

Today we continue our series on the church as both a place and a people.  
So far we have seen church as people  
designed for worship,  
encouraged to be disciples,  
passionate about prayer  
filled with the Spirit

This week we're going to look at being part of God's family.

Dealing with people is what makes church both stimulating and challenging, and because people are involved it's always messy - there's no way you can work with human beings and have everything neat and tidy. People misunderstand, they misinterpret and they make mistakes. People get it wrong - and that's just on Sunday! The rest of the week is even worse.

The thing is though that life always involves mess. Lives are not perfect and neatly packaged and we should be glad of the mess. We are not sweet and antiseptic. We are not squeaky clean. We are a laboratory of love, learning to love each other through the mess. That's what marks out true fellowship - working with the mess.

Sometimes we get the notion of fellowship wrong. We somehow imagine, although we would probably never say it, that church is a place for 'nice' people. It's for people like us. People who don't have problems and issues, or at least people who know to keep their problems to themselves. Yes, church is a place for saints, and sinners are to be viewed with suspicion.

I actually think that there is a great deal of life here at MPN - and that means that there are people for whom life is a struggle; for whom faith is weak; who are struggling with depression, finances and physical limitations. There are people who don't fit the mould and it's wonderful. It's not so much an issue as an opportunity. It's not so much a problem as an occasion for grace.

I want to focus on one word from our reading - it's the word especially in verse 10:  
*Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

This word suggests that there is something extra about the fellowship of faith, something unique about being church together. I want to look at three times when it appears in the NT.

Another translation has the apostle Paul writing "*We should help people whenever we can, especially if they are followers of the Lord.*" This tells us to be intentional and purposeful. This tells us to reach out and do something for one another. It tells us not to live in isolation, but to connect to one another, deliberately, on purpose.

Most congregations have someone who, “Just loves everybody!” Well, let me tell you, it’s one thing to love everybody, but it’s another thing entirely to get down into the mess with specific people. I find that when you get specific, it’s not quite like that. The folks who say they love everybody, when you ask them if they will help so-and-so with his problem, will say, “Well, minister, I’d like to, but not them. Can’t deal with them.”

Many of us love the human race, as an abstraction, but find it tough to deal with actual people. It was Linus in “Peanuts” who once announced, “I love humanity; it’s people I can’t stand.”

But it’s not about whether the other people are nice or not. We already know the answer to that. We already know they are a mess! It’s not about others; it’s about us. It’s about our attitudes. It’s about our hearts. Whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all – especially for the family of faith. Fellowship means intentional care for one another, in the church.

I have a confession make: I could have been a much better minister over the last five years. If only I hadn’t had to deal with actual people! My sermons could have been much better and more engaging if only I hadn’t had to consider who would be listening. My job would be so much easier if it didn’t involve people. I read a comment by a pastor which said, in all his years of pastoring, no one had ever come in to say to him, they were having trouble with the doctrine of the Trinity. “I don’t get it about transubstantiation.” In fact, he said, they come in and say things like, “Pastor, I’m having trouble in my marriage. I’m having trouble with an addiction. I’m having trouble with my job.” Messy people, messy problems, that is what we are called to deal with. Some of us may prefer to mull over abstractions and worry ourselves with how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. But Paul won’t have it that way. Paul insists that if you are going to be part of the Body of Christ, you look for ways to do good to one another. You work at finding out how you can help somebody. It’s about opportunity, and intentional ministry.

Calling up to say, “Do you need me to drive you to your medical appointments?” Going around the corner to offer, “I’m here to help you with the grass, since you’ve been sick lately.” The word of the Lord is, “**whenever we have an opportunity**” – did you hear that word? Not, “whenever we cannot avoid it”. Not, “whenever we just absolutely have to.” And certainly not, “whenever the minister harangues us about it to the point where I will do it just to shut him up!” But “*Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*”

Paul actually boasts about how well he and his team have put this into practise: 2 Corinthians 1:12 *Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with*

*integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace.*

The church in Corinth was in a bad way – Paul wrote to them twice with loads of instruction and help. They were doing some very ungodly things and Paul had to find a way to help them see that what they were doing was wrong, and help them change. Nobody responds that well to being told they're wrong yet Paul is able to say that especially in his relationships with the believers there he has acted with integrity and godly sincerity.

Because our topic for today is about being part of the church I immediately went to the part about those of the family of faith BUT that misses out on the most important part of the verse – let us work for the good of ALL. Paul says, “*we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you*”. We are expected to do good to all – our smelly colleague, our nosy neighbour, that family member we've never got on with, the stranger – we are expected to bless all those with whom we have contact *whenever we have the opportunity* – and somehow be extra careful to do it well with our Christian brothers and sisters. That could include the most simple thing: a smile, giving up a seat, a word of encouragement; it could include talking about Jesus with someone; it could mean making a real sacrifice to ‘do good’ for someone else.

It is also deeply significant that Paul reminds us that in order to do this – in order to be able to ‘do good to all’ we don't rely on our own competence, understanding or talent we rely on God's grace. We need to allow God's grace to work in us and through us.

You see we already have the ultimate example of someone working for the good of all – Jesus died so that whoever believes in him can have eternal life with God. Our third mention of the word especially appears in 1 Timothy 4:10 *That is why we labour and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, and especially of those who believe.*

There is something deeply significant about being part of the church – we are not just a club; we are not just a service organisation or charity; we are not here to solve today's problems and hope they don't reappear tomorrow. We are a fellowship – people in relationship with God and with each other and we are here to redeem lives; to proclaim the Good News, to prepare people for eternity – why? Because we have put our hope in the living God.

I want to encourage you to keep doing what you're doing. So many of you are doing this stuff and it is amazing to see. Because we have received grace we can respond with grace. Eternity is involved and the very best thing we can do for someone is introduce them to Jesus. When lives are a mess – there is Jesus. And as a family of faith we need to be aware that Jesus can save all people, but not all people are saved.

Therefore, it is vital that we live out the hope that we have because we know Jesus in a positive, encouraging and God-honouring way because, in doing so, we draw people to him.

We need to reach out to others by doing good – not to save the church, but to save souls. Not to build this institution, but to build the Kingdom. We are supposed to be a fellowship that seeks to save every special soul that comes our way because we have set our hope on God.

God understands this because he sent Jesus into the mess of the world. Jesus was criticised for spending time with messy people and so might we. There were those who thought that some people were too far gone to merit their attention or that they were too ‘dirty’. But it was to the addict and the prostitute, the homeless and the sick, the tax collectors and those only known as ‘sinners’ that Jesus went, as well as to fishermen, shepherds, doctors and lawyers and the religious. And so should we – messy though it might be - because our hope is in the living God.