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## *Committed to Community*

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*Ephesians 1:1-16*

“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus,” says the writer of a letter to the church in Ephesus 2,000 years ago, “And your love toward all the *saints*, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.” (Ephesians 1:15-16)

We celebrated All Saints Sunday only two weeks ago and here we are back in another biblical epistle from the first century that speaks of them. Saints are everywhere in the early church community. They were not considered especially pure or morally perfect people; they were people simply trying their best to be faithful. They dedicated themselves to the service of God and others. They loved God. They loved neighbor. They were committed to the community called *church*.

In an urban congregation I previously served there was a woman named Emma. She had served for many years as an elder on the church session and as a trustee on the church board, but as she grew older she let go of the sort of leadership that came with

church office. She wanted merely to be as fully engaged as possible in everything the church did without the responsibility of governance or finance or decisions about this or that.

Sometimes I wonder how I would have engaged in the church had I not been ordained as a minister. Honestly, I've thought about how liberating it would be simply to dedicate myself to being an active member, serving God and others and showing the love of Jesus without some of the complications that come with being involved in a more formal leadership role.

Emma was like that, freed from official responsibilities. She simply wanted to do church very well and all the time. She was there every Sunday. She attended every potluck, and participated in every class and program, every retreat and church event. Whenever the church gathered, Emma was there. These were her people. She belonged to them and they belonged to her. She went to most memorial services whether or not she knew the person who had died. It was the church at worship, giving thanks for one of the saints, and she felt drawn to be there.

I remember one time proposing in a sermon that everyone in the church try to respond in some fashion to those living on the streets in the neighborhood. I have told this story before because I think it's so powerful a witness. *I* thought I was suggesting to offer them a greeting and get to know them as fellow human beings. *Emma* took it several steps further. Each day before she left her apartment she would carefully make a few sandwiches, put them in little bags, and place them in her purse. Then out she

would go, tottering down the street, hoping to run into someone who might be hungry. She never returned home until she had given away all her sandwiches – to people she got to know in the course of sharing a little love.

*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and your love toward all the saints. The letter could have been written to Emma. I do not cease to give thanks for you.*

We used to call them “church ladies,” or “pillars of the church.” Those clumsy, now anachronistic phrases were trying to express admiration for the commitment of people to the life of the church, to its worship and ministries, its care of those who are sick and lonely, to its steadfast support of the stewardship of the earth, to its support of justice and concern for those caught in systems of racism or privilege or poverty.

Maybe you know someone like that today. Westminster is full of them. We see that every fall when we invite people to make a financial commitment to the church for the coming year. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there is your heart also” – meaning that our deepest commitments are naturally where we invest our time and resources and energy. That’s why we never try to protect people from their own generosity: *we don’t want to keep them from pursuing their heart’s desire.* We give because we get it about the purpose of church: to love God and love God’s people, to serve God and serve God’s people.

Some may recall that Associate Pastor Emeritus Doug Mitchell used that as his Charge every time he preached: *To love God and love God's people, to serve God and serve God's people*. A faithful response to all that life throws at us – a raging pandemic, persistent racial injustice, brokenness in the human family, our own personal griefs and sorrow and challenges – our response to all of that starts there, with a willingness to begin again to try to love one another. That's how we build *beloved community*.

The ancient church got off the ground in the years after the life of Jesus because of all those first century Emmas, faithful servants who took to heart the mission of following Jesus. Over the centuries and around the globe faithful people have always followed Jesus, united by the Spirit in the mystery that is the Church, the body of Christ.

If nothing else, we Christians are *committed to community*. It's who we are, and what we do.

Those of us involved in the Cuba ministry at Westminster were invited a couple months ago to join a new conversation group set up for members of our partner congregation in the city of Matanzas. There on the island they cannot use Internet and email to keep in touch, so they have begun using the What's App communication tool on their cell phones. They stay connected - sending 40-50 What's App messages every day that we can see, as well. They're deeply committed to one another, like a family. They greet each other with a psalm in the morning and offer prayers for a good night's rest at the end of the day.

We, here in Minneapolis, watch our Cuban siblings do church: they pray for one another, send devotions and scripture verses, offer rides to one another, plan careful visits when needed, share news of those who are ill – all on WhatsApp, so we can see their communication, as well. Yesterday we learned of a church member with Covid who is isolating at home. The immediate call from the church was to pray without ceasing. This morning we learned of the death of a church member, and the loving support of the congregation, and from Minneapolis, is surrounding that family.

*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and your love toward all the saints – the letter to Ephesians could have been written to our Cuban friends. I do not cease to give thanks for you.*

Churches are unique in that they seek to form community among people who otherwise would not ever associate with one another, whether long ago in Ephesus, or today in Matanzas or here in the Twin Cities.

That's the beauty of being part of a church – you align yourself with people with whom you often have little in common, other than shared faith and commitment to following Jesus. The social worker and the CEO sit in the same pew – or watch the same livestream. The lawyer and the artist volunteer in the same mission project. The teacher's aide and the MD serve on the same task force.

To be committed to community does not mean we give up our individual identities or let go of our personal perspectives. Josiah Royce, the 19<sup>th</sup> century American philosopher, said that, on the contrary, genuine beloved community allows and expects individuals to remain individuals. There's no blurring of personalities, no forced shedding of one's own perspectives. But when individuals form a beloved community they enter into what Royce called "a kind of second-order life that extends beyond any of their individual lives."

(<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/royce/>)

That's what was happening in Ephesus long ago, and it has happened wherever the church has been alive and thriving and serving. That *second-order life* is what holds us together in community – especially *beloved* community – even when we are tempted to break apart.

Thirty years ago, when the national denomination was struggling over – and splitting over – whether to permit LGBTQ members to serve as elected officers of the church, local congregations were splitting. When the church I served back then chose to allow anyone, including its LGBTQ members, to serve as leaders, Emma was upset. She did not agree with the decision, but these were her people and this was her church and she was committed to it. She put her views into a kind of emotional escrow, and chose to live with the church, as best she could, into the future it felt called to pursue. She decided to try out the idea that God might call gay members to lead the church.

Eventually, over time, Emma's view changed, and she became a fierce champion of inclusivity.

*Committed to community.* Where else are we engaged with strangers, who become sisters and brothers, siblings, close neighbors, members of the same family?

"In Christ we have...obtained an inheritance," the writer to the Ephesians says, reminding the *saints* in that city that they had been given something unique, something beautiful, a gift that called them to live for a purpose, a purpose they had inherited. The gospel is that purpose, and the gospel compelled them to create communities to witness to the love and justice of Jesus.

That is no less true 2000 years later in the heart of Minneapolis, in this community called Westminster. We may not get some things right. We may not agree on everything and we might shy away from that which makes us uncomfortable. We may not all want to go in the same direction all the time. *But this is a beloved community*, and we have been given this beautiful gift of faith in one who will not fail us. We who follow Jesus have received an inheritance from those who went before.

"This," the letter writer says, to the Ephesians, and to us, "This is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of God's glory." (Ephesians 1:13-14)

And this is *our* pledge, yours and mine, as God's own people – to worship and serve the Lord by loving others and pursuing justice. In so doing we offer an *inheritance of hope* not only to those who come after us, but, most importantly – especially in these difficult days – an d inheritance of hope to the world around us.

Where is the world going to see strangers who love one another, if not in communities like this one? Where is the world going to discover a people bent on joining others to work for the full humanity of every person, if not in communities like this one? Where is the world going to find people willing to talk about hard subjects and listen to those with whom they disagree and whose life experience has been so different from their own, and be open to being changed, if not in communities like this one?

This is the work of the church. This is *our* work, the work of those who follow Jesus Christ.

Every year in the stewardship program in our former church, Emma would make her pledge to the ministry and mission of the congregation. It wasn't much, but that didn't matter. She gave what she could, year after year. Toward the end of her life she could no longer come to church, so church went to her, as members visited and prayed with her. And when she died we learned she had left a gift to the church in her will.

Emma was committed to community, in life and in death. She was being the church, as are we, you and I, on this stewardship Sunday.

That long-ago letter could have been written to us, to  
Westminster:

*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and your love toward all the  
saints and I do not cease giving thanks for you.*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.