

## **“Returning to the Themes of Relationships and Community”**

**2 Corinthians 6:1–13**

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Do you remember what you were doing this Sunday in June in 2009? I do. The exact date was June 21, and I was preaching on today’s reading from 2 Corinthians — my first sermon as pastor of this church from this very pulpit. Well, not exactly this pulpit, with the base and top added. The original pulpit, which is still here, did not come up to my waist, which did not make it easy to preach from, but I did note how close the pulpit is to the first pew, which I love. In the church I served in Winston-Salem, there is a split chancel on the first level some distance from the first pew, and a central pulpit on a higher level even further away, leaving the pulpit a full sand wedge from the first pew!

I may be employing some hyperbole, but there is a great distance there, and that reality was related to my sermon. The title was “Opening Our Hearts to Each Other” and I was talking about the importance of community, how we relate to each other as pastor and congregation, but also how we all relate to each other. Physical distance in sacred space can create psychological distance, and we don’t want that.

We want closeness, openness, deep connectedness in the body of Christ. I talked about how we would need to take time to get to know each other and build trust before we tempted each other to cuss and spit, but how we would eventually need to address important concerns in a way that would create tension, but necessary tension we could handle.

You will notice that I have not given you a test to see who remembers any of this or how well we have done with the tasks named, but I come back to these themes today because fifteen years later, I still believe everything I said. The need for authentic community may be even greater now, it requires time to build trust and a willingness to engage key concerns, and the context of 2 Corinthians 6 may be even more appropriate now. Paul is not developing a vision for how to relate to people he is just meeting. He is responding to tension experienced in a longstanding relationship with the church in Corinth.

Paul talks about what he has given and endured, how he has opened his heart to the people, and he pleads with them to open their hearts to him.

We don't need to identify with all of this. Paul talks a bit too much about himself here. As I said fifteen years ago, I'm not Paul nor are you the church at Corinth, thanks be to God on both counts! But it is worth returning to these themes of relationships and community, opening hearts, building trust, and addressing important concerns.

For a healthy way of relating to each other is not only a prerequisite for everything else we do; it is one of the most important things we do in and of itself. Who we are as a church matters at least as much as what we do, especially now.

For we live in a time when people are searching desperately to find community. Human beings have always needed social interaction and support. It has been documented that children who are isolated struggle to develop in normal ways. Even cognitive functions are affected. But this basic human need has been intensified by the fear and division of this time, the emergence of social media, and the isolating effects of a pandemic.

During COVID, cases of depression and addiction increased, especially among adolescents. Suicide attempts were more common, and people in general struggled. Our daughter moved to Michigan for grad school in the late summer of 2020, a time when classes were not held in-person and you couldn't go out with other human beings to do anything — eat a meal, see a movie, enjoy a concert or ballgame. It was painfully isolating, but as with many things, COVID simply accelerated an already-existent trend toward isolation.

It is one of the great ironies of our time that in an age with so many ways to communicate and connect, we aren't very good at either. I have joked that our son doesn't know that you can talk into a cell phone... Online communication is not all it is cracked up to be. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy has just issued a warning about the threat social media poses to children, but he has also talked about the more general danger of assuming that online interaction can replace personal connection.

We have expanded our online presence in this church to connect with young people and because of COVID, and we will continue to stream services

and use other platforms to spread our message and help those who cannot be physically present to maintain a connection to the church. But online connection will never replace personal connection. There is something about being physically present with people we care about and who care about us that nurtures us in a way nothing else can.

People today are searching for such human connection, and they are searching for authenticity in it. A church where people put on pretenses and wear masks is of little interest in a time when enough games are played already and there is so little honesty and truth. Furthermore, a church that cannot talk about the issues that affect people's everyday lives isn't worth wasting time on.

Authenticity means we can be honest about who we are with all our virtues and faults. And it means we talk about things that matter, disagree at times, but continue to care about each other across these differences. Any church that maintains peace by avoiding subjects where people might disagree denies itself depth in relationships. But a church that is open and honest, and willing to live with some tensions creates space for people to experience the kind of connections they are desperately seeking. I am grateful that this is a church that lives toward this ideal, not perfectly but faithfully, humbly and persistently.

But what is it about church that creates space for this kind of connection? It begins with what Paul talks about at the very end of our passage — opening our hearts to each other. This phrase implies intimacy and vulnerability, more than a superficial way of relating. It points to a deeper way of connecting, far beyond points of agreement and common interests. It's about a connection that can be maintained through times of conflict and separation, a vital link that binds people together.

By contrast, the norm in this time is a heart that is always on the verge of closing. People close their hearts to friends and coworkers, fellow church members and family members. It only takes one conflict, one disagreement, to write someone off. Human beings have always had disagreements, but they didn't often end relationships. They do now.

We have come to dread the Thanksgiving get-together with extended family. And in almost every church I know of, people have lost not just

church members but lifelong friends over a disagreement. We don't just close our hearts to each other; we take pride in doing so!

The Jesus community is called to be different. We are called to open our hearts to each other in a way that binds us together as we seek to shape the beloved community. Such a way of relating is ever imperfect, it is aspirational, but we genuinely aspire to it.

I am deeply grateful for enduring friendships with people I disagree with on many subjects but still claim as sisters or brothers in Christ. That's the kind of relationship Paul seeks with the church in Corinth and the kind he wants them to seek with each other, which is a challenge, given how divided they are by power struggles, ethical lapses, and downright crankiness. That's the kind of relationship we seek with each other.

But it's not just an open heart that creates space for a community like this; it is how we got here in the first place, by grace, our common bond in Christ. Our reading begins with Paul saying that as we work together, we should not accept the grace of God in vain. *As we work together* — faith is not a solo endeavor, we must work together — we rely on *grace* to achieve our shared work, God's unmerited love.

We are here by grace and grace alone, and that changes everything. We have no right to insist on our own way, to put others down and lift ourselves up. We have no cause to exclude anyone. Everyone is welcome and each of us has something to contribute without which the church is less than it should be.

The community stoles we wear in this season offer a beautiful sign of this reality. They were assembled by church members, using materials contributed by church members. I can't tell you who contributed each piece of the stole I am wearing or who assembled it, but the stole can only enhance worship as it does because of each person who contributed something. That is the church, that is this church. We are all welcome and accepted, we are all needed.

The belonging value in our Mission, Vision, and Values statement puts it this way.

First Baptist Church strives to be a church where everyone can experience a sense of belonging and connection. We welcome and affirm all people for who they are and who they may become. We provide

space for individuals to be true to self and to challenge themselves and others to create community that embraces diversity. Because we believe in the sacred worth of all people as beloved children of God, we invite every person to participate in all aspects of the life, leadership, and ministry of our congregation.

We create space for authentic connection by opening our hearts to each other and by remembering that it is by grace that we are here and thus extending grace to others. Most of all, we build community by remembering that love is the most important thing, not correct beliefs or perfect knowledge, not the right stance on all the key issues, love.

The thirteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians makes this point eloquently. Knowledge, prophecy, tongues, faith — none of these things matter if we don't have love. In the end, faith, hope, and love abide, he says, and the greatest of these is love. It is so obvious, it is indisputable, and yet so many churches struggle to get the message, and because they do, not only do people who need community not find it, the church's witness is compromised.

There is an old story about a man who was asked why he avoided a certain church even though its mission was to share God's love with the world. "I don't know anything about that," the man said, "All I know is that they hate each other."

But there is another old story about a young man who walked past numerous churches every week to get to one particular church. "Why do you do that?" someone asked him. He replied, "Because they really know how to love a fella' down there."

As a simple song says, "They will know we are Christians by our love." Love may not be all we need, but it is the one thing we need most. It matters more than all the programs and buildings and budgets and causes we become passionate about. Any church that remembers this will have a place of significance, a vital ministry to a world full of people desperately seeking community.