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The Disciplines of Joy
III. Fellowship and Service
Ecclesiastes 4:7-12, Galatians 6:2

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*“No Christian is an only child.”*¹ Eugene Peterson wrote that. *“No Christian is an only child.”* It is first of all simply a statement of Biblical truth – that from the very moment we become a Christian, we also become a member of the Christian church. Even if we never let our name be placed on a church role, even if we absent ourselves from the worship and work of a local congregation – still, our membership in Christ’s church is an inescapable corollary of our faith in Christ. We can no more be a Christian and not a member of Christ’s church than we can be a person and not be in a family. We simply do not get to have Christ without also gaining brothers and sisters in Christ. No Christian is an only child.

So the only question, really, is not, *“Am I going to be a part of the community of faith?”* but, *“How am I going to live in the community of faith?”*² Some Christians choose, as it were, to run away from home, making only occasional visits back home at Christmas and Easter, perhaps also weddings and funerals – but otherwise keeping as far away from the community of faith as they can. In my experience such absent members of the community have all sorts of excuses, all sorts of reasons for staying away – church is full of hypocrites, it’s our only day to sleep in, there is a soccer/basketball/volleyball/baseball/racquetball/pickleball tournament – I’ve heard them all. But again, Biblically speaking, none of those excuses are worth a hoot. None of those reasons will satisfy the Christ who has placed us in His family, the Church – and who expects His children to be present and active in that family. Those who absent themselves may well want to consider that fact a whole lot more carefully than they do.

But it’s more than that. *“No Christian is an only child”* – it’s not just that absenting ourselves from the family of faith is wrong, it is that it is also such a sad thing to do, and such a foolish thing to do. Because life is hard. And the life of faith is even harder. And to try to “go it alone” is to miss out on the second great Biblical truth about Christ’s church – which is that it is one of the greatest blessings and helps Christ imparts to His children. Life is hard. The life of faith is even harder – to undertake either on our own, apart from the family of faith is to make ourselves vulnerable and lonely. It is to make both life and faith much harder to keep, and much harder to enjoy. Christ draws us together into His family of faith, His Church, because here we shall be no longer alone, here our vulnerability is now shielded by our communion together, here we find resources and strength and support for life and for faith which we could never muster up solely on our own.

That is what our passage from Ecclesiastes is talking about. Let me read it to you again, this time using Eugene Peterson's contemporary translation, The Message:

I turned my head and saw yet another wisp of smoke on its way to nothingness: a solitary person, completely alone—no children, no family, no friends—yet working obsessively late into the night, compulsively greedy for more and more, never bothering to ask, “Why am I working like a dog, never having any fun? And who cares?” More smoke. A bad business.

*It's better to have a partner than go it alone.
Share the work, share the wealth.
And if one falls down, the other helps,
But if there's no one to help, tough!*

*Two in a bed warm each other.
Alone, you shiver all night.*

*By yourself you're unprotected.
With a friend you can face the worst.
Can you round up a third?
A three-stranded rope isn't easily snapped.³*

“A three-stranded rope isn't easily snapped.” That's the deeper meaning of the truth that “No Christian is an only child.” That is the true blessing Christ imparts to us through our participation in the disciplines of fellowship and service. Here, in the ordinary workings of ordinary church, Christ opens up for an extraordinary pathway into His joy.

So how are we to practice these disciplines of joy, this gift and work of fellowship and service within the church? Paul has a whole lot to say about just this question – next to Christ Himself, it is Paul's favorite theme. But I think this one verse from his letter to the Galatians sums up his counsel well: “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Bear one another burdens – that image is just so rich and ready to be unpacked!

“Bear one another's burdens” – that is how we live out the disciplines of fellowship and service in the family of faith in which no Christian is an only child – “Bear one another's burdens.” In our Presbyterian Constitution there is actually a very helpful unpacking of that instruction – found in the list of the Six Great Ends of the Church, the list of the six great purposes for which Christ calls His church into being. One of the six is this: “The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.”⁴ “Bear one another's burdens” – here in Christ's church we do so by providing shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship in Christ's name and through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Take the first of these three, Shelter – the church provides shelter for its children because of the fact that life is hard, as well as the great truth that Christ is merciful and kind. So we take care of each other in the church, in this family Christ has made. We take care of our brothers and sisters in Christ, helping one another to withstand when indeed life turns hard.

The Episcopalian preacher Barbara Brown Taylor tells of a story told to her by an elderly woman in her congregation. This woman spoke of a summer's day in her childhood when she and

several of her friends decided to climb Mount Washington in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. She said they ended up going too far and staying too long – such that, before they knew it, the beautiful sunset they had been watching turned into a dusk so foggy they could not see their hands in front of their faces. No one had a flashlight – since flashlights had not been invented – and no one was really sure which way was the right path down. But they agreed that they would all hold hands and that they would not, under any circumstances, let go of one another. And that is how they made it down the mountain safely – one step at a time, carefully picking their way through the darkness, a living chain holding on to one another for dear life. Taylor writes:

“Sometimes,” my friend said, “all I knew or could see of the world was the hand ahead of me and the one behind. Sometimes my arms ached so badly I thought I would cry out loud, but that is how we made it at last. We found our way home by holding on to one another.”⁵

We find our way home by holding on to one another. That’s the shelter of the family of God. When the way is hard – the future dark, the pain or grief or fear or suffering or sorrow or confusion unbearable – we come alongside one another and we bear it together. We hold on to one another, shelter one another, and get one another through – that three-stranded rope that will not break. Sometimes it’s a hug before church; sometimes it’s a casserole left at the door. Sometimes it’s a friendly ear or a shoulder to cry on. Sometimes it’s just knowing that there is someone who cares about what we are going through, someone who is praying for us, someone who would drop everything and come should we call. Here, in Christ’s church, in the family Christ has made, we bear one another’s burdens – we practice the disciplines of fellowship and service – by sheltering one another through the storm.

“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Here in the family Christ has made, among our brothers and sisters in Christ’s family, we also practice this discipline of fellowship and service by nurturing one another. Meaning we help one another grow up in our Christian faith and devotion. We learn from one another what the Christian life looks like; we encourage and challenge and correct one as we seek to put that life into practice in our daily living. We pray together, we worship together, we open God’s Word together, we work and serve together. And so we grow up in Christ together. I mean, how we would ever grow in Christ, in faith, in discipleship if we didn’t have one another to help? If we didn’t have saints among us who show us not only what Christian maturity looks like, but also prove to us that it can indeed be attained?

Ron Sider tells of participating in a men’s study group at his church. He was out shopping for a winter coat one day and found a nice one at a thrift shop for only twenty-five dollars. But when the clerk rang it up, he missed a zero – he rang it up as only two dollars and fifty cents. Sider saw the mistake, but kept silent, paid the two-fifty and left with his new coat. For weeks after, however, his conscience just tortured him about this. So, finally, he decided to confess what he had done to his study group. They first responded by laughing hysterically at him, he said, which didn’t help his guilt at all. But then they insisted that he had to take that coat back and make it right. Sider agreed to do so, but he also asked the group to hold him accountable for this at their

next meeting. He did go back and make it right – but he couldn't help wondering if he would have done the right thing without his fellow Christians holding him to account.

And then Sider goes on to say that it was such a small thing really – but that of such small, daily decisions are our characters formed and our discipleship lived out and tested. And so, to be the family of Christ means that we help and nurture one another in making right choices and rectifying bad choices – and so, together, keep moving forward on the right path of real Christian discipleship in this fallen world. Sider ends by stating this:

People who have learned over months and years to love and trust each other can help us follow Jesus in far more momentous things. They are a great place to discuss family budgets, charitable donations, the joys and struggles of parenting and marriage, the tough temptations over sex and money, and the big decisions about vocation. I am absolutely convinced that God will dramatically transform any local congregation that [does this].⁶

In the household of faith, Christ's family, Christ gives us to one another that we might nurture one another in the life of faith – that together we might grow up to mature discipleship.

“*Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*” Here in Christ's family, we do this also by maintaining spiritual fellowship. Spiritual fellowship – what that means first of all is exactly what it appears to mean, that we enjoy and laugh and love together as Christ's family. The stuff of Wonderful Wednesday conversations around the table while breaking bread. The greetings in the glass hallway, smiles across the sanctuary as we gather. It's youth fellowship and Amazing Grays and the choir – definitely the choir! It's having fun together on the farm this afternoon. It's just simply the genuine pleasure and joy and friendship and fellowship that we find here, among our brothers and sisters in Christ.

But it runs even deeper than that – this maintaining of spiritual fellowship among Christ's family. It's also how we commit to these relationships for the long-term. It's how we hold on to one another, keep our promises, prevent one another from falling away. Gordon Atkinson, a Baptist pastor, tells about the long struggle two members of his church, Stan and Carol, had in conceiving a child. After many years, many tears and prayers shared by the whole congregation, Carol finally became pregnant and soon baby Elliott was born. Again, it's a small church, so all of this was pretty well known to everybody – which meant that the first time Carol and Stan brought baby Elliott to worship, the worship service was twenty minutes late in getting started while a whole church full of grandmothers and grandfathers, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles all took their turn holding Elliott. Atkinson says that baby Elliott was being passed around those pews like an offering place – which, in a Baptist church, is really saying something!

A couple of years later, a couple named Jennifer and David Kramer started coming to the church, bringing along their three-year-old son named David, Jr. The Kramer's were very young, barely twenty, and clearly struggling with life and the demands of parenthood. So the congregation welcomed them right in, and immediately took to helping them however they could. Then, one Wednesday night church supper, suddenly terrible screams were heard coming from the children's

playroom. Little Elliott was screaming in pain and they were several marks on his back where David Jr. had bit him. David and Jennifer came rushing around the corner and immediately saw what had happened. Jennifer ran out of the church crying hysterically, “*Oh my God, not again!*” It turned out that this had happened before. The Kramer’s would join a church, begin to settle it – and then David, Jr. would bite another child, forcing them to leave in embarrassment and shame. David picked up his son and apologized over and over again as he hurried out to find his wife in the parking lot.

But as they were about to get in their truck, the door of the church banged open and out rushed Elliott’s mother, Carol. The Kramer’s saw her coming, and Jennifer started sobbing all over again, “*I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.*”

Carol didn’t say anything at first. Then she put her left hand on Jennifer’s shoulder and her right hand under her chin. She lifted Jennifer’s face and spoke in a very soft, but firm voice, “Stop.”

“Listen to me,” she said. Elliott is going to be fine. He will heal, and he will get over this. I’m not worried about Elliott. Do you know what does worry me?”

Jennifer shook her head, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“I’m worried that you and David will be so embarrassed about this that you will never come back to our church. That’s the only thing that worries me. We’ve come to love your family, and you need to be here with us. You need church, and I want you to promise me that you’ll come back this Sunday.

Jennifer didn’t answer her. She melted into Carol’s arms, sobbing . . .

They stayed like that for a long time, two mothers holding each other in the parking lot.

Concludes Atkinson: “*I watched and had the strangest impulse to take off my shoes.*”⁷

That is the deeper meaning of maintaining the spiritual fellowship of the church – we hold on to one another, we put up with one another, we love and forgive one another, we stay together come what may, as good families always do. And in all of this, this three-stranded rope Christ has made, this bearing of burdens He has commanded, this Christ-given discipline of fellowship in which we learn how to serve one another – indeed, how to serve others outside the church as well – in this family of faith we find indeed a God-ordained, God-blessed pathway into joy. Because no Christian is ever an only child.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1980), p. 169.

² Peterson, p. 170.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 1169.

⁴ *The Book of Order: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly), F-1.0304.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, God In Pain (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 80.

⁶ Ronald J. Sider, Genuine Christianity (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), p. 81.

⁷ Gordon Atkinson, RealLivePreacher.com (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), p. 44 (40-45).