

Resolve to Relate Sermon Series Week 2
My Relationship with my Church Family
Colossians 3:12-17
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January 9, 2022

As we begin a new year of life and ministry together, we are starting off with a short 3 week sermon series called *Resolve to Relate*. There probably could have been a better name for the series, but that was the best I could come up with for a new year's sermon series about the relationships that make churches healthy and effective if 3 key relationships are healthy and working together.

As a reminder, or for those who are just jumping in today, the idea for the series is based on the book and research behind the book *Unbinding the Gospel*. For 4 years, researchers studied 100s of mainline congregations like ours to see which churches were most effective at evangelism and they found that the churches that were really good at helping people move closer to God and into Christian community (which is our working definition of evangelism in this series) were those churches whose members related well to God, to each other, and to those outside of the church. Another way of saying that is to say that the churches that are great at evangelism are the churches that are faithful in their obedience to the two great commandments. They are good at loving God and good at loving their neighbors. Last week we were challenged to remember that God has loved us first and to recommit in this new year to loving God wholeheartedly in response. That is the first of the interconnected relationship rings- our relationship with God. Today our challenge is to recommit to loving our neighbors starting with the neighbors who are sitting around us in this room or watching with us online. Our relationships within our church family are the second of the interconnected relationship rings.

Our Scripture for this morning comes from the book of Colossians which is one of 4 letters written by the Apostle Paul while he was in prison. Who Jesus is and what Jesus makes possible are the ideas at the heart of the letter. The first chapter includes a hymn that affirms among other things that Jesus is the center and source of creation, that he is the head of the Church, and that he is God- in him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, the hymn says. Throughout the letter Paul describes the things that Jesus makes possible and in chapter 3, where we are reading this morning, he is describing how members of the Body of Christ can relate to and care for each other. We may read it and think it sounds too idealistic or a bit out of reach for real people, but again, Paul is talking about what it's possible for people to do, not in our own strength or power, but through and with the help of Jesus. Let's listen to what he says in Colossians 3:12-17.

¹²As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and

admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Before reading the passage, I said that Paul is talking about a way of being with and treating each other that Jesus makes possible, and I want to emphasize that point again. There is a lot there about how believers ought to behave and relate to each other, but there is also a lot there about the believer's relationship with God. Behave in these ways because you are chosen, and holy and dearly loved. Forgive each other as you have experienced forgiveness in your relationship with God. Let Christ's peace and word dwell within you. Give thanks and worship God. There is clearly a connection between having a close relationship with God through Christ and our ability and willingness to relate to each other in loving and healthy ways. The one empowers the other.

That we can find power through Jesus and our relationship with God to have and maintain good and healthy relationships with the people in our church family is really good news because anyone who is part of *the* Church and part of a church knows that church family relationships are just as hard or harder than any other relationships we have. Sometimes I feel like it shouldn't be that way, right? I mean, we are bound to our church family through the same baptism, and the same profession of faith in Jesus, and we are filled with the same Holy Spirit so why is this so hard? The other night during elder training I was sharing that this has been one of my big questions for God for a long time. With all of these significant things in common, especially the fact that the same Spirit lives within us, why is it so hard for church family to agree on things and to get along? Why can't we all just come to the same conclusions and see things the same way? God has not spoken to me in an audible voice or written any answers for me in the clouds on that, and the best thing that I have been able to come up with is that if nothing else, being in relationship with people that we don't always agree with or find it easy to get along with gives us an opportunity to practice loving and to rely on Jesus. I think those are things that God wants for us to do. It's what the Scriptures tell us to do, and the miraculous thing is that when we do those things, even though our relationships in our church family may still be hard, they can be healthy.

That's the thing. Relationships can be hard, and they can be messy, and they can involve imperfect people acting imperfectly, but a healthy church family is not healthy because it's perfect. Perfect churches don't exist, and as the saying goes, if you find the perfect church, don't go to it because you'll ruin it. Perfection is not the measure of health, and that's obvious when you look back at Paul's exhortations there in our Scripture passage. He talks about clothing yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, and patience. Those don't sound like the kinds of things that perfect people need to be encouraged to put on. Presumably, the perfect people would already be wearing those things all the time. And he says things like "bear with one another and forgive one another," but what do perfect people have to forgive and be forgiven for? Paul is not talking to perfect people and he knows it. Instead, he is talking to imperfect people about how navigate their relationships with other imperfect people in healthy and constructive ways, and the way to do that is by relying on Jesus. A healthy church family is not healthy when it is perfect. It is healthy church family is healthy when it is connected to and surrendered to Jesus.

and to get along or maybe even sometimes harder than to have the bad news about having good relationships in our church family is that it is hard. All relationships are hard for lots of reasons- because of our personality differences, and our different life experiences, because we all have wounded parts and sensitivities, and because along with our good points we are also sinful and self-centered. These things make our relationships with each other in the church just as hard as any other relationships, and sometimes it's hard to be motivated to do hard things. We might want to just try to stick to the people and friendships that are the least work

This is what the Scripture says, and it bears out in real life. In *Unbinding the Gospel*, the author says, "Congregations that are doing great faith teaching [and] faith sharing over the long haul are healthy from the inside out. If individuals are devoted to staying alive in Christ and have a spiritual life that is sustained over time, if the congregation puts a long-term focus on helping people be in primary contact with God, then healthy relationships have a much better chance of developing." This is the first take home point for us as we consider resolving to pursue good relationships in our church family. My relationship with Jesus empowers me to have good relationships in my church family.

The second take home point has to do with what it means to say we have good or healthy relationships in our church family.