

Acts 2:37-47 The Message paraphrase

³⁷ Cut to the quick, those who were there listening asked Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers! Brothers! So now what do we do?”

³⁸⁻³⁹ Peter said, “Change your life. Turn to God and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is targeted to you and your children, but also to all who are far away—whomever, in fact, our Master God invites.”

⁴⁰ He went on in this vein for a long time, urging them over and over, “Get out while you can; get out of this sick and stupid culture!”

⁴¹⁻⁴² That day about three thousand took him at his word, were baptized and were signed up. They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers.

⁴³⁻⁴⁵ Everyone around was in awe—all those wonders and signs done through the apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person’s need was met.

⁴⁶⁻⁴⁷ They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved.

Proclamation of the Word

I'm going to be honest with you. Sometimes God speaks to me very personally. Lately, these words of Scripture keep popping into my head. I keep hearing Jesus' words, "Peter, do you love me? Feed my sheep" in my head. For some reason the Holy Spirit kept putting these words in my mind. It finally dawned on me this week why these verses keep popping into my head. But now God was really speaking to my heart now. While preparing this sermon I heard the question differently,

Laura, do you love me? Feed my sheep.

Of course, Lord, but God, I have nothing to say this week. I have been reading your word all week with some insights, but there have been emails to read, calls to make, groceries to buy, a child who needed to see the Dr.

Laura, do you love me? Feed my sheep.

Of course, Lord, but I cannot compete with their busy lives, the entertainment options, the football gods, or the funny preacher on the internet. And to be honest, Jesus, I wonder sometimes how much gathering together in worship matters to people. I get so discouraged.

Laura, do you love me? Feed my sheep.

I do, Lord, but all week, I have had these wonderful serendipitous visits with your people. I had multiple visits with church folks at the grocery store, unexpected and important. I went to a Funeral and heard the deep love of a grandson paying tribute to a beloved grandmother. Then while I planned to work on this sermon, my niece called and came over to study on Friday. My brother called. But Lord, it's Friday. I really need to finish this sermon so I can go to Hendersonville for my aunt and uncle's 80th birthday party with all my cousins.

Oh, wait, building relationships...is that what you were showing me, Jesus? That is what you want me to do. You have been putting people in my path so I can love and serve.

I did stretch myself and go to a Clergy event at Southern Wesleyan, not my normal group of friends in ministry, but I loved meeting some new colleagues, intentionally being with folks with whom I differ theologically, but who sincerely love you and desire to do your will. You surprised me. I was not planning to attend their Chapel service and then of all things, it was a church history professor doing a first person monologue as Martin Luther, an ancestor in our Reformed church family. That morning was a blessing.

And then, you allowed me to have a meaningful conversation with a colleague in ministry. And when I realized I talked more than I listened, you convicted me. I went back to that person to apologize. I am trying to change- to listening more and talking less. I do think the world needs more people who do that!

And then, in our Wednesday small group, you were speaking your word to a group of us, and you were right there in the midst of us. The Christ candle burned in the center calling us to be in you, in the presence of one another, and listen for your word. That was building relationships intentionally, wasn't it?

Laura, do you love me?

YES! I do, so very much. You know I love you.

Feed my sheep.

But...what do I say, Lord?

Tell them what I have been showing you.

Jesus and I have these kinds of conversations sometimes. Some may find that weird. Others of us call it prayer. I think it has everything to do with the fact that we have been friends for a long time. And

when you are friends with someone, your talks are very honest. I can pour out my heart and sing, or weep, or express outrage at mass shootings and senseless violence. I can say a person's name without adding lots of flowery words, just their name, and I know God hears that as prayer and already knows the need.

We are friends, and friends tell each other the truth in love, even when it is hard. Friends lay down their lives for one another. Jesus is the one who faced with the powers of death, lies, and violence, does not return evil for evil, but in strength, offers forgiveness, because he loved even those who did not know what they do, loves us even when we grieve his heart.

Chuck is away this weekend with his college friends. After many years of being so busy raising children and working so much, there is finally space in our lives to do extra things sometimes. It has meant the world to these guys to reconnect. So Thursday a couple of our friends arrived for dinner before they would drive together to the beach. After dinner of laughing and catching up, I realized how much I love them. My heart was full.

I am so proud of Andy from Kingsport, the attorney married to Jenny. I am proud of the person he is- a faithful Baptist, quiet and unassuming servant in his church and community. He is on the board of the United Way and encourages generosity in his community and love of his neighbors. He is the father of three, but quick to remind me with tears in his eyes of their fourth child who died way too young.

There is Chris. We were friends even before Chuck knew him. We went to college and Seminary together, did mission trips and slept on floors together, took Christian Education classes together, disagreed over some things, ate together, laughed lots, prayed together- did life together. He was the PSA intern at USC while I was the intern here at Clemson. We danced at his wedding. I baptized his daughter. More than a friend, he is a brother. Now we are opposites both politically and theologically. And he is a huge Gamecock fan, but oh, how I love him.

We are so close that he helped pick out my wedding gown. It seemed fitting (no pun intended). He introduced Chuck to me. We both became pastors. He is one of the most positive, loving persons I know, but life has dealt him some difficult cards. Recently he was diagnosed with early onset frontal dementia at age 45. The same disease killed his father 5 years after his diagnosis. Chris noticed that he would get lost driving places, confusion came. Chris has a 12 year old son and a 16 year old daughter.

But, he talked about what a blessing it has been in their lives. He is serving as a part-time Stated Supply pastor in a little NC mountain church which he loves. He is officially disabled, but has more time for his family. God opened the door for his wife, a nurse at the VA hospital, to get a new job in medical records which she can do from home a few days. He talked about how this disease has helped God heal some broken relationships with other family and has brought them closer to one another. When

the news was fresh, there was much more heartache. He said, they are doing better now that the shock has past.

When you live together, you develop inside jokes. When Chris was living down the hall from Chuck in college, Chris would knock on the door, poke his head in and say, "I just wanted to tell you goodnight." Every night. The guys all give Chris a hard time about that little ritual. Sometimes, Chuck will call Chris late in the evening and open with, "I just wanted to tell you goodnight." So this Thursday night, I went to my bedroom leaving the guys up talking. Then I heard a little knock. It was Chris. "I just want to tell you goodnight." He closed the door, and I wept. My heart breaks for him and his family. I am so grateful for his friendship in Christ.

Jesus said, ¹² **"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. (John 15:12-17)**

We are IN CHRIST, friends in Christ. He has called us together. The Holy Trinity- Father, Son, Spirit exist in a relationship of mutual love. God invites us into that relationship

Still unique persons, but living, moving, breathing together in unison.

Through baptism into Christ, we share one another's sorrows, burdens, joys and struggles.

We are in communion with one another because Jesus sat the Table, gave his body, his blood, himself to us.

We, created in God's image, are made for relationships.

Baptized into God's forever family, we share in Christ's life, suffering, and resurrection, new life and because of him, we become ONE.

Not because of us, because of him.

Not our like-mindedness, not our uniformity, not our agreement, not because we are alike, but because of who Christ is.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, **"Human love is directed to the other person for his own sake, spiritual love loves him for Christ's sake."**

We are the Body of Christ.

Last week some of us met new Friends in Christ. Job and Man Chi arrived last Monday from Eugene, OR with their newborn son. Their pastor had contacted me a couple of months ago to make a connection to Fort Hill church. Job is a new faculty in Psychology, a deacon in the Presbyterian Church. Job and I spoke by phone, and I asked how we might help them. He wrote in an email, "I know this is

bold, but the church is our only friend, might there be a few friends who could help us move some furniture off the truck when it arrives next week?" My immediate response was "Of course!" Job sharing a need opened us to the start of a relationship. So Donna Crader, her neighbor, and Dana ended up being there to help. Others of you were glad to serve, but the timing did not work out.

The day after their arrival last week, their three week old son needed to be hospitalized for care. On Saturday, I ventured to the hospital. I learned that Job and Man Chi were home for a couple of hours to unpack a bit. Derge was awake and wanted someone to hold him. The nurse said she wondered if a family member could sit with the baby, but learned they did not have any family here. I piped up, "I am his family. I will be happy to hold the baby for a while."

Bound by our Baptism into Christ, we are family. I loved spending a little time with my new little brother. We rocked and sang the same songs I used to sing to my children at naptime. I reveled in that time and thought, "You are my brother. You are ours. We are God's. We belong to Christ."

Am I my brother's keeper, my sister's keeper? Absolutely.

When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful.

When we received forgiveness rather than judgment, we were made ready to forgive.

What God did for us, we owe to others.

The more we received, the more we are able to give.

And when we do not love our brother and sister, the less we are living by God's mercy and love.ⁱ

In a minute, we will sing a special hymn. It is a song that was sung at our wedding, a sort of family mission statement about serving each other. God gives us these relationships and calls us to serve, to be his friends in the world, for the world he loves.

In light of the events again of this week and the grief we share at yet another mass murder. In light of whatever grieves your heart, find courage in God.

Remember these words,

"Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world. All things break. And all things can be mended. Not with time, as they say, but with intention. So go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally. The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you."ⁱⁱ

The light that is Christ in you, in us.

ⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together; A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954) 24-25. Paraphrase used here. The whole book was helpful in the preparation of this sermon.

ⁱⁱ LR Knost, Parenting author. To learn more go to www.LRKnost.com