

A View From the Pulpit
A Sermon for Pilgrim Church
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Deuteronomy 8:7-16

8:7 For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills,

8:8 a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey,

8:9 a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper.

8:10 You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you.

8:11 Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today.

8:12 When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them,

8:13 and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied,

8:14 then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,

8:15 who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock,

8:16 and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good.

A second reading.

1 Thessalonians 3:9-12

⁹How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? ¹⁰Night

and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹²And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

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I have the best view on earth. And I don't mean the view of the trees I can see from the pulpit. And I don't even mean your beautiful faces by candlelight on Christmas Eve. I have the best view on earth of love. It's something hard to photograph, so let me try to describe this view.

I see people who abound in love. I see a community that abounds in love.

There are guys who have started to gather once a month over coffee and cookies, and I can't hear what they are saying but when I peek into the sunroom, I can see love.

There are ten people around a lunch table, eating sandwiches, celebrating the artwork of one of our members, enjoying each other's company. Watercolor can't capture love precisely, but I can see it in this circle.

There are six windows on Zoom every Tuesday morning, when we are supposed to be studying the Bible, but you know we are studying love.

There is a card next to her bedside table and she asks me to read it to her, and I can see that the words on the page are love, love, love, love, love.

There are the folks talking at coffee hour for more than an hour. You know that it's love, not half and half, that keeps them there.

There are meals cooked, rides given, texts sent, jokes laughed at. There are dinner invitations. There are folks who notice when someone's missing. There are teachers who teach with love, and there's a choir whose notes sound not like performance but like love.

There is the new Pilgrim who says, this is the friendliest church...

Love.

I have the best view of love, on earth.

—

This is church, right? This is what good church is. Good church is a community of love.

Now, there's no guarantee that every Sunday we will experience this kind of church community. There are some days when it happens and some days when we leave the sanctuary still lonely, still tense, still tired. But on good church days, we are part of this extraordinary, interdependent, beautiful community. Jim Davis and Michael Graham write, "Church is not an event, it is a family. It's not a perfect family, but it is a real spiritual family. We are in some mysterious way, all grafted together into Jesus' body....We are a part of who Jesus is, which makes genuine Christian belonging something we cannot find outside of the church."¹

It turns out, Davis and Graham go on to say, that folks who don't have this kind of religious community are worse off. "...the dechurched indicate higher levels of anxiety, depression and loneliness than those who immerse themselves in their faith community...In the local church...we are blessed by having to know and love people who are not like us - people who, outside of church, would not be in our lives."²

¹ The Great DeChurching: Who's Leaving, Why are they going, and What will it take to bring them back?
By Jim Davis and Michael Graham. Pps 126-126.

² *ibid.*

So, I'm just saying, church is literally good for your health.

But, to have this kind of community - and we all know this, I'm just speaking common sense - to have this kind of community - a choir to sing in, a men's circle, Bible Study, folks who weep when you are weeping, and when you laugh they laugh with you³ - it takes intention. It takes commitment. It requires showing up and giving of yourself.

We don't walk in the door the first time and have instant community - we help to build the community over time, through our kindness, our presence, accepting invitations and making them.

Church community depends also, may I say, on forbearance. Looking upon the person next to you in coffee hour, Bible Study, Choir, with compassion. Who knows what they're going through - but you both showed up to church, which probably means you need each other. Remembering compassion and forbearance are the way of Jesus - and everyone of us has had a moment we've gotten on someone else's nerves.

The letters we have of Paul to early congregations tell us that in the first years of Christianity, churches sometimes

³ "Won't You Let Me Be Your Servant?" Richard Gillard; from Romans 12

had a challenge living up to Jesus' way of community. More than once, Paul issued a challenge like this one: “⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” We are members, one of another. (Romans 12)

It's also true that sometimes we have to ask our church to be church for us. Church is spiritual but not psychic. It is good and holy to say, I need my church right now. Here's what's going on.

Paul, in his letter to the folks at Thessalonica, gave thanks to God for the people of that church. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? And then he told them he prayed to see them face to face. That leads me to one more point. I have wondered, since the start of CoVid, if our close knit relationships - in every setting, not just church - might be made more fragile by distance. Cards, phone calls, letters are wonderful. Zooming together is wonderful. But I'm glad we're increasingly returning to face to face.

This is the challenge: show up. In person. For our folks who live far away - we're thrilled you're here on Zoom, and

I hope you are working on your local and in-person relationships, because we all need them.

We perhaps leaned away from deep chosen community and interdependence and love during CoVid. So let's lean back in. Because we need each other. This is bumper sticker wisdom, but nonetheless true: "Let's pour our hearts into things that make each other feel less alone." We are members, one of each other.

And when it's easy - when the music is wonderful and the coffee is tasty and the company is a blessing - we save up for the hard days. So that, when relationships are tested, when heaviness and heartache threaten to take over, we can travel back to the foundation of love.

Folks, in a season of gratitude, I am grateful for my view from the pulpit: grateful for the love I see in this community.

May we abound in love for one another and for all.

Amen.

Benediction

¹²And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

