

Sermon: importance of the community

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

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This week I came across a report by engineer Helmy Guirguis who studied the damage to the walls of our church in 1995. He wrote this - sorry for the technical language:

“ There are obvious abrasions and deterioration in the stone forming the bearing walls of the church.” This problem reached to a height of 90 cm from ground level.

Engineer Helmy wrote that these symptoms “are clearly related to the absorption of dampness from the ground up into the stone walls. He said, “The decay affects the outer face of the walls and it penetrates in some place to about 6 cms into the 40 cm thick walls.”

Because of rising ground water level, and because of the increasing saltiness of the ground water, the lower stones were first affected, but the salty water crept up in the the stones above, damaging more and more.

Worry not, the walls have been repaired in a professional way; a trench has been excavated all around the church, the stones have been cleaned and strengthened, you are safe.

The physical walls of a church can become weak; but the spiritual church, that is, the people of God, can also have stones that are compromised. And weak, compromised stones in the spiritual house of God also affect others and are a threat for the whole community.

1 Someone has hurt the christian community

In the seven verses that we have read from Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle speaks about the impact that we as individuals can have on the whole building of the house of God, on our community.

All we do in life influences other; no-one of us is an individual without many links to others. This is true for us as a church as well. We are a community, and it is possible by our words and actions to hurt the life of the community.

Paul writes about someone who has caused pain to himself and to the whole community. Some think this is the one mentioned in the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians. There in chapter five we read of someone who was judged by Paul for have a sexual relationship with the wife of his father.

It seems more logical to think that the person who caused pain for Paul and for the whole community was the leader of the critics of Paul - someone who offended the apostle personally. And this offense was probably the direct reason for Paul to write this letter of 2 Corinthians; In a few weeks time we will come across this issue again.

Anyhow, we do not know for sure what the problem was. What did that person do? What did he say? And maybe it is better that we do not know for sure. If we would know, for instance, that this was a thief, or an incestuous person, or a murderer, or a bad gossip, we could easily distance ourselves and think, 'thank God this is not about me.'

But we must all be careful. We can all become the person that Paul mentions, the one who causes pain to the whole congregation. By our words and our behavior we can all sin against our Christian community, hurt the fellowship and bring darkness into relationships.

We are all able to create great problems, and these problems have a tendency to grow. Like salt water crawling from one stone into another in our church building. You get different groups in church, different parties, people who are with this or that brother or who are against him.

This is a big problem; the church is the body of Christ on earth; it is the means through which God makes himself known; it is where God imparts his salvation to us; it is the place where God wants to heal us through his presence; and in order for the community of the church to be this safe place where people can meet with God, we have to live up to His standards - the church of God must be both one and holy.

If we, by our words or action endanger the holiness of the church, if we personally suck in the salty groundwater of darkness - we do something very damaging to the community. Instead of being a light on a hilltop, we become a stumbling block for people who need to find God.

So what you say and do is utterly important. Does your lifestyle make you into a strong building block for the church? Or someone with a slipstream of damage?

I know, every church has difficult people who put the community and its harmonious relationships under stress. Just make sure it is not you who by unholy behavior undermines the holiness and the unity of the church.

2 Satan wants to destroy the community

Paul mentions Satan in verse 11; Satan tries to outwit us; he has designs to hurt the community of the church, because that is exactly where he can hurt the work of God most. The apostle says that 'we are not ignorant of his designs'.

Sometimes you wonder how ignorant we are of those designs; with our modern worldview where many find it hard to even hold on to a view of God, satan has been pushed outside our frame of mind. Nowadays even for many Christians, he does not fit in the picture.

But this does not mean he is not there. We cannot deny that he plays an important role in the worldview of Jesus and of his apostles, and it is only at our own loss, if we deny him. It is at our loss, because denying him means that we lower our guard for spiritual forces that are out there to hurt us.

The word satan means adversary; he is called the 'accuser of the brothers' in the apostle John's book of Revelation. Our world is inhabited by spiritual forces with destructive plans. The misery in our world and in our lives, or in our minds, cannot be reduced to material or psychological causes only.

The English playwright William Shakespeare has Hamlet say to his unbelieving friend Horatio, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than dreamt in your philosophy." And that is true for many people today as well.

And because the church is central in the plans of God for this world, there are spiritual forces that will do all they can to damage the holiness and the unity of the church of God.

This is not a way to avoid personal responsibility for what we do. We are 100% responsible for our words and actions, for our thoughts and behavior. And because we know that satan is out there - or should we say, in here - to damage your relationship with God and the church of God, exactly that is why we must be so careful about what we do; what we say; how we behave.

We must not fear the devil; he is a chained dog and he and his spiritual forces can only do as much harm as we allow him to. We better keep out of his reach, for our own sake and for the sake of the community.

3 Community must forgive and love

So to come back to that man in Corinth, he damaged the holiness of the church by what he did - by whatever that was. He was wrong, he had been warned, he had been punished.

So, Paul says, now you must forgive the man. Paul uses three words: We must show forgiveness, comfort, and love. And, says Paul, 'we do this so that we are not outwitted by satan.'

You do not repair the wall of a church by knocking stones out, but by carefully repairing them, with the tender loving care of the stone mason.

Paul's motive in the exercise of discipline was not vengeance but correction; he did not aim to knock a man down, but to help him to get up. He judged the man, yes, but not by the standards of abstract justice, but of Christian love.

Correction is sometimes needed, but that should encourage and not discourage. This is true in how we raise our kids, but it is also true for how we deal with people who damage the life of the community they are part of. There are rules we all have to abide by, because community needs guidelines for behavior.

Obvious sin against God breaks the holiness and the unity of the church, but... But not showing love and forgiveness and comfort also has this same bad impact on the life of the community where Jesus Christ - who loves and forgives - should be given shape in his body.

We are all repentant sinners - we ask God for forgiveness for what we have done and for what we have not done all the time. Because we realize that God is holy and he wants his people to be holy.

A lack of forgiveness for others, a lack of love, not comforting others, is wrong, as it breaks the unity of the church. And it is also an expression of a lack of holiness because holiness is defined by tGod who is holy, and he loves, forgives, comforts.

Especially not accepting others as they are, to trying to push everyone into our own mold, that is very damaging. Love, forgiveness, accepting others as they are, that is the cement of the building of God.

Not loving people, making them feel unwelcome because they are different, thinking that we are better than others, that is most damaging to the body of Christ. It makes stones fall out of the walls of the building. It makes the building crumble.

So what Paul is saying here is that sinful behavior - like excessive criticism, or incestuous behavior, or stealing, damages the community life of the church - but a lack of forgiveness and a lack of love and a lack of comfort for such people, has exactly the same bad impact.

We must all live a life that honors God, and not allow sins to overtake us. And to think that we are better than others, that the others are sinners but I am not, is also hurtful for the body of Christ, for the community of the church.

Conclusion

What makes people live more for God? I think that the impact of love, forgiveness and comfort is much bigger, than critiquing others.

What builds up the church in unity and holiness? If we live for God, and love, forgive, and comfort.

God desires his church to be holy and united. This holiness cannot be enforced by pushing people out, and thereby breaking the unity of the church; and the unity cannot be maintained by denying the need for holiness.

So there will always be a tension in church between how to maintain holiness and unity. But what we can do is each, individually, to be committed to serving God. Worry not so much about the lifestyle of the other, but worry mainly about yourself.

Let's be focused on building this spiritual temple of God - the church. And let me therefore end with the exhortation of St Peter in his first letter:

St Peter writes in this regard,

Put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:1-5)

Peter says, 'as you come to him, you are being built up as a spiritual house.' That is a fantastic summary of what we need to do to be God's desired spiritual community. We have to come to him. Each individually, and also we as a community together. We must come to him.

Let us come to him in our time of holy communion, kneel together for him who loves us, comforts us, forgives us. And as we do so in unison, let us love, comfort, and forgive each other. Then our church will be a safe and secure building for all people.

Amen