

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:6-11      Text: Romans 12:10,13

Message: A Ministry of Sharing

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At different times over the past year, people have shared stories about how God is at work in this church and in their lives as part of this church. Inherent in those stories were values that are important to us as a church. The four values that came out most often were caring, welcoming, sharing and trusting.

If you take a close look at those values you might notice how they speak of relationship. Caring, welcoming, sharing, trusting are things that we do together.

In teaching with churches in general about their life and future, there are 4 key areas that are identified: Vision, Relationships, Programs and Management. New churches tend to place the emphasis on Vision and Relationship. Churches that have been around for quite a while may have developed numerous programs and have efficient management. While vision and relationships may have played an important role in the past, they become less important or visible when the focus is on programs and management. That shift leads to a concern for the health and future of the church when there is a decreased experience of relationships and a loss of direction. All of this is part of the teaching that every church has a certain life-cycle.

And so it's encouraging to see that the values that are important in the life of this church emphasize the experience of relationships. It's an expression of renewed life in our church. This morning, we look at the particular value of sharing in the context of Romans 12.

Romans 12 is a chapter about living in community. The words of this chapter are addressed first of all to the family of believers, those who share a common faith in Jesus Christ (see v.1). This chapter is filled with instruction and advice on how believers respect and encourage each other in response to God's mercy, using their gifts to build each other up, and living in relationship.

The chapter begins with the reminder that our first emphasis in sharing is to share our praise to God. Jesus summarized the law by saying that the first commandment is to love God with all that we are. Our focus as a church is first of all on God, on who he is in all his greatness, on what he has done for us.

The apostle Paul starts this chapter: "Therefore, in view of God's mercy..." Knowing God and his mercy, worshiping a merciful God, inspires our lives of faithful obedience. We

could say that we experience our values first as an expression of our relationship with God. God cares for us, welcomes us into his family, shares abundant blessings with us, and trusts us to continue his work in this world.

From this relationship with God comes the relationships we have with one another. Jesus' second commandment is to love our neighbour as ourselves. This is expressed in our values, including our value of sharing.

Sharing is more than doing something nice to make each other feel good. It's an investment in someone else's life.

In the verses of our text we hear the repetition of "one another," along with the words "devoted" and "honour." To be devoted to another person is to desire the welfare of that other person. To be devoted is to be committed to seeing good things happen in the life of another person. We give our attention and time and our self for the benefit of the other person. We do whatever we can for the benefit of another. This devotion is based on love and care and concern for one another.

It is expressed in an attitude of humility. Honour one another above yourselves. See the other person as most important. See their needs as more important than your own needs. Let your devotion be expressed in such a way that you look out for someone else before yourself.

This does not mean that we become a doormat or a passive sufferer or a slave with no consideration to our own welfare. These words are expressed to each other. As everyone honours each other, the others are held in honour. As each of us see the other as more important, each is held in importance.

The verse continues, "Share with the Lord's people who are in need." It's possible to read this verse to say that we only share with people who are in the church. The "Lord's people" refers to church people. That is one part of the meaning.

We share with one another, helping each other in times of need. That is experienced in many ways, like providing rides or bringing meals, providing childcare or praying for each other, to mention a few of the stories identifying this value.

But we do not limit our sharing to only our own church family. The Lord's people are also outside of this particular church. The Lord's people live on the streets and go to the Food Bank. The Lord's people live in the houses on our street. The Lord's people attend other

churches, and some don't attend any church. They are people who have needs. And God has blessed us to share with them in their time of need. As we get to know them, we also know their need.

Sharing includes the practice of hospitality. We show hospitality when we welcome the stranger, who might be a refugee from a foreign country. They experience the love and security and blessing that is shared by God's people. We practice hospitality when we invite someone to dinner or for games. We practice hospitality when we serve coffee or tea after Sunday morning worship and when we offer to do the dishes.

Hospitality is an expression of welcoming someone into our space. Max Lucado, in his book *Outlive Your Life*, speaks of hospitality in this way: "Something holy happens around a dinner table that will never happen in a sanctuary. In a church auditorium you see the backs of heads. Around the table you see the expressions on faces. In the auditorium one person speaks; around the table everyone has a voice. Church services are on the clock. Around the table there is time to talk.

"Hospitality opens the door to uncommon community. It's no accident that hospitality and hospital come from the same Latin word, for they both lead to the same result: healing. When you open your door to someone, you are sending this message: "You matter to me and to God." You may think you are saying, "Come over for a visit." But what your guest hears is, "I'm worth the effort."

Meliksah Demir, a professor at Northern Arizona University, did a study to identify what it is about friendship that warms our hearts. It turns out that companionship, the idea of simply doing things together, is the component of friendship that most makes us happy. When we do things together we give the message that the other person is important.

It's an obvious truth that we need to repeat. When we do things together we give the message that the other person is important. You might have participated in the Bell "Let's Talk" campaign this past week. Let's talk...about mental illness. Let's talk, to let someone else know that they are important. Let's talk, to share our time and space with another person and talk...and listen. Let's talk is not just once a year with texting or a message on Facebook. Let's share our personal space with someone; they are important.

It's the value of sharing, to express to someone else that they matter and there is someone available to them for support, care, blessing, walking alongside. Be devoted to one another. Honour one another. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice

hospitality.

Think about the purpose of sharing and hospitality as fellowship and companionship, not entertainment. When you act on the opportunity to share with someone and practice hospitality, you might spare them from another humiliating fall into internet pornography because they don't spend the time alone, but instead are going for a walk with you or chatting over a cup of tea.

When you share your time and space with someone, you might be helping them through the fear and darkness of depression and loneliness. Through your sharing of yourself, that person knows they are not alone, but instead safely in community, where they are respected and honoured for who they are, not who they have to be or become.

While our text about sharing is from Romans 12, I have also chosen to read from 2 Corinthians 9 this morning. It's important to be reminded that we are not to be stingy in our sharing. "God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways so that you're ready for anything and everything...He gives you something you can then give away...so that you can be generous in every way, producing great praise to God."

The value of sharing refers to our time, our talents, and our treasures. We give of ourselves, our time and abilities and money, generously, cheerfully, knowing that it is the blessing of God that we are sharing. We can know and believe that God has blessed us generously, and will continue to be generous, that we may generously share with others.

Eugene Peterson, whom many people know as the person behind *The Message*, writes in one of his books: "Being a church member or follower of Jesus is a vocation, a way of life. It means participation in an intricate web of hospitality, living at the intersection of human need and God's grace, inhabiting a community where men and women who don't fit are welcomed, where neglected children are noticed, where the stories of Jesus are told, and people who have no stories find that they do have stories, stories that are part of the Jesus story. We are placed strategically yet unobtrusively at a heavily trafficked intersection between heaven and earth."

In that intersection between heaven and earth, or, as the apostle Paul says, "In view of God's mercy...be devoted to one another. Honour one another. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality."

What a gift to have this relationship with God, that we can share generously with others.

Amen.