

2. United We Stand  
United in Fellowship  
Acts 2:44-47

This is the second of a series of sermons on the subject, "United We Stand." Last week I talked about how we are to be united in Spirit with all Christians who believe that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life" and who believe that the proper response to God's gift of love in Christ is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself." Those are the essentials, the fundamentals, of the faith. Everything else is opinion, and we give our fellow Christians the freedom to think and let think. As John Wesley was fond of reminding us: In essentials, unity; in opinions, liberty; in all things, charity.

This morning I want to talk about the strength we gain from being in a healthy Christian fellowship. There is a story about a man who had seven sons. They didn't get along very well. The old man knew he didn't have many years left, and he worried about what would happen to his sons when he was gone. One day he called them together. He showed them a pile of sticks. He asked them to each take a stick and try to break it. Each of them was able to break his stick easily. Then he took seven sticks and tied them together tightly. Then he invited them to break the sticks. None of them could do it. They got the message. Individually they were weak and easily broken. But united, they would be strong enough to withstand the forces that would try to destroy them.

I think that's a pretty good analogy of the church. Many of you can share stories of surviving difficult times because you are a part of the fellowship of the church. As a part of the church, we can resist troubles, trials and temptations which would have broken us if we tried to face them by ourselves.

There is one difference between that bundle of sticks and Christians united in fellowship. The difference is this: Being a part of the bundle of sticks does not make each of the sticks stronger. However, in a healthy Christian fellowship, not only are we stronger as a whole, but we become stronger individually.

Before I moved to Brenham, eight years ago, I spent six years in Center, Texas. The Baptist church had a racquetball court, and I played racquetball four days a week during the lunch hour. When you get adjusted to that level of physical activity, you find that you need it. When I moved to Brenham, I discovered the nearest racquetball courts were in College Station, some forty miles away. It was not practical to go there regularly to play. So, I looked for some other means physical activity. I joined a class for cardio-kickboxing. I thought I was in good shape, but they took me to a whole new level.

By the time I moved here, I had been doing cardio-kickboxing for six years. I knew the routines and exercises. I had the equipment. I decided I no longer needed a class. I would just exercise on my own. So, that's what I have been doing. However, as time goes on, I find I am exercising less and less. Part of the cardio-kickboxing routine is to end an hour of intense exercises with what is called a "burn out." You hit and kick the bag as fast and hard as you can for three minutes. It's called a burn out because after a

minute every muscle in your body is burning. It hurts. But that's when you are pushing your body to the highest levels of conditioning.

After a minute or so of burn out, you want to quit. But when you have people all around you who are pushing themselves and refuse to quit, you think, "They're not going to beat me. I can go as long and as hard as they do." They push you to keep going. Without the class, it's hard to push yourself. I am now to the point that when I get to the burn out, I just skip it. The result is that I'm losing the high level of conditioning I once had.

The same thing happens to Christians when they drop out of the fellowship of the church. We push each other to high levels of commitment and service. We push each other into deeper levels of spirituality. We encourage one another.

There are those who say they can maintain their spiritual lives without the church. I say to them, "Go ahead and try it." The great majority of people who drop out of the fellowship of the church become spiritually flabby in a short time.

We are strong when we are a part of a healthy Christian fellowship. Now the key word there is "healthy."

Not all Christian fellowships are healthy. The media has been talking about unhealthy Christian fellowships a lot the last few weeks. The pope's visit has stirred up the wounds of those who have been abused by priests. Those priests created unhealthy Christian fellowships that left some of their parishioners weak and broken. The fellowship of the Fundamentalist Mormon Church at El Dorado was an unhealthy Christian fellowship that left its members so weak they couldn't even protect their own children.

In both of these instances people were actually broken by their Christian fellowship, rather than being made stronger.

Those are extreme examples. But there are much more common examples of unhealthy church fellowships.

Christian fellowship becomes unhealthy when it is either too close or not close enough. When people have experienced an unhealthy Christian fellowship they may say something like this: The last church I attended didn't seem to care a thing about me. No one knew my name. No one ever asked how I was doing. They just seemed to want me to give money to the church and help their membership figures. That person was saying there was not enough closeness in that church.

Or maybe you have heard someone say something like this: I grew up in the church, and I felt judged and condemned all the time. They wanted to control everything I thought and felt and said and did. They didn't want me to have any free time to myself. They caused me to be filled with guilt and shame. They left me feeling helpless. I didn't like myself. That person was saying that the fellowship in that church was too close, so close that he had no room to grow as a person.

A healthy church fellowship is like that bowl of porridge in the Goldilocks story: It's not too cold, and it's not too hot. It's just right.

But who determines whether the fellowship of the church is just right? You do. You, and you alone, can determine whether a church fellowship is healthy for you. Each of us comes into the world with a need for both closeness and space. We get lonely if we don't have people close to us. We felt violated if they get too close to us.

You, and you alone, must find the balance which is healthy for you. And you have to take the authority to shape the fellowship of the church to meet your needs.

In a healthy church you have the authority to create a closer, warmer fellowship if you don't feel the fellowship of the church is close enough and warm enough for you. You can help create programs and ministries which will meet your needs.

And in a healthy church if the fellowship is getting too close for comfort, you have the authority to say, "Back off." If someone is hugging you too long, too tightly and too often, you can say, "I'm not comfortable with that." If someone wants to share information about themselves that you don't feel is appropriate or wants you to share information about yourself that you don't feel is appropriate, you can say so. If the preacher who asks you to get involved in a program of church members calling each other when you feel that receiving or making such phone calls is an invasion of your personal and private space, you can say that you don't wish to participate.

In a healthy Christian fellowship, you have the right to say, "I am not comfortable with that" without feeling guilty.

In the early church the members sold all their possessions and put their money together to provide for one another. They shared all their meals together. They joined together daily to worship in the Temple. Would you be comfortable with fellowship that close? It didn't last long. Evidently they weren't comfortable with it either. It was too close for comfort.

We all need a certain amount of time and space for ourselves. Even Jesus did. That's why he would regularly go out and spend time in prayer alone. He was not being selfish to say to his disciples and to the people who came to him for help, "Give me some time and space for myself, so that I can renew my spirit and my soul." If Jesus could do that, we shouldn't feel guilty about doing protecting our personal boundaries.

There are two extremes. There are those who want very little fellowship. There are those who want a lot of very close fellowship. And the majority of us are somewhere in between.

Our goal should be to get as close to our fellow Christians as is comfortable for all of us. Our goal is to create a fellowship which not only gives us strength as a whole, but enables each member to become stronger.

When we are united in a healthy Christian fellowship, we stand stronger as a church and as Christians within the church.

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