

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

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

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we move to wrap up our regular ministry season this month at Valleyview - as the title of our sermon series suggests, there are some things that we need to hear.

So last week we started out with an important reminder from Rev. Martin Boardman that our role in working with Christ to advance His Kingdom is so dependent upon prayer.

But what we need to hear about prayer is more than a general reminder – we also need to learn **how** to pray for Christ's Kingdom purposes, and to pray **intentionally against** whatever opposes Christ's Kingdom.

And so this past Tuesday, Rev. Boardman with his gifting in Prayer ministry, lead a seminar for our Prayer Team on how to identify and pray against Enemy Strongholds, so that we can be the Church which Jesus describes as one which *"the gates of Hell cannot stand against"* (Matt 16:17-19)

And brothers and sisters, another thing that we need to hear... is that we've made good progress in becoming the kind of church that advances Christ's Kingdom – and that is a significant threat to the enemy!

The Kingdom work and ministry going on at Valleyview is doing damage to the work of the enemy, as we grow and become more empowered in the Holy Spirit, we pose a greater threat to the Enemy – and I know this friends, because of how I see the enemy retaliating.

If you took the time to read the Introduction to this year's AGM report, you will remember how I characterized the past year as being *"the best of times and the worst of times."*

Because many people in our congregation have undergone difficult personal circumstances over the past year and a half – the kind of struggles which they have never encountered before in their lives.

Now – please understand – I’m not “blaming the devil” for any and all misfortune that we encounter. There are many contributing factors to the struggles that we’ve encountered over the past year; the economic downturn, health considerations, the actions of other people and so on...

So, why am I inclined to see these circumstances as the enemy working to retaliate against Valleyview?

First and foremost because this is something that myself and a number of other people have been praying about – so it’s grounded in prayer and scripture reflection and listening for what the Holy Spirit is saying.

Secondly, because over the past year and a half I’ve noticed that Valleyview was showing some symptoms that have caught my attention...

Worship attendance has dropped a bit, some people who were involved in ministry on a regular basis have pulled back, there seemed to be less enthusiasm for some of the ministry

events and activities that have previously energized us, and our NCD survey results gave us conflicting information that we struggled to understand...

Now it’s easy to see all these things individually and explain them away with legitimate insights – such as more people in our congregation are moving into phases of life that have them away for extended periods of time; or we’ve sent over 15 of our youth off to college since 2015; people are going through some difficult times and thus have less energy and enthusiasm for ministry and so on...

But, when you combine all of these factors together and spend time in prayer and discernment, you realize that these are only symptoms and not the underlying issue...

And then it becomes obvious that the underlying issue is that the enemy - in a very subtle and sneaky way - is at work trying to neutralize the threat that Valleyview poses to his agenda by using our circumstances to discourage us and cause us to pull back from each other.

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.

And brothers and sisters, we need to hear about this. We need to be made aware that this is what the enemy is attempting to do to us – to neutralize us at Valleyview.

Because 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.

Now the good news friends is that what the enemy intends to use to harm us and destroy us – God will use to grow us.

But the only way that will happen for us in our current circumstances... is through our praying together, with each other and for each other.

And this is a challenge, because as I've observed this past year and a half – when we go through tough times in our personal lives – our tendency is to withdraw, pull back and disengage and not share very much – let alone pray together.

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...”*

So why do we withdraw and disengage from our Church at the times when we probably need our brothers and sisters the most?

What prevents us from being described in the same manner as that early group of Christians which we read about in Acts 2 who were “devoted” to prayer?

When I read about that group of Christians, somehow I don’t think that if one of them went through some hard times that they would pull back until their circumstances had improved.

In fact we read that they sold property so they could financially support each other if they had any needs.

So what do we need to hear today to help us come together and pray with each other to rebuild the connection we have in the Holy Spirit, and to be able 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.

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 friends, the flavor of ice cream you prefer and where you like to shop for gas and groceries and whether you wear boxers or briefs are private matters and up to your personal preference – and we don't need to share these in prayer.

But... your faith and experience with Jesus Christ is not a private matter and it is something you share with other believers and thus you should pray together regarding it.

So the third thing we need to hear is that 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 – publically so 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 what God is doing in our personal lives by removing the false beliefs we have which want to keep our faith private and personal.

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.

Many of us going through these kinds of circumstance 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 has previously been based on our feeling good about attending worship, being involved in ministry or what we believe about the Christian life and discipleship...

Then we will quickly discover that our motivation for it is gone and we will be left wondering if we even have faith anymore.

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 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* – and I'll say more on that in a bit.

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!

This is the point of 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 can 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.

And so ironically we are often resistant to being encouraged and prompted to pray together with other Christians...

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

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

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

*<sup>20</sup> But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, <sup>21</sup> 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 prayer 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 because we believe its public speaking, because we believe faith and spiritual matters are private and personal, when we believe 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 scoffers as they have introduced falsehoods and lies into the church 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 talking about feeling like you 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 prosac 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.



So - this is how we can overcome our tendencies to pull back when we go through trials and tribulations and fight against the Enemy's efforts to separate us.

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

And we've started doing this already – and I want to encourage us to do it more and more over the summer and into the fall, so that as Valleyview is praying together, and praying with and for each other we become the kind of community that people are drawn to when they go through trials and struggles, and they can also feel free 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...

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 publically.

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. Amen.