**Life-Giving Relationships**

**FBC Albemarle**

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*Fellowship* is a word we use too lightly in church. When we think of fellowship, we think of covered dish lunch. We think of a get-together over food and casual conversations. We think of a Sunday School gathering or a small group celebration at a restaurant. Do you see the theme there? FOOD! Yet, fellowship, or *koinonia* in Greek, means much more! The variety of uses in the New Testament reveals that *koinonia* involves a deeper level of fellowship than an informal social gathering around food. The essential element of *koinonia* is **participation** and the fact that Christ is what connects us together.

We should value all that we hold in common as followers of Christ regardless of our differences. The focus should always be on what believers share in common. This is the key to understanding *koinonia* in the New Testament.

In 1 John 1, it reads, “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship (*koinonia*) with us; and indeed our (*koinonia*) is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.… If we say we have (*koinonia*) with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have (*koinonia*) with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” (1 John 1:3, 6–7) In Christ, we enjoy *koinonia* with God. In Christ, we enjoy *koinonia* with one another.

Throughout the summer, we’ve been talking about the kind of life we want to live: a life that is connected to God; a life that is focused on God’s kingdom; a life that is filled with his peace; and a life that is lived out of our giftedness. Today, we continue to look at how we can thrive by connecting to life-giving relationships.

Remember when your parents told you to watch out who you hang around with because you would become like them? You, then, rolled your eyes and said “Mom, you don’t know what you’re talking about!” Well, it turns out that parents actually knew what they are talking about! *The truth is God uses people to form people.* That is why the interaction between you and another person is never just a human-to-human interaction. The Spirit longs to be powerfully at work in every encounter. God is at work in every one of our relationships! That is how *koinonia* works! God desires for us to have rich, deep, joy-producing, life-changing, meaningful relationships.

Not surprisingly, sociologist Robert Putnam discovered the power of life-giving relationships in a longitudinal study. He writes in his book, *Bowling Alone*, “The single most common finding from a half-century’s research on life satisfaction, not only from the U.S. but around the world, is that happiness is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one’s social connections.” He goes on to mention that connectedness is not the same thing as knowing many people. You may have many acquaintances but how many real friends do you have? Young people often refer to their real friend as their bff (best friends forever) or simply as “their person.”

How many bff’s do you have? When something goes wrong, do you have someone you can turn to? Do you have someone you can just drop in on without calling ahead? If you won the lottery, do you have that one person you would call first? (other than your lawyer and accountant) The way koinonia works, when you are loved, it isn’t that you just receive more from someone else, but also that you become more yourself the way God designed from the very beginning. Life-giving relationships with others hep you to be more you!

Chapter 5 of Galatians begins with Paul declaring that Christ followers have been set free. But what are we set free from? Paul told the Galatians that they have been set free from their pagan past. They were no longer enslaved by sinful actions that were common in the pagan world. In addition, they were also free from the grips of the Law. Gentiles who came to faith were not bound to the Jewish Laws because they were fulfilled through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Therefore, just like the Galatians, we are free! But, free to do what? Whatever we want? To sin as much as we want? NO! We have been set free to live in God’s kingdom today and forever. We have been set free to love our neighbor as ourselves. We have been set free to serve others. In loving our neighbors and serving others, we flourish in our connectedness because love produces life-giving relationships.

In recognizing the life-giving relationships in our lives, we also make note of the life-draining relationships. These relationships take everything out of us. These relationships leave us feeling used and compromised. When we recognize these people in our lives, we have to learn to distance ourselves. **It is not our job to fix people.** That is a job that we are not capable of doing. We love them, but we learn to love them from a distance.

So, how do we cultivate the life-giving relationships in our lives? First, we offer one another the gift of delighting. Love is mostly something you do, not something you feel. Love is marked by servanthood. A son drives five hours to be with his mother on her birthday. A friend is suffering through a bad break up, so you show up with dinner. You notice someone who might need a pick-me-up at a restaurant, so you secretly pay their check. A father knows how much his daughter likes having a clean car, so he sneaks over to wash it for her. You create a text group with your small group or Sunday School class to encourage one another throughout the week. We do the small things to delight the people we love.

People who give life to us are people who notice us. They know what we love and fear. When we work to truly notice someone else, love for them grows and we want to do things that delight them. And the great thing is that when we work to truly observe others, in that self-forgetfulness our own soul flourishes!

Mother Theresa once said, “If you can’t do great things, do little things with love. If you can’t do them with great love, do them with a little love. If you can’t do them with a little love, do them anyway.” Love grows when we serve and delight others.

A second way we cultivate life-giving relationships is to offer one another the gift of commitment. One of the marks of the early church was their commitment to one another. They understood that relationships don’t just happen. They met together every day. They ate together with glad and sincere hearts. However, over time, that value must have faded. So, the writer of Hebrews said, “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing.” (Hebrews 10:25)

We were created to live within community. When we live in isolation, we are most likely to give into temptation and discouragement. We are likely to become more self-absorbed. So, we stay committed to one another. We make extra effort to be at church on Sunday mornings when we are gathered together, not for the sake of just checking off our list but to have our soul nourished and to remain connected to the body of Christ. We offer one another the gift of commitment.

Lastly, we cultivate life-giving relationships by offering one another the gift of joy. We hunger for joy in life. The psalmist cried out, “Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love so that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.” (Psalm 90:14) Joyful people make us come alive!

Ever been around a person who is full of joy? I’m not talking about someone who is just loud or magnanimous. I’m talking about someone who is truly filled with joy from the inside. When you are around someone filled with true joy, you realize that you are also filled with joy. Joy isn’t based on circumstances or a feeling. It is an attitude that flows deep within our hearts!

A 20-year study of more than 4,700 people found that joy is contagious. People who become joyful make it more likely that their friends will be filled with joy, for joy travels through relational networks like ripples in a pond. It is so robust that it continues through three degrees of separation, so you are more likely to increase in joy if even a friend of a friend of a friend experience joy. Having a joyful friend is more likely to increase your joy than getting a $5,000 raise. So, if you get a $5,000 raise, try giving it to your associate pastor. He will be filled with joy and we will both win!

We have been set free! We have been set free to live in God’s kingdom today and forever. We have been set free to love our neighbor as ourselves. We have been set free to serve others. In loving our neighbors and serving others, we flourish in our connectedness because love produces life-giving relationships. These life-giving relationships are treasures in life. They do not exist without work. We have to cultivate these relationships. So, let us offer one another the gifts of delighting, commitment and joy. This is the life I want to live!