

Good morning! In our early days as Christians, Pam and I attended a church called House of Bread, which was the English translation of the word Bethlehem. Nearly everyone in it was about our age, around twenty years old. As you might imagine, it was a very relational church. We met in small groups during the week; we hung out together and went to Bible studies and seminars together. We were very much a part of one another's lives and saw each other three or four times a week. In addition to all that, we were all going through the same life-events at the same time: weddings, having kids, moving up in our jobs. When Pam and I moved to another town and finally left that church, it was hard to find a church where we felt the same way about being together; in fact, we never have! One problem was that for years we were trying to duplicate what we had back then, but we are no longer young people living through the most adventurous stages of life. We still hunger for a sense of community though, and have found it in different ways in different churches. This morning, let's consider this need for relationship as we read two passages together:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. **Eph. 4:3**

I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. **John 17:21-22**

In our first passage, Paul says, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit." It's interesting to me that Paul doesn't say to create unity, but to keep it. Christian unity is not a human project. This connectedness, this belonging to one another, is a reflection of a relational unity that comes from God. You and I have been invited into the great Trinitarian love story that existed before the beginning of time. As we come together, Jesus says that He will be present and His Presence overflows in love for others. In our second passage, we read that a community of loving, unified people is God's signature. This is why the experience of community is so wonderfully life-giving. We are in the circle of love, but the circle is not fixed---it is meant to continually widen. Every relationship is an opportunity to live in and intentionally extend the fellowship of the Trinity. How do we do that? Forgive someone; encourage someone; extend compassion; be reconciled; show mercy. These intentional acts, both within the church and without, offer opportunities to "keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." Why must we make every effort to keep the unity that comes from God? So the world will believe, because Jesus likes it...and because it's the happiest way to live!