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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

**January 2, 2022**

**Communion Sunday - Unopened Gifts**

**Selected Scriptures**

**Prayer:** *Father, this is a heavy day, it's a heavy day in the first place because it's the day that we focus on you and the cross, but it's a heavy day because of Budd. And Lord, again, we just lift up his family. We just continue to pray for all the grace that they need, for all of the wisdom that they need as they go through the grieving process. I just want to pray this morning, Lord, as we again open up your word, I thank you for the gift that you've given us of your word, I thank you for the ability to examine what it is you've given to us in your Son. And I pray, Lord, this morning as we open up your book that you would just give us the gift of the presence of your Holy Spirit. Guide us, Lord, as we examine your gifts, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, once again this is the day that we remember Jesus Christ and his cross. And Jesus on the night before he died, he met with his disciples for what would be the last Passover supper that he would have with them. The account is in *Matthew 26*. It says this: *Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke*

it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." So Jesus took bread and he took wine and he offered them up as symbols of his flesh and his blood and then he asked his disciples to eat the bread and drink the cup so that they might symbolically eat his flesh and drink his blood. And then he asked them to repeat the remembrance of this sacrifice on a regular basis, and this is what we call "the Lord's table," and we celebrate it once a month and we do that by meditating on what it is the Lord Jesus Christ has done for us on the cross, by examining ourselves, and that means asking God's Holy Spirit to point out areas where he is convicting us of sin, by confessing our sins and then by participating in the elements. John 6:53 says: So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

Well this morning I want to do things just a little bit differently than we've done in the past. This morning I would like to visit, revisit actually, a message that I gave some nine years ago about the day after Christmas. When I was a youngster, the day after

Christmas was a particularly tough day. You know, the excitement of Christmas is over and it was just starting to dawn on me that there was going to be 364 more days before it came back. One thing that always struck me in looking at the Christmas tree the day after was that usually there under the tree were a few orphaned presents. For some reason the gifts' recipients, they couldn't be there or maybe they were mislabeled or nobody knew who it went to, so they just kind of sat there under the tree all wrapped up and just begging for someone to open them. Well, it strikes me that we can say the very same thing about the gifts that God sends to us. Oftentimes they just sit, begging for us to open them. *James 1:17* says: *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.* Some of those gifts wind up sitting unopened and they're unopened due to ignorance or fear or maybe even simply neglect. So this morning I would like to focus on opening and using three of those gifts. I want to look at the word of God as a gift, the wisdom of God as a gift, and finally the body of Christ as a gift.

Now the first one is one that I literally, I thank God for every week as I prepare to deliver a message, and it's God's word, it's the Bible. You know, I've been reading a one-year Bible now for probably about 30 years and so basically each year I wind up going

through the entire Bible, and I found out the hard parts are still hard, but they're not what you might be thinking. I mean to me it's not the complicated or difficult theological passages that I struggle with, it's the lists, it's the genealogies, it's the historical accounts of instruction that seem to go on and on and on, that make for difficult reading for me. So I confess, I've skimmed, I've skimmed and I've skipped through many a dry bone section of scripture, but I still don't doubt its value historically and prophetically. I mean, Jesus said not a jot or a tittle of his word is misplaced, so I will take his word on that because it's Jesus who showed us how he valued God's word supremely.

If you go look back to the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, remember that part where Jesus goes out into the desert to meet the arch foe that he had come to destroy, this was Satan himself, and the weapon that Jesus chose to defeat Satan with was the very same weapon that each of us now have on our phones, on our laptops and on our book shelves. It's our bibles. I mean Paul refers to it in Ephesians 6 as "the sword of the Lord" and this was Jesus' chosen weapon. Jesus sent by the Holy Spirit went out into the desert to this place where these spirits lived to bring his challenge directly to Satan's feet. Matthew's gospel sums it up this way. It says: *Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness*

to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, "'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"" Now Jesus, Jesus had power, dominion, intelligence, wisdom, he had a host the angels accompanying him, but all he needed was God's word. That's all he needed to defeat Satan's attack. And so recognizing that he's failed, Satan then offers another temptation to Jesus. It says: Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "'He will command his angels concerning you,' and "'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'"" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"" Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him. So three times Jesus is tempted by Satan and three times Jesus responds to the temptation by saying, "It is written," "It is

written," "It is written."

See, I don't think we realize the power in the gift that we have been given in God's word. And I say "power" because it's totally within our power to increase or decrease the effectiveness of God's word not only as our weapon of choice but also as a means of communicating God's wisdom to us. I mean it's taken me years to appreciate the fact that God uses scripture as the vocabulary that he communicates to us through. Now I've often said our spirit, it's kind of like a hard drive, and scripture is kind of like files that are on that hard drive. They're files that you download onto that hard drive but you take them in through your senses. And the more files you have loaded onto your hard drive, the more files God can use to communicate with. I mean I know there's been many, many instances where I've had a question for God about some specific circumstances and the heavens don't open up and I don't hear a baritone voice, but almost as impressively God takes the word that I've already implanted in my heart and he brings it to mind in a unique way so that I know he is using scripture to communicate.

Let's say someone comes to me and he's bearing a tale about someone and the situation sound quite damning and I'm inclined to arrive at an immediate conclusion. In the back of my head I begin to hear *Proverbs 18:17* which says: *"The one who states his case first*

*seems right, until the other comes and examines him."* Well then I recognize that I've got to slow down, I've got to give that other person a chance to state his case. Or maybe somebody has a case against me and he states it and I'm quite ready to fire back with both guns. Again I hear that little voice of scripture in the back of my head and it's saying: *Know this, my beloved brothers: Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.* I hear God say to me slow down, slow down, write what you will but just sit on it for a while, let's sit for a few hours and then consider whether it's wise to send it. I mean there's literally thousands of other instances where I've heard God use the word of God to speak directly to me about a situation or a person or a circumstance that I needed his input on, and I'm convinced that the more you fill up your vocabulary with scripture, the easier it is for God to communicate his will through the scripture. God himself says that his word is a lot more than simply letters arranged to supply information. *Hebrews 4:12* says: *For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

Okay. So how does God -- quote -- "discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart?" Well, just like I said, God brings the

appropriate scriptures to bear on wherever it is the thoughts and intention of your heart are going. Wouldn't it then follow that the more scripture you have in your heart, the more then that God can communicate with? Never make the mistake of thinking that the Bible is just another book or just another source of information. It is absolutely unique. And to those folks who think that it's outdated or off-putting to a culture that sees it as fundamentalist or Bible thumping, I simply would state what Paul states. This is what he says in *Romans 15*. He says: *For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

Listen to what John MacArthur has to say about God's word. He says this, he says: Scripture is, after all, the Word of God. It is therefore to be proclaimed fearlessly and faithfully—regardless of how the winds of fashion seem to be blowing at any given time: "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Timothy 4:2). Those are especially important words for our generation, because we live in a time of intense and growing hostility directed toward the Bible. There is no shortage of strategists and innovators in the evangelical community who think they have better ways for reaching the culture than by preaching God's Word. But the answer is better and more Biblical preaching, not shorter,



lighter, or fewer sermons, and certainly not entertainment instead of instruction and exhortation from Scripture. "The gospel is the power of God for salvation" (Romans 1:16). Human cleverness and slick PR tactics are no substitute for that, no matter how such things may garner accolades from the secular culture or from church people eager to have their itching ears scratched. Moreover, the Word of God properly taught is more exciting, relevant, timely and applicable to every heart and life than any substitute message of self-esteem, self-help or human motivation could ever be.

I mean it's easy to forget that every time someone actually hears the gospel -- and by "the gospel" I mean the fact that man is completely broken, that God himself became a man, became one of us, lived out a perfect life on this planet so that he could offer that perfect life up on a cross so that we by faith could place our faith in him and exchange our sin for his righteousness and stand before God, before a holy God now perfected not by us but by Christ -- that's the gospel that I'm talking about. And every time that somebody hears that gospel, and I mean hears it, something supernatural takes place. I mean I've heard that gospel dozens and dozens of times before God opened up my eyes. It meant absolutely nothing. But the moment God's Spirit interacted with that word, I was flattened. So God in his wisdom is saying you just keep preaching the gospel and I will give it the power to make sense to

those whom I've called. And he says so in *1 Corinthians 1:21*. He says: *For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

Well you know another gift that is left unopened is another gift that the scripture speaks about and that's the gift of the wisdom of God. Now I don't want you to confuse wisdom with intelligence or with knowledge; it is neither. You don't receive the gift of wisdom by being born with it or going to school for it. I've seen folks with precious little of it, and I've seen not-so-smart folks who have plenty of it.

So just what is wisdom? Well, wisdom is the ability to live life skillfully. It's the ability to not just see the big picture but the grand picture, the one in which the kingdom of God is central. The wise person has the ability to connect the dots between this life of temporary flesh and the real world of the spirit. He or she has the vision to see the hand of God in all the dealings of men. *Proverbs 3* says: *Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better*

*than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. You see, wisdom is a gift that bestows incredible blessings on its recipients and it gives one the ability to navigate all of life because it directly connects us to the giver of life. And if you had it, no matter what you did, whether you were a plumber or a president, a carpenter or a CEO, you would be able to do it in a way that would be pleasing to God and to man as well. James breaks out exactly what this wisdom consists of in James 3:17. He says this, he says: But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.*

So first, godly wisdom. The first thing about it is that it's pure. You know, wisdom is said to be the best means to the best ends, that means that everything about godly wisdom is holy and separate from the mixed motives that we bring to virtually everything we do, and you get this wisdom simply by asking for it.

And next it's peaceable. And that comes from the Greek "eirenikos" from which we get "irenic." You know irenic, well you know, there's some people that can be characterized by saying they're always looking for, they're always itching for a fight? Well this is the exact opposite. This is a person who's always itching, he's always looking for a way to make peace, and you get that eirenikos

just by asking for it.

Next, godly wisdom is gentle. I mean I think of gentle, I think of somebody like Tim Tebow, somebody who is physically incredibly imposing and for years someone who's been surrounded by people who just literally hate his guts because he's up front about his relationship with Jesus Christ. And I've seen him get abused and mocked constantly. Never, ever have I seen him respond to the viciousness that surrounds him with anything but grace. I look at him, I say everything about that guy exudes gentleness. And that, too, comes with godly wisdom, and again, you get it just by asking for it.

And next is open to reason. This is a person who recognizes that there could be more to one side of a story, perhaps many different sides. This one is humble enough to recognize that he or she doesn't have all the answers. They're not threatened at all by any new insight or wisdom coming from elsewhere that might shed light on a situation. This is the way godly wisdom thinks. And again you get it just by asking for it.

And the next two categories is how godly wisdom acts, it's full of mercy and good fruits. You know, godly wisdom doesn't just stay isolated up inside of our heads. It compels action. Faith without

works is dead and thoughts without action is basically faith without works. A man or woman filled with godly wisdom realizes that nothing matters more than the kingdom and so they're always looking to find a way to relate life itself to that end or goal, and a heart for action is yours just for the asking.

And finally godly wisdom is impartial and sincere. I mean it's exactly the opposite of how the Pharisees and the religious leaders operate, I mean, they were highly partial, they loved whom they saw as being in their cast or their club, they were filled with hypocrisy and insincerity when it came to their own shortcomings. Godly wisdom recognizes how easy it is for us to be lulled and become blind to our own sin and our own folly.

Now so if you look at this list that James gives us, this list of wonderful attributes, you say okay, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere, you just can't help but wonder who in the world would not give their eye teeth to have that as their own personal resume, and yet God practically shouts all this is yours just for the asking. The amazing thing is that this gift is a gift which is also very rarely opened not because it's too difficult to unpack, because it's too easy. I mean it's astounding to consider that there are but three things that God requires before he will freely give you wisdom.

Number one, we have to know that we lack it; number two, we have to ask God for it; and number three, we have to believe that he's going to give it. I mean I almost wish that God would add some other requirements to gaining wisdom because I fear people think this is too easy. This can't possibly work.

Listen to how God puts it in *James 1:5*. He says: *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting.* Now I can honestly say this and I say this without bragging, I have the gift of wisdom, and I have it because I ask for it constantly and I believe that God would give it to me. In fact if I didn't believe that I had this gift from God, I would have failed in one of the requirements it takes to get it. Let him ask in faith without doubting. So I believe I have wisdom because I've met the qualifications. I lack it, and I know it, I ask for it, and I believe God when he says, I'll give it to you. I don't know, can anything be simpler than that? I mean just think about that for a second. God says I have one of the most precious gifts the world could ever desire, something the world in its own way desperately seeks for constantly and I'm anxious to give it to you, but you have to ask.

Janice and I have been praying together for years now and our daily

prayer always, always includes a prayer for wisdom. We pray for wisdom as for husbands and wives, moms and dads, as church leaders and any other aspect of life that needs wisdom, we just simply ask God for the ability to do those jobs and to do them skillfully. And one of the first signs that God has answered the prayer for wisdom is believing that he's given you the wisdom that you need. I mean I can't tell you how many times God has given me his wisdom in ways so palpable that I could literally feel it. And like I've tried to point out, God's vocabulary consists primarily of scripture. So the more scripture that you put into your heart, mind, and spirit, the more God's Spirit can communicate to you through those scriptures, whether it's an insight into scripture itself or an insight into a situation or a circumstance or a person. God wants nothing more than to pour that wisdom into you and me, because we're one of the primary venues that God uses to distribute and display his wisdom to the entire spirit world.

So take a moment this morning to consider whether or not this is a gift you've actually opened when you've seen it under the tree. And as you consider that, let me give you our preparation for communion to receive the bread. This is from *1 Corinthians 11:28*. It says: *But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning*

*the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.* What Paul is telling us here is that communion is extremely serious business and to enter into communion in an unworthy manner as to literally court disaster. And so if you're not absolutely confident that you are a child of the King, if you haven't trusted in Christ as your Savior, if you still have some need to be reconciled to your brother or sister by bringing your sacrifice, that is your body, to the altar for forgiveness, then just pass the elements on. If you don't feel right about participating, then err on the side of caution and get right with God first.

As I say each month, I mean on the other hand you can make the opposite mistake, you can think, well, I'm not spotless so I'm not worthy, and that, too, is a mistake. Being a child of the King doesn't mean that you don't sin and that you don't fail, it means that you recognize that salvation is a gift that no one has ever been able to earn by quote -- being good. So we quote Dane Ortlund again, he says: "In the kingdom of God, the one thing that qualifies you is knowing that you don't qualify, and the one thing that disqualifies you is thinking that you do." It also means that when we do fail, we are aware that we've sinned and there's a



reason for that and that's because God's Holy Spirit now lives inside us and it's his Spirit that is convicting us. And so we grieve as children and children who know that they have a Father who longs to forgive us and cleanse us. God says in *1 John 1:19*: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* So being a child of the King doesn't mean that you are spotless and sinless, it means that when we sin, we understand we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ speaking on our behalf. *1 John 2:1* says: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father -- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.* And so because we have Jesus' righteousness now as our own, because of that we are now free to eat from his table. So if you love your Lord, don't deny yourself the privilege that Jesus purchased for you. He lived the life that we should have lived, then he died the death we all deserved to die. And so because of that life and because of that death, we are now worthy of heaven. So thank God this morning for the gift of his word and for the gift of his wisdom, and take a moment to think on that before we partake the bread.

*1 Corinthians 11:23* says: *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and*

said, *"This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."* So take, and eat.

My final unopened present this morning is a gift that is I believe spectacularly under appreciated. And sad to say, I think in many, many places it is still left orphaned under the tree and it's still under wraps and that's the gift of the church. You see, it is the church where you will find the gift of God's word and the gift of God's wisdom coming together uniquely in a way designed to display those gifts to the rest of the world. Just observe Paul as he's telling us about the role we play in displaying that wisdom. He's talking about in this passage, he's talking about the unique grace that he was given but he's also talking about the grace that all of us receive and it's grace that we're given to display God's wisdom. This is what he says. He says: *To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

I don't know if you heard what Paul was saying there, I mean, what

Paul is telling us is that God designed the church to be the place where the manifold wisdom of God is demonstrated to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. And then what he means by that word "manifold," I mean manifold literally means "many faceted." It's like the facets on a diamond or a piece of jewelry, when the light hits it and it's done well, what it does is it breaks the light into all these different planes and facets and they go off in all these different directions. What God is saying is the church is the place where my many facets of wisdom get expressed through you. Just allow that thought to take root for a moment. I mean God's saying it's not the press that's going to be the ones that herald my wisdom to the unseen world, it's not going to be the entertainment industry that does it as well even though there's some marvelous venues such as *The Chosen* that are going out to hundreds of millions of people, they do a marvelous work in that area but it's not the press and it's not entertainment, it's not government, it's not education, it's not any of those venues that God has chosen to display his wisdom to the unseen world through. It's something far more prosaic, it's something far more common, something far more lowly, if you will. It's the local church. So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. God is saying that he's going to display the gifts of his wisdom throughout the spirit world in the way that the Sunday school

teachers are teaching God's word, in the way that the worship team and the congregation is singing God's word, in the way that I'm preaching God's word, and finally in the way that all of you in the body of Christ are living God's word.

And when it comes to preaching, there is but one criteria by which you should be judging that preaching. Collin Hansen in his book *Rediscovering Church* asks this. He says: "What gives any preacher the right to stand up at least once a week for, say, half an hour, and claim to speak on behalf of God? Not even the president of the United States boasts such authority. No one thinks a math teacher or literature professor deserves this privilege. And how many other one directional monologues do you regularly encounter these days anyway? Preachers draw their authority not from superior knowledge, political power, or rhetorical flourish. They draw it from God's word alone. Preachers don't have authority if they are reviewing the latest Netflix series. They don't have authority if you're asking for a restaurant recommendation. They don't have authority if they're sharing thoughts about a conspiracy theory they saw on Facebook. They might make some good, interesting, or worthwhile points. They might have some good advice if you need, say, help finding a job. But they derive special authority to speak on God's behalf only when they preach his word."

See, the body of Christ gathers each week not to sit at my feet but to sit at God's feet and bask in the wisdom of his word. And to the extent that I'm connecting you with his word will be the extent that you are receiving that wisdom. To the extent that you are connecting with me, myself, and I, will be the extent that I'm wasting your time and you're wasting mine.

But it's not just teaching, singing, and preaching that displays the gifts of God's wisdom to the spirit world. And this is the part that I think many, many people miss. I mean there's a role for every single one of us here to put God's wisdom on display. So just what is this gift that God has given us known as "the church"? Well, for one it is the living expression of the wisdom of God translated through the actions and behaviors of his saints as they gather together in community. God refers to the church as "the body of Christ" because it's made up of many different parts all with different functions but it acts as one interdependent organic whole. *1 Corinthians* says: *For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.* I mean the church is the living, active kingdom of God actually touching planet earth. And because of that the members of the church uniquely represent Christ's presence on earth in literally a supernatural way. The body of Christ acts in some ways like any human body when it responds to an

attack on it by having the whole body react. I mean right now every one of us is feeling the loss of Budd Smith right in our collective gut. That's because God says if one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. I mean just a few days ago Budd was warmly welcomed into eternity by the Lord that he loved and served but right now all of us who miss him, we're all feeling that loss of losing him. And we're feeling that pain as a body. I mean if it wasn't for this church, Budd's life and my life would have never intersected, and that's part of the beauty of the church. You see, God has taken people who have absolutely nothing in common with each other except their relationship with Christ, and he takes these people from every tribe, tongue, and nation and he puts them all in this metaphorical jar and he shakes them all up and then he dumps them out at one location, in this case 25 Sullivan Avenue, and he says, okay, for the rest of the watching world, show them how I love you. This is how Jesus put it to his disciples. He said: *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* Now it's hard not to notice that Jesus put this in the form of an imperative, that is a command. He didn't say I have a new suggestion for you. I have a command for you. And then he

commands us to do something that we think no one, not even Jesus can command. Quote -- *"That you love one another just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."*

You see, our culture has been taught for many, many years now not by God, not through scripture, but by Hollywood through television that love is not something that you do, it's something that you feel. And if you don't feel it, then you are free to act on that lack and go off searching for someone or something that will help you feel it again. And when you stop feeling it, well then, you are free to start that search all over again. But that's not love; that's a lie. I mean I've had a number of people tell me flat out that the reason why they don't come to church or seldom come to church is because they just don't feel it. The love, that is. I mean they really don't like so-and-so and they don't like this type of person and that type of person. Other people have told me they don't come to church because of a hurtful situation they may have been involved in either at this church or some other church some time in the past, they don't want to risk being hurt again. Still others don't want to be associated with an institution that's got all kinds of red flags and black marks going against it from national news headlines all the way down to our local scandals, and you add to that genuine fear of Covid-19 and you've got the perfect storm that's successfully pushing people away from the local

church. They just as soon get their spiritual feeding from Christian TV or Christian radio, maybe through blogs or church service broadcast over You Tube of which we are one, even though abandoning gathering together flies in the face of the clear commandment God gives in scripture. *Hebrews 10:24* says: *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

I'll be the first one to say, neglecting to meet together may have made perfect sense when Covid-19 first appeared but even after its resurgence, it's important to notice just what is at stake when we neglect to meet with each other. See, God never intended for church to be a place where smiley-faced phonies get together to exchange pleasantries, sing a couple of songs and then listen to a spiritual pep talk. That's not the idea. Instead church is supposed to be an outpost for the kingdom of God, a place where believers gather to learn from and to hear from the king through his word proclaimed and preached and sung, a place where folks see the business end of what it really means to love your neighbor. I'll be the first one to tell you sometimes that is messy, sometimes that's unpleasant, sometimes it's downright hurtful and painful. See, if your idea of loving someone is reaching deep down



inside you to find some warm fuzzies and you don't find those warm fuzzies there, well that doesn't excuse you of the command of your King -- quote -- *"that you love one another just as I have loved you."* I mean Jesus had no time, he had no tolerance for us just loving people who are loveable. He said: *"For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"* I mean Jesus never told the disciples to go looking for love. He told them to exercise love right where they were. *"That you love one another: Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."*

And you know, when each of us stands before God's judgment throne and he asks us how he went about the task of loving the brothers and sisters of the church that we were a part of, this church here on Sullivan Avenue, I don't want to be in a position of saying, well, I really didn't care for them. They really weren't my cup of tea, especially this one or that one, that one really got on my nerves. See, like it or not your brothers and sisters are just that, they are your brothers and sisters, and God will hold you and me responsible for loving these people just as though we are loving those that are unlovable. And he says you are to love people you just might not like because we're in a war and every one of us is in the same foxhole.

You know I saw something extraordinary this past Sunday. I was watching a football game, Cowboys against Washington, and Washington literally got smacked by the Cowboys. I think they were losing by some 21 points in the first quarter when a fight broke out. Now fights on the field are very, very common in a football game. It's a very intense competition, that's kind of normal. This one was different. This one was on the sideline and it was among Washington's own players. As the announcer said, he said he'd never seen a fight break out among two players on the same team because that never happens. I mean it's just assumed that you're in a battle and when you're in a battle like professional football, no matter how bad things get, you got a brotherhood of teammates that are fighting the same battle together. And so when teammates start fighting, you know you've got big, big problems. I don't think it's that far a leap to recognize that the church is in a much, much bigger battle. And it's not just a battle, it's a war, and it never stops. And there's nothing the world loves to see more than individual teammates in the church just duking it out. And more often than not, that's exactly where they see it, not in the center, not where the action is but out somewhere on the sidelines. I've said this before, I'll say it again, there are lots of different reasons that people give for leaving a church, some of them legitimate, some of them not so much. But among the reasons that people have given for leaving a church, the most

painful to me would be someone saying, I'm leaving because I just can't get along with this person or that person. I don't think that's ever happened to us, but I know we've come very close on a number of occasions. Part of my job is to sit in on disputes, knowing that they are a normal part of what church is all about. And if you doubt that, I would just direct you to the very first church in Acts 6 and read about the battle that they got in over who to serve. One of the things I like to point out to people who are struggling in this area is that God intentionally puts us together with people that we might struggle with just so that iron can sharpen iron, so that all of us can lay our own egos and agendas at the foot of the cross. You see, that's what growing is all about and that's what community is supposed to represent, and that's what doesn't happen when people stay home to avoid the struggle of close contact. The point of close contact is to stir us up. Again: *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

God has given us so many wonderful gifts. This morning we've only had time to look at three of them: God's word, God's wisdom, and the body of Christ. But I think we can see how all of these fit together in one grand and glorious gift that we need to see as this

year's priority.

Let me conclude with this thought. This is a thought from the authors of *Revisiting Church*. By the way, I've got twenty copies of this book. We all, every one of you need to read it. It's a wonderful, wonderful book. This is what the authors say which I really appreciated. They say: "No one gets the church they want. But everyone gets the church they need. We all need churches that call us to something greater than ourselves. We need churches that call us plainly to God. When we follow the example of Jesus, we get the church we need." Consider that as we are about to take the cup.

*1 Corinthians 11:25 says: In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." So take and drink.*

Fred's going to grab the rest of the folks that are downstairs to come on up for this part. This part is what we call head, heart, and feet. Head, heart, and feet is when we try to establish some kind of practical understanding of just what it means to understand and worship Christ. And you know, eight years ago -- I should just back up a little bit. I was thinking about Budd, thinking about

his ministry here at this church. He was here for some, I don't know, 18, 19 years I think he came here? And so I was looking back and I remember he had substituted for me preaching some eight years prior to that and I had tried to get him many, many times to preach but our schedules just overlapped in a way that made that very, very difficult. But after I learned of Budd's home going, I went back and looked at his sermon. I've listened to it twice. And I was astounded at how fresh and how exactly to the point it is about the gift of the church and the role that we play in it.

And so Budd, I have one last task for you, and that task is this, would you sum up the message we just gave this morning and close us in prayer. So let's watch Budd from eight years ago.

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