

How Good It Is – Matthew 15:21-28, Genesis 45:14-15

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Since I left you on May 14, I was fortunate to travel to several destinations that resulted in fifteen thousand miles in my car (three oil changes) and five thousand miles through the air.

I made three trips to Iowa to visit my family (and thank you for your prayers and concern for them. We moved my dad into memory care to start with. He rapidly declined, however, and is now receiving palliative care in the local hospital there. My mom moved into an independent living facility in recent weeks and is doing well. My dad's sister died in late May as well; so I was fortunate to assist with her memorial service in Omaha in early June.)

There were also trips to Ohio, Virginia, Atlanta, and to Montreat with our church's youth. Plus, I spent two weeks travelling through parts of Europe last month with a couple of friends.

Despite all that travel, there was also time for reading, reflection, and rest. It was just a wonderful break and a true gift that you all were able to give me.

During these thirteen weeks I was away, then, I only went to church three times. I attended First Presbyterian in Lenoir City back in early June, First Presbyterian Church in Tuscaloosa two week ago (where my son, Jacob, worships), and then last Sunday at a megachurch in suburban Atlanta called North Point. It's not Presbyterian, but it was worship that was well-done and meaningful.

So, only three weeks out of thirteen that I worshiped on Sundays. Early on in the Sabbatical, I have to tell you, I didn't really miss it. My mind and spirit strangely were okay with that. But around the first of July, a yearning started to develop. And it wasn't a yearning, necessarily, to preach and lead worship. It was simply a yearning to be with my people—my community.

When you tour Europe, you really can't avoid seeing all these amazing cathedrals. They're everywhere. And they are stunningly beautiful.

For example, in Prague, in the Czech Republic, we visited the St. Vitus Cathedral, part of the Prague Castle complex built in the tenth century. The architecture, the intricacy of the furnishings and the frescos on the walls and ceiling are jaw-dropping. How such a structure was able to be constructed that long ago and remodeled throughout subsequent generations is mind-blowing.

Of course, the day we visited there was a long line to get in. The visitors come and look and then they go. For the most part, cathedrals throughout Europe are like this—museums that are homes to parades of tourists and really little else. They aren't homes to communities of believers any longer.

The Czech Republic, home to Prague and the St. Vitas Cathedral and many others, is the least-churched country in all of Europe and the third least-churched country in the developed world (that's according to Muhammed, the delightful young man who was our tour guide during our e-bike tour through the city). Such beautiful people there, such an energy and vibrancy in the city. And yet, communities of faith are almost non-existent.

It was during that tour and seeing that beautiful church and sensing God's hand having to have played a part in the building of it that I started longing again for my community, my church family.

For the rest of July and really into early August, the desire grew steadily within me to be back with my people. And not just in the context of Sunday morning worship. I missed the connection the rest of the week with all of you. It wasn't "illegal" to be in touch with you during those thirteen weeks or for you to be in touch with me. But, clearly, we respected each other enough to make this Sabbatical what it needed to be—a time away from each other, a disconnection so that rest and renewal could occur for me and for you as well.

And for me, holding firmly to that boundary was refreshing but also—as the summer wore on—revealing.

I am not the same person without you. And again, it doesn't have as much to do with my role as pastor as it does simply my identity as a human: I need to be with you. As a child of God, as a disciple of Jesus, as a sinner in need of redemption, as a broken vessel who needs others' help to put me back together, I need you.

We can find community in a host of formats and venues: friends groups, service organizations, parent groups of our kids' athletic teams, work colleagues, neighbors on our block or in our Cul de sac. I don't know though: I just think there's something different about faith communities. I can't pinpoint why other than to think that something called the Holy Spirit brings and keeps us together. It's the glue that allows us to find our place—especially when everything else at times seems chaotic and out of place.

And what's even more amazing is the fact that we find our community amid a sea of other people that are often different from us or with whom we have found disagreement.

In the most well-known story of a sibling pitfall, Joseph's brothers throw him into an actual pit in Genesis 37. The long and detailed story that follows is filled with repeated betrayals but also with loyalty, forgiveness, and redemption.

When Joseph eventually calls out to his brothers in Genesis 45, he uses the same Hebrew word for brother that Psalm 133 does. If there's any doubt that reconciliation is hard, complicated, and sometimes downright confusing while paradoxically also sweet and celebratory, there is no better story to illustrate it than this one.

Check out verses 14 and 15 of Genesis 45: "Then Joseph (the one whom his brothers had sold into slavery) fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that, his brothers talked with him."

Joseph finds reconciliation with his brothers. He finds community with them. How could it be? After all their hatred for him and their outward and severe attempts to do away with him as part of their jealousy, they come together because they needed to be together. They were family.

The Spirit of the Lord could only make that happen.

Not only do we find community with people we disagree with or hurt at times, we find community with others who come from places we haven't been or don't reside in.

In Matthew 15, Jesus is approached by a Canaanite woman seeking healing for her daughter, who was possessed by a demon. Now, Jesus reiterates that he had come only to redeem the lost sheep of Israel. Well, Canaanites weren't part of Israel. They were Gentiles, non-Jews, they were historically enemies of Israel.

And so, Jesus, cruelly, attempts to blow her off. "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," he says. However, the woman is persistent and wise: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table."

And with that, Jesus instantly finds community with her. He commends her for her faith and heals her daughter. Her belief in him, and his belief in her, brings them together. What or who else could bring people of such different ethnicities and nationalities together—ones who were at one time enemies? The Spirit of the Lord.

There's something about communities like ours that sustain us in ways that are different from the others we're part of—at least that's true for me and was confirmed for me during my time away from you. What bonds us is Jesus, although each of us might articulate that belief in different ways or with varying degrees of certainty.

Regardless, we're together. And whatever it is that brings us together has the power to help us look past that which would otherwise divides us—politics, income, family status, seasons of life. And it's awesome!

Today is a day to celebrate our community, our being together (first-service casual worshippers and second service traditional worshippers). And to celebrate the prospects we have for growing our community. There are so many good things happening at FPC, so many vehicles by which our connections with each other can grow and connections can be made with others who yearn for what I missed this summer.

To reiterate the words of Psalm 133 that Dr. Batey led us in a few minutes ago, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together

in unity!" Kindred can be estranged brothers who are reconciled to each other; kindred can be people of different countries who were once arch enemies rallying around a common belief in their God, kindred can be people today who would never go out to dinner with each other for whatever reason but enjoy sharing a meal because of their connection here, kindred can simply be humble people leaning on each other because they don't believe at whatever level they can live their faith alone.

Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber has this great definition of faith: "Faith is a team sport, not an individual competition, in that we hold the faith on each other's backs. So when I can't believe, someone else is believing for me, and vice versa. Sometimes we're the ones being lowered through the roof to Jesus, and sometimes we're the ones doing the lowering." That's faith in community.

How very good and pleasant that is!

It's very good to be among you again. Thanks for your support and for the warm welcome home.