

January 2, 2022
Pastor Ken Hepner

“Community at Cedar Grove: Belonging to Each Other”

2. “Soft and Teachable Hearts!”
Acts 2:42, 46, and Romans 12:10 – 18

Introduction:

This morning as we come together around God’s Word, we are taking a second look at something that is really important to the internal health of our church family here at Cedar Grove: Our Community Life. The truth is that the Lord wired each one of us with the desire for **Relationships** with **Each Other**. It is also true that in a church of this size we are not going to get to know one another in meaningful ways if we only ever see each other for an hour and a half on Sunday morning in worship.

Church health experts tell us that there are three fundamental needs that every believer in Jesus Christ has within them: Worship, Fellowship, and Relationship. Churches that address those needs by creating ways for the members to relate to Jesus and others are healthy. Those who do not create ways for those needs to be met are generally walking through a slow process of death of the church. They are usually diminishing in size and growing older in median age each year.

The equation goes like this: Celebration + Congregation + Cell = **Healthy Church** body. The words should be easy enough to fit into Cedar Grove Church family ears but we will state the obvious.

- Celebration is the worship gathering of the church that can number in the thousands and still be deeply meaningful and personal. Celebration is joyous and festive. It is praise and worship, prayer, giving, and hearing God’s Word through preaching.
- Congregation is a grouping of more than 15 and can number up to 75 people, a place where you relate as a small church would relate. It is a place where God’s Word is taught, caring for one another, taking meals to the sick in your group, and you are missed when you aren’t there. At Cedar Grove Congregation takes place in Sunday School Classes!
- Cell is a gathering of less than 15 people that is much more intimate, where you can really get to know one another well. It generally takes place in a home and has components of relating, studying, praying, and fellowshiping. At Cedar Grove Cell takes place in our Home Groups that are being formed.

That we are the church of the Lord Jesus here in Mifflintown, PA presupposes a couple of important truths. **First**, we belong to the Lord Jesus because He purchased our salvation by shedding His blood for us. We are His body over which He is the Head. We are each called to be a part of His **Physical Presence** here in our hometown.

Romans 12:4 *“Just as each of us has one body with many member, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”*

Second, as a part of His body we are each given spiritual gifts, supernatural enabling that He gives to His people as He determines. He gives some of us gifts of preaching, leading, teaching, serving, mercy, helps, and giving. Gifts of the Holy Spirit enable all of us to do works of **Ministry** together. Ephesians 4:16 *“From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”*

The bottom line in these two messages is this. As our community looks on and watches our church, they are looking to see how well we get along with each other. Our ministry, which He has given us to do with Him, will only be **Anointed** by His favor and approval and **Successful** in building up the body to the extent that our relationships with one another are healthy and vibrant!

We are called to be sowing deep relational love with each other. God wired us with the need for relationships that are authentic and open. The Bible tells us that we are to do some things that enable us to engage in deeply meaningful relationships. There are imperatives regarding how we are asked to relate: Loving, forgiving, encouraging, praying for, caring about, and teaching one another are to be flowing spontaneously in our church family.

So we are seeking to find ways to actively communicate to every person that attends Cedar Grove Church that we believe choosing to **Relate** to other **Believers** is vital to our personal health as His follower and to our church as a whole. So we believe choosing to get involved in a Sunday School Class and a Home Group will put each of us in a place to engage in meaningful relationships with other Christians.

I. Three Vital Signs of Relational Health in Acts 2:

Acts 2:42 and 46 *“They devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.....Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”*

I want to point out to us in this text is that the followers of Jesus were just starting out in the faith. They met the Lord Jesus powerfully and personally just days earlier, but there were clear signs in their lives that they really had been made alive in heart and soul by the Spirit of the Lord Jesus. **The first vital sign of internal health** is that they had **Hungry Hearts**. They gathered in the temple courts daily and were devoted to living out the message that was shared by the apostles of Jesus.

The clear and unmistakable sign, that God the Holy Spirit was doing a powerful work in their hearts, was their hunger to both **Know** and **Live Out** the Word of God. They just couldn't get the truth fast enough to satisfy their inner hunger. They attended the public teaching sessions called by the Apostles, fellowship sessions, daily prayer gatherings in the temple courts, and talked about the things of God to each other in their homes. They were soft and teachable in spirit because the Lord Spirit was changing them.

When God the Holy Spirit is doing a work in our hearts, we have a deep hunger and thirst to know Him more intimately than we presently do. It's as though the Word of God is on fire in our hearts. It makes so much sense, whereas before it was just words on paper. The Lord will never

turn a hungry and thirsty heart away from Him with the needs unmet. He promised us *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied."*

The same is still true today. As the Holy Spirit does His work in our hearts and lives, He creates a **Passionate** longing for more knowledge of the Lord Himself. As He ministers to us He draws us away from the garbage of this world, the desires of the flesh and the lusts of the eyes. He draws us to new passions and desires to know, love, and adore the Lord Jesus!

Acts 2:43, 46a, 47 *"Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles... Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts... praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."*

The second vital sign of internal health that we see in these believers' lives was that they just had a blast worshiping the Lord. The presence of the Spirit in them gave them **Worshipful Hearts!** To gather together and glorify the Lord in song, in testimony, in prayer and to hear the Word of the Lord taught was a high point in their lives. They could hardly wait to get together next Lord's day to see what the Lord was going to do among them.

They had hearts filled with rejoicing, glad and festive celebration because of who Jesus is and what He had done for them. They gathered together in the Name of Jesus to praise the Lord together, to worship and exalt His holy Name, and they prayed for the manifest presence and power of the Spirit of Jesus to be made known among them! They sought to create an atmosphere of faith that He was free to work in when they gathered together!

The same atmosphere should be our goal today as His people gather together to worship Him. We should be tremendously hungry for His manifest presence. We should come together with extreme joy and celebrate Him as our Victorious Warrior Lamb. We should desire to create an atmosphere He is pleased to step into and do awesome things for His glory.

Acts 2:46 *"Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts."*

The third vital sign of internal health in the Church at Jerusalem in the first century is pointed out by Luke in this paragraph: When they gathered together, the followers of Jesus became **Soft, Open, and Teachable** with each other. They met together in homes, probably just a few families together, broke bread, ate together and shared their lives with each other.

From what we know about the size of the homes in Jerusalem, and the size of the average Jewish family in those days they maybe could squeeze 4 or 5 families together and put the kids in front of the DVD Player to view Veggie Tales. The really neat thing though was that they were a part of a bulging church.

They met together to share with and shepherd each other to walk with the Lord. There was absolutely no way the twelve Apostles could make their way around to all those homes. So they met together to encourage one another on in their new relationship with Jesus.

Their hearts were softened by the Holy Spirit, in that He made them soft in heart toward God's Word and His **Transforming Works** within their hearts and souls. The Spirit of God had Luke use two words in the Greek text that have pinpoint accuracy in what they communicate to us:

The word *agalisai* is translated "glad hearts" in the NIV. The word means celebrant, joyous, extreme jubilation, to rejoice exceedingly, to exult loudly. They had a joy and gladness in their hearts, some folks might consider radical because of what Jesus had done in them.

The word *apheloteti* is translated "sincere hearts" in the NIV. The word means simple, sincere, from the root word of a stony field. The word picture is of a heart without stones, the hardness has been removed. They had experienced the Spirit of God walking with them in the garden of their hearts and pointing out stones He saw that they might permit Him to remove them from their lives.

These two things are the desperate need of the people of God today. We definitely have something to learn about offering God sacrifices of praise and adoration with extreme joy and loud celebration. And we all need the Holy Spirit to show us stony spots in our hearts, things we might know are there but have no clue how they got there. The Lord wants to walk with us and show us things that we need His power to remove from us. Would to God that we'd be a church full of people with extreme jubilant and soft and tender hearts for God.

The Lord God desires to create hungry, worshipful, and sincere hearts today. In order to fan those things into flame we need to engage in meaningful relationships with other people in the body of Christ. Those relationships are built best when we get in each other's homes to talk about how we can encourage one another to walk with the Lord. I desperately need a place of safety and openness in which I can be honest with a few people and they can be honest with me. Then together we walk into the Throne of Grace and pray for each other.

II. The Focus of Their Gatherings:

Acts 2:42, 44, and 46 *"They devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." "And all who believed were together and had everything in common." "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts."*

The best way that I can describe what is portrayed here in the Bible is with the word **Community**. It is a modernization of the words **Fellowship** of **Believers**. The Greek word that the New Testament writers used to describe what was going on is the word *koinonia*. It is a word that describes deep intimate knowing. It is the Greek word from which we take our word for what happens between a husband and a wife who love each other deeply, describing an intertwining of their two lives into one new married life together.

When the church met together in these meetings it was a place for them to get deeper than the surfacy interactions at worship gatherings. That is what we are trying to get accomplished in our smaller group lives here at Cedar Grove Church. We are trying to create three key things:

A **Place to Belong** – It is so important to us as staff, church board, and deacons that everyone who calls Cedar Grove Church their church home is given the opportunity to enter into deep and meaningful relationships that are based in the love of Jesus. Belonging means people who come here feel that they are known and they are missed if they aren't in attendance that week. It means a safe place with people who love me in which I may explore what it means to be the son of God in Christ Jesus. It means I have a place of unconditional acceptance in which I won't be judged or put down if I don't have all of the answers exactly right.

A **Place to Grow** – It is equally important to us as leaders in the church here that all of us have found a space for us to grow in our spiritual life with Jesus. So, for us the most important spiritual component of Sunday School and Home Groups is that the Word of God is opened up together, studied, and its meaning made clear. Opening up God's Word together is a part of what it means to be Brethren in Christ. We have been a community that longs to know and live out the Word of God since 1780! We long for each person to have the opportunity to grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ as Savior.

A **Place to Love** – It is so important to us as leaders in the church at Cedar Grove that all of us are relating to others in love. The truth is that the demonstration of what it means to live a Christian life is love for others. Jesus made this exceedingly clear when He taught His disciples. John 13:34, 35 *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

John 15:12 – 14 *“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. If you do what I command.”*

Jesus says we are to love one another with Holy and Divine love that we do not naturally possess! Human love that we have for one another, which naturally lives in us, is subject to the moods and dispositions of the hearer, to coldness, suspicion of others, and to being withheld from others through hurt or envy. What Jesus says here is “agape one another” – love one another with a divine, holy, self-sacrificial, self-giving, self-emptying love, and keep on doing it constantly!

Paul writes in Romans 5:5. *“and this hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.”* This holy love comes to us and lives in us solely **by the Gift of His Grace**. Only when we are born into the family of God by saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ do we receive this agape love into our hearts. Only when our sins have been dealt with and our guilt cleansed and pardoned do we receive this holy love.

This divine and holy love is brought to us by the person of God's Holy Spirit who lives within us and imparts this new nature of God into us when we invite Him to come in. **Only God loves with agape love, so it follows that if we're to love with agape, God must live in us.** That is exactly what Scripture teaches us and what happens to us when we invite Jesus Christ to cleanse and save us and His Spirit comes to live in us. Agape is the fruit of the Spirit's presence in our lives; we need Him to produce it! Galatians 5:23 *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, agape.”*

III. Characterized by His Love:

Romans 12:10 – 18 *“Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ... Be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. ... If possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”*

In this amazing paragraph of Scripture Paul states the agape of God, holy, self-emptying, other-oriented love of Heaven has taken up residence in the hearts of the people of God who are in Christ Jesus. Paul brings out practical applications of how the holy love of Heaven is to be lived out in our relationships with one another at Cedar Grove Church. The list of practical ways to look for the love of Heaven in each other’s lives is absolutely wonderful!

Paul says we are to have brotherly and sisterly affection for each other, like family. He says we are to outdo one another in showing honor to each other. He says loving communities are characterized by praying earnestly for each other, rejoicing with those who are joyful and weeping with those whose hearts are broken. Brotherly and sisterly love seeks what is best and promotes God’s peace in each other’s lives!

This holy love for one another is a vital tie that characterizes people who are a part of God’s family, members of the body of Christ. Even with cultural and ethnic differences, our backgrounds being vastly different, having different tastes, habits, likes and dislikes, Christians are joined together by a love in Christ that is stronger than all of the forces of the enemy arrayed to disunite. This holy love must be cultivated that it may grow and bloom; that is our part. He gives it – we cultivate it!

Oswald Chambers wrote a great quote: “When the Holy Spirit has shed abroad the love of God into our hearts, then that love required our cultivation. No love on earth will develop without being cultivated. We have to go on dedicating ourselves to love, which means identifying ourselves with God’s interests in other people, and God is interested in some funny people – like you and me.”

What was He saying? God is definitely the source of agape and we are totally dependent upon Him to have His love in us. But once we’ve received His love, we are responsible to become conduits of His loves, His desires, and his passions to the lives of others. **We reveal the power of God’s love by the quality of our loving**, which we **Cultivate** and **Share**. If we do not reveal this love to them, then we do not really love God. **If it’s really in there it will get out!!**

Our love for others is in direct correlation to God’s love being poured into our hearts and our loving God so much that we cultivate His love with us. We will search for ways to reveal His love to others and so reveal Him! His agenda with this holy love is the most important thing in the world to us! We are dependent on Him; we need Him to move and shape us after His will in the context of relating to each other in our group life here at Cedar Grove!

January 2, 2022

COMMUNITY: BELONGING TO EACH OTHER:

2. "Soft and Teachable Hearts!"
Acts 2:42, 46 and Romans 12:10 – 18

Introduction:

We studying the internal health in our church: Our community life. We're wired with desire for meaningful **R**_____ with each other.

Church health experts have written an equation that is universally true: Celebration + Congregation + Cell = **H**_____ **C**_____.

That we are part of the church of Jesus in Mifflintown presupposes two central truths:

First: We are each part of the Body of Christ. We are part of His **P**_____
P_____ in our hometown. Romans 12:4

Second: We are each given spiritual gifts that enable us to work together to do works of **M**_____. Ephesians 4:16

The ministry acts that we do together are His ministry and it is only as **A**_____
by His favor and **S**_____ in building up the body as our relationships are vibrant and healthy.

We believe choosing to **R**_____ to others in **L**_____ is vital to our personal spiritual health and our church family health.

I. Three Vital Signs of Spiritual Health in Acts 2: Acts 2:42 and 46

The first vital sign of spiritual life and health was that they had **H**_____ **H**_____

This clear sign of God's Spirit doing a powerful work within them was their hunger to both **K**_____ and **L**_____ **O**_____ God's Word. They gladly came together to be taught His Word.

It was true then and it is true now. As the Holy Spirit works in us, He creates **P**_____ longing to know Him more intimately.

Acts 2:43, 46, and 47 – The second vital sign of healthy spiritual lives is that the Spirit of Jesus gave them **W**_____ **H**_____

Acts 2:46 – The third vital sign of spiritual life and health was that they became **S**_____, **O**_____, and **T**_____

Their hearts were softened as the Holy Spirit did His T_____ W_____ within them.

The Greek words agalisai – glad, celebrative, extreme jubilation and apheloteti – sincere, hearts without stones

The Lord desires to create these things in our hearts today in our community life at Cedar Grove!

II. The Focus of Their Gatherings: Acts 2:42, 44, 46

The best word that I can think of to describe what is taking place in the lives of the believers is the word C_____. It is a modernization of the Biblical terms F_____ of B_____.

A place to B_____

A place to G_____

A place to L_____

John 13:34 and John 15:12 – 14

Jesus says that we are called to love others with a H_____ and D_____ love. It is a love that we only have when the Holy Spirit pours it out into our hearts, Romans 5:5

This kind of love originates in the heart of God and we get to experience it only by the G_____ of His G_____.

Only God loves with holy and self-emptying love so if we are going to have this love, then G_____ must L_____ in us. Agape love is the fruit of His presence; only He can produce it. Galatians 5:23

III. Characterized by His Love: Romans 12:10 – 18

In this amazing paragraph Paul brings out practical applications of how the H_____ L_____ of Heaven is to be lived out in our relationships!

His love must be both received as a gift of His grace and C_____! That is our part, fanning into flame His love with one another.

We reveal the power of God loving us by the quality of our love for one another. We cultivate and share His love with each other!

Concluding Thoughts:

Discussion Starter Questions for Home Groups

1. Why do you think that a healthy church is creating three different levels of ministry for the attendees' involvement?
2. What were your thoughts as you heard the teaching that our ministry as a church will only be anointed and successful in building up the church as we relate to others in love?
3. How would you describe what it is like to have a "hungry heart" to someone who asks you about your spiritual life?
4. In your opinion, why is it important to cultivate a worshipful heart?
5. Why do you think it is so important to the Lord Jesus that we each cultivate having a soft, open, and teachable heart before Him?
6. What is the importance of having a place in our lives to belong, to grow, and to love others?
7. How does a follower of Jesus live a life of love in practical and everyday Christian living?
8. Read together aloud the story in Acts 2:41 - 47 and discuss insights you have regarding how the first century church related to each other.
9. Read together aloud I Corinthians 12:12 – 27 and discuss insights that you have about what it means to be His body in this world.
10. Are there people in your sphere of influence who are hard to love? What steps can you take to actively and practically love others in your sphere of influence?