

John 13.1-17

Creating Community

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 3 July 2022

Big Church Little Church (4)

Being Real

We join Jesus and his disciples in the upper room, hours before Jesus was arrested. It was the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, his last meal with his friends, the three-year discipleship programme over. This was the moment for them to demonstrate what they had been learning. Only a few days earlier Jesus had taught them,

'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

Mark 10.42-45 (NIV)

Now I don't know how you picture the Last Supper, but one thing it's hard for us to imagine is the smell. The roads and paths in first-century Jerusalem were covered in dust and animal droppings – and worse. There weren't any wellies back then, so hosts would provide a slave to remove their guests' sandals and wash the dust and excrement off their feet.

This was particularly important because they didn't sit at a table to eat, they reclined on the floor, leaning on an elbow – meaning their head would be right by someone else's feet.

For this meal, no slave was provided – so all the disciples had filed into the room, one-by-one, and taken their places to eat, ignoring the foot-washing because that was for slaves. **Before a word had even been spoken, the whole room was reeking of proud hearts and dirty feet.**¹

Thank goodness we don't need our feet washing when we come to church on a Sunday – but the pride is the same. **The veneer of hymns and 'How are you?' clichés** hides our proud hearts, the **tensions, conflicts, mistakes and misunderstandings that litter** all our lives.² Now in part that veneer is necessary – we come together to worship, not to have pitched battles and all-out rows.

But church also needs to be real – our relationships need to be so much more than polite smiles and small talk. They are complex – God knows that! – but we need to learn how to be honest, we need to grow relationships that are real and honest.

A wife called to her family – ‘dinner!’ As they emerged from their different rooms, the daughter heard her father grumbling to himself again about his wife’s ‘boring’ food.

They all sat down in the kitchen, and as usual the father closed his eyes and said grace, ‘Thank you Lord for this delicious meal prepared by my lovely wife. Amen.’ His daughter looked at him thoughtfully.

During the meal, she asked him, ‘Daddy, does God hear us when we pray?’ With his most pious face on, he replied, ‘Yes darling, he hears us *every* time we pray.’

A little while later she asked, ‘Daddy, does God *only* hear us when we pray?’

Swelling with pride that his prayerfulness had encouraged his daughter to think about spiritual matters, the father replied, ‘Actually darling, God hears us *all* the time.’

‘Then which does he believe?’ she said.

Healthy churches need healthy relationships which means being honest with each other.

And by that I *don't* mean being honest about how annoying you find this or that person. That's just having a go. I mean being honest about *ourselves*, being honest about things *we* struggle with instead of always sharing other people's problems for prayer. I mean being honest about *my* pain, sharing how a Bible verse has challenged *me* instead of using it to challenge others.

And that means we also need to listen, graciously and openly, not problem-solving but helping one another to discern where God is working in our lives, and what he might be wanting to do. True relationships mean *both* being honest about ourselves *and* being gracious when others are honest about *themselves*.

The New Testament has a number of verses to help with that, which are sometimes known as the 'one another' verses. ¶ Here are a number of them... but there are many, many more!

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we learned to live alongside one another as these verses describe? They teach covenant love not cupboard love,³ a commitment to one another that goes beyond emotion to our shared identity in Jesus.

Above all they teach us to follow Jesus' example when he washed his disciples' feet, taking the lowest possible position – serving one another and putting each other's needs before our own.

The best place to learn to live like this is in Little Church, is in smaller groups. There we can learn to be honest and open with one another, to build relationships that go so much deeper than the surface 'How are you? / Fine thanks' of Sunday mornings.

If you're in a small group you might like to look at these together.

I am under no illusions about how difficult this is. It means taking risks with ourselves, and it will mean getting hurt, because the people we open ourselves up to are bruised and broken by sin – exactly as we are. As Jesus showed us, to love is to be vulnerable.

Creating Communities

Now, this morning's sermon was supposed to be looking through these verses, it was supposed to be about helping us learn what it looks like to create a healthy church community – or fellowship, which is the word I prefer. It's important we do that, along the lines of these and the other 'one another' verses. Today's title – the fourth of the five Big Church Little Church values we are looking at – is 'Creating Community'.

But actually most of us spend most of our time *not* with our Christian sisters and brothers. Most of us spend much more time in non-Christian communities than we do at church or in church groups. What about *those*? Are these values only for use in Christian groups, or do they have relevance elsewhere too?

Actually, I think they do – these kingdom values, these are not God telling us random stuff to be and to do – they reflect God’s own character. And because humans are made in God’s image, they tell us what it means to be truly human, whoever we are.

Wouldn’t it be amazing if, as we grow in these values as a church fellowship, they started to spill over into the other communities we are all part of?

Yesterday a few of us heard Chris Wright speak about the Old Testament. He reminded us that when God gave his people the Law and called them to be different his motivation was mission:

Observe [these decrees and laws] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’

Deuteronomy 4.6 (NIV)

This was a key part of Jesus' teaching as well:

'You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5.14-16 (NIV)

Peter put it like this:

Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

1 Peter 2.12 (NIV)

People see our actions long before they hear our words. The mission of God's people begins with how we behave – so *when* we speak of Jesus (and we must, otherwise how will people hear about him?) – *when* we speak of Jesus people might actually listen, and perhaps realise *why* we are different.

When I left university I worked for a finance director, helping him rewrite all their accounts spreadsheets. It was actually quite an exciting year because together we standardised the entire company's accounts reporting system – this is actually the first church where I haven't needed to use the skills I learned doing that job!

Anyway... it wasn't my first job, but it was the first time I had worked in a 'proper' office. It only took a week before one of them asked me why I didn't swear. When they found out I was a Christian, at first it was like being back at school where I was bullied for my faith.

But as we got to know one another better, we had some good conversations. I tried to be salt and light: not super pious and holier-than-thou, nor hiding the lamp of my faith under a bowl and being no different.

Gossip was a huge problem – eventually over time we talked about how to decide what to say: is it true, is it kind, is it necessary – unless the answer is yes yes yes, don't say it.

I was only there a few months, but I hope I had a positive impact on that small community of six people in that office.

Being different is not easy, which is why so often we hide the lamp of our faith. I get it – I've done it! That was a good example from my life, but in another of my IT jobs, I'm not sure any of them knew I was a Christian, still less about to start training to be a vicar a few months later! In another job they did know, but I was so argumentative and grumpy I certainly wasn't the best advert for the kingdom of God.

But that is no excuse – we have to keep being salt and light.

That is why we need our Big and Little Church fellowships to be like this – to help and support one another, to encourage and challenge one another, to cheer one another on as we live as God's people in all the places that he's sending us: out in the world, in our daily lives.

There are many ways God's people can be light to the world and help create healthy communities. But these 'one another' verses suggest two common values that can make a big difference.

Kindness

First is kindness. There is a growing polarisation in the world at the moment, fuelled by politicians and social media. Simple kindness is hard to find.

From Brexit to Twitter, adversarial attitudes are spilling over into the way we interact with one another in everyday life. People go from fine to furious in the flick of a finger. The individualism and selfishness of society stop us seeing things from someone else's point of view, so we end up simply shouting our opinions at one another in louder and louder voices.

I refuse to believe people want the world to be full of shouting and anger – but we're trapped in a spiral of rage. Kindness can make such a difference, kindness can break that cycle.

In the groups you are part of, can you be kind when you disagree with someone? Can you encourage others to listen? Can you help others see things from someone else's point of view? Can you learn to see the good in people – and help others see it too? Can you put aside your assumptions and try to understand why others do things that seem so strange or annoying or wrong?⁴

Ephesians 4.32 reads, **be kind and compassionate to one another**. Paul's pun doesn't work in English – but in Greek 'kind' is *chrestos*, and in his next sentence Paul uses the word *Christos* – Christ.⁵ To be kind is to be like Jesus, to **live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us** (Ephesians 5.2).

Generosity

And that suggests the second value that can make a big difference: generosity. In part that means being generous with our money, but it's also more than that: it is about being big-hearted, open-hearted, giving ourselves to serve and support others.

This is particularly important right now. Lockdown isolated us from one another, and now it's hard, even exhausting, to break out of that pattern, that attitude of being closed to others. Add to that the weariness, the pain, the grief of all that we've lost. We feel like it's all we can do simply to keep going, let alone serve others. And so we withdraw into ourselves.

I wonder how Jesus managed to wash the mud and excrement off his disciples' feet that night. If it were me I'd have been exhausted and frustrated with them for not learning or listening. Even after he started, none of them volunteered to help.

But actually we do know how he managed it; John tells us:

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table...

John 13.3-4 (NIV)

Jesus knew who he was – he was confident in his identity. He didn't feel the need to prove himself, he simply *was* himself: the one who **did not come to be served, but to serve** (Mark 10.45). **Jesus was able to do what he did, because he knew who he was.**

Repeat

If you feel weary and worn out, spent and shattered, perhaps these words from Jeremiah might encourage you.

Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord,
whose confidence is in him.

They will be like a tree planted by the water
that sends out its roots by the stream.

It does not fear when heat comes;
its leaves are always green.

It has no worries in a year of drought
and never fails to bear fruit.

Jeremiah 17.8 (NIV)

The life we long for is there, the life we need to be able to serve is there – we need to send out our roots by the stream, to drink deeply from the living water that is found only in Jesus. In him alone is life that will never run out. In him alone we do not need to be afraid any more. In him alone we can have confidence.

Light

I long for us to grow as a fellowship of believers, to support one another in Big Church and in Little Church, as we go into the world to create and shape communities with kingdom values. We need help – which is why I invite us all to pray every day:

Come, Holy Spirit:
be poured out on us,
fill us,
and make us new,

God calls his people to be different, so the world might see and know who he is and what his best way of life looks like.

So let's be his light in the darkness around.

Let's create communities of kindness and generosity.

And let's be ready to talk about Jesus and the way that leads to life.

¹ For this section and final quotation see Phil Potter, *The Challenge of Cell Church*, 77.

² Potter, 78.

³ Potter, 82.

⁴ Potter, 85-86.

⁵ Potter, 85.