equivalent of spiritual Prozac to take the edge of the raw pain that someone feels – so that we're more comfortable being around them.

Do you understand what I'm saying?

We need to pray together – but we must be careful that we pray together and seek the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to

pray in ways that truly support and encourage each other and do not give further excuses for people to withdraw and pull back during hard times.

And if you have been on the receiving end of this and have pulled back – can I encourage you to gently tell those who have “scoffed” at you how they have done this – and forgive them – so that they can learn from their mistakes??

Brothers and sisters this is how we can overcome our tendencies to pull back when we go through trials and tribulations and fight back against the Enemy’s efforts to separate us – and neutralize us.

This is why Jude says *“build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.”* (vs. 20)

So let’s do that shall we – will you pray with each other as we endure through the frustrations and challenges that are continuing to face us. I know many of you have begun to pray in the service since we started gathering online...

I to encourage us to not only pray in the service – but to pray with each other when you connect with each other – or connect with each other to pray for each other.

And what will happen as we are praying with and for each other is that we will grow more and more into the kind of community that people want to be a part of when they go through trials and struggles... where they are able to open up about their weakness and brokenness in regards to their sins.

Isn’t it amazing that as we work to overcome how the Enemy wants to undermine us – we receive the blessing of being supported in our lives, growing closer together in Christian community, and becoming a place where sin can be confessed and then the grace of Jesus poured out in forgiveness!

It’s awesome how the Lord will use what we have gone through to allow us to do even more damage to the work of the Enemy. What he intended for harm God will use for good!

Brothers and sisters – it is through praying together that the church becomes what God intended it to be – the body of Christ.

So when and where do we pray together? If you are part of a Christ Care Group, or attend the men’s group, or you are involved in another ministry team at Valleyview – these are opportunities to pray together... and for each other.

Or you can come and join us at the most obvious opportunity – our prayer group on Tuesday nights. We encourage people to come and pray with us – you don’t have to become a regular member – but come out and share what you need prayer for and allow us to pray for you and with you.

Or maybe what you need prayer for is somewhat personal – and while our faith is not a private matter – sometimes what we are struggling with is not a matter to deal with publicly.

In that case, you give me a call – that is what your minister is for and we can meet and pray together – confidentially.

Now I realize this may feel a bit awkward for us at first. But that’s ok...

It’s just like overcoming the awkwardness we’ve felt when we attempted other things for the first time.

It was a bit awkward the first few times you tried skiing, or ice skating, or rollerblading, or when you learned to ride a bike or ride a horse... right?

But you didn’t believe that because it felt awkward that it wasn’t genuine or that you shouldn’t continue to try it right?

Instead, because you continued to do it – it started to feel normal, natural - it didn’t feel awkward anymore, you became comfortable and adept at it and you enjoyed the benefits of it.

So to friends praying together with other Christians will begin to feel normal once you’ve done it a few times – and not only will we grow closer to God; we will grow closer with each other and stand firm against the enemy’s retaliation.

Let me wrap up what we need to hear this morning with a quote from Pastor Timothy Keller: *“To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us.”*

Pray with other Christians brothers and sisters – we will grow closer together. We need to hear that... again

So let's pray.