**Connected in Christ**

Hebrews 10:19-25

Consider for a moment: what IS the church?

***What makes a church a church?***

* The building or the property?
* Registration with the government as a 501c3?
* A paid pastor who went to seminary?
* A well-designed worship service with five songs, a Scripture and a sermon?

If you took all of those things away, would you still have a church?

**What makes a church a church?**

* A building
* Non-profit status
* Paid pastor
* Planned worship service

I think we can all look at that list and say, “Yes, it’s still a church even without those things - or even without a children’s ministry or youth group or official men’s ministry or women’s ministry.” Ok, so what makes a church - a church? **What is the irreducible minimum** that if you don’t have THAT, you don’t have a church?

***PEOPLE. Right? Believers.*** You need a group of believers. Period. Full stop. That’s it. That’s all you need. It helps to have a Bible - but there are places in the world where all the Christians have are a few fragments of Scripture; where it’s illegal to gather as any kind of large group; where seminaries can’t exist officially.

One of the things that drove the multiplication of **the underground church in China** was the fact that it was illegal to gather in a large group or to be an official church. So as soon as a gathering reached 20-24 people, they had to divide it in half. It was simply too dangerous to get more than 24 people together at a time. And since they couldn’t send their pastors away to ***a formal seminary***, do you know what accomplished that training for them?

**PRISON**. It was just a matter of time before a pastor would be arrested and the standard jail term was three years. By the end of those three years, do you know what happened?

* Those pastors learned to PRAY.
* They learned to desperately depend on each other.
* They learned to memorize Scripture.
* They saw that Jesus would provide for them and their loved ones.

The book, *The Insanity of God* tells stories from China and the persecuted church. And it was actually ***difficult for a pastor who had NOT been to prison***. He simply wasn’t respected. It was a rite of passage where you established your credibility and the genuineness of your faith under fire.

So, think of the underground church in China or the middle east. And we will see in Hebrews 10 what true community looks like.

**What True Community Looks Like:**

1. **Celebrate** Jesus Together
2. **Seek** God Together
3. **Stand** Firm Together
4. **Serve** Faithfully Together

Here is a good ***summary of CHURCH***. Worship. Prayer. Faith. Service. That’s community. That’s CONNECTING. You don’t need a building. You don’t need a pastor. You don’t need an official program. You don’t need a piano or a guitar. ***You just need EACH OTHER.***

That’s all **the early church** had! They most often just meet in homes. Fancy church buildings didn’t come along until 300 years later and the conversion of Constantine - which many Christian historians consider the WORST thing that ever happened to Christianity. It certainly brought an end to the viral movement that was the early church.

Now, we have no plans to sell our property or abandon these buildings. I certainly hope there is no coup being prepared to get rid of the pastor. But ***the day may come*** - and it may not be very far off - ***when we can’t meet publicly anymore***; when they remove our tax-free status; when they confiscate our buildings; when it becomes illegal to preach and teach things from the Bible like “marriage is the union of one biological male and one biological female.” Many are trying right now to classify that statement a hate crime. Pastors will not be hard to find or to round up. I have no delusions that I can “live off the land,” for a while. I can hardly survive a night of camping.

Our application as we prepare for the end times is not to become avid “preppers” in terms of stockpiling supplies, but to ***prepare our HEARTS*** to stand firm in Christ and to prepare our MINDS with the knowledge that **church is US**. 2 or 3 believers - that’s the church. 5 or 10, that’s a blessing! 20 is a force to be reckoned with.

For now, ***let’s take advantage of the freedom*** we have to gather for worship and prayer and Bible study and service and evangelism in our community. It may not be long before all of those things become illegal. And we won’t stop any of them, we will just have to take them underground like they do in many other countries right now. So what does true community look like? First:

**What True Community Looks Like:**

1. **Celebrate** Jesus Together

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus…” Heb. 10:19

The first thing the church does is CELEBRATE. ***We sing the praises of the Lord Jesus***. We rejoice in His finished work on the cross. We worship with all of our hearts.

Have you ever thought of the significance of ***opening your mouth to SING***?

At the end of the **classic Christmas movie, Elf**, do you remember Buddy’s Dad wasn’t singing? He was just rolling his eyes and mouthing the words until Buddy’s little brother called him out. “The best way to spread Christmas cheer is… ***SINGING LOUD for all to hear***.” And everyone had to sing. That mattered for the Claus-o-meter - because it was an expression of FAITH in Santa.

Let’s not press that analogy too far. The point is that ***singing expresses our hearts***. It reveals what we really love. There’s a reason that when I proposed to Kristin, I sang her a song I had written. Thankfully there is no documentation anywhere we can find of that song. I’m sure it was terrible. But the record shows that she said “Yes.” So here we are. If you’ve ever heard me sing when my mic is left on in the livestream you know that “a little pitchy” is a generous assessment of my vocals. But my heart came through when I sang for Kristin.

And that’s how it should be when we gather as a church and sing the praises of King Jesus. ***Our HEARTS should come through as we sing***. Some of us “make a joyful noise.” Others of you can hit the notes and sing harmonies and we all appreciate you for it. But the value of worship is not in hitting all the notes or having the most impressive worship band in town. (Though I would say that ours is up there!) The value of worship is to give thanks and praise to Jesus - the One who is worthy of all of our honor and glory and blessing.

The **book of Hebrews** documents, in meticulous detail, the meaning of Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross. Here in verse 19 the writer talks about CONFIDENCE to enter the most holy place of God’s glorious presence - not because of our rituals or our bloodlines, but entirely because of the blood of Jesus. Look back a few verses.

1. **Celebrate** Jesus Together
	* Covered by His **Sacrifice**

“But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins he sat down at the right hand of God.” Heb. 10:12

One sacrifice to end the need for all sacrifices. All the lambs, all the bulls, all the goats that were killed to atone for the sins of God’s people pointed ahead to the one final sacrifice of the Son of God. Look at the results in verse 14.

1. **Celebrate** Jesus Together
	* Covered by His **Sacrifice**

“For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” Heb. 10:14

If you have committed your heart and life to Jesus, **look at what this says about you**. The sacrifice of Jesus - His precious blood - has been applied to YOU and in the courtroom of God you have been PERFECTED for all time. Even as you are in the process of being sanctified, you have already been declared righteous, holy and perfect in Christ.

That should absolutely blow your mind. ***Not only are your sins covered, they are GONE***. Not a single thing you did wrong can be held against you. Not a single thing you failed to do remains on your record. When God looks at you, He sees JESUS - He sees perfection. And by implanting that righteousness IN YOU, you are being sanctified to become more holy and righteous throughout your life.

Do you see what we celebrate every time we gather? **We celebrate JESUS**. We sing the wonderful truth of the gospel. This is what unites us - our common faith in Jesus, our love for Him, our joy in Him. This is ***why we SING our hearts out*** - because Jesus paid it all - all to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain, he washed it white as snow.

**This is the church**. This is CONNECTING. Do you see the significance of the simplicity of it?

* A husband and wife bowing their heads to pray together before bed - that’s the church.
* A small family watching Phil Wickham on YouTube and singing along with him - that’s the church.
* Two friends meeting for coffee and opening the Bible together - that’s the church.
* A small group encouraging one another and praying for each other - that’s the church.

First, we celebrate Jesus. Second.

**What True Community Looks Like:**

1. **Seek** God Together

“Let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith…” Heb. 10:22

Here’s **the first COMMAND** of this passage. SINCE we have confidence to enter God’s presence and SINCE we have a great high priest, King Jesus - therefore, let’s draw near. Let’s approach the throne of grace. Let’s seek the Lord ***with sincere hearts, not divided hearts***. Let’s come to the Lord with full assurance, knowing our relationship with God is not based on our worthiness but Jesus’ worthiness.

1. **Seek** God Together
	* **Calling** on Jesus’ Name

“Since we have a great high priest… Let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith…” Heb. 10:22

**We come together in JESUS’ NAME**. We pray in His Name. We approach God the Father boldly only because we come in the Name of His Son. Jesus is our Great High Priest. He represents us. He is our mediator.

**The High Priest** played a very important role in Israel. One man was designated High Priest, and it was no small thing to receive that appointment. You had to be of ***a specific lineage*** - not just in the tribe of Levi but descended from Aaron, the brother of Moses. From that select ancestry you also had to prove yourself through your service as a regular priest.

The book of Hebrews is filled with Jewish, priestly images and terminology. We are invited, even ***exhorted to enter the MOST HOLY PLACE*** - but that was unthinkable in ancient Israel. Only one man - the High Priest - was allowed to enter the holy of holies, and even he could only enter there one time each year, and then only after many elaborate rituals of sacrifice and cleansing.

***The High Priest would wear a special ephod*** - an ornate chest piece with 12 precious jewels on it, representing the 12 tribes of Israel. Carrying the people of God on his chest, the priest would enter the most holy place where the ark of the covenant rested and where the glory of God dwelt.

So, the average Jewish person had **access to the presence of God**, ***but only through a representative***; really through layers and layers of representatives. Regular priests could work in the temple area. Jewish men could approach the temple courts. Jewish women could come to the outer courts. Gentiles - like most of us here - could only come up to the outer walls of the temple area.

Prayer has become so common - so regular for us - that ***we have lost the sense of awe and reverence*** for how impossible it is for sinners like us - unclean Gentiles no less - to dare approach God directly. Yes, the way is open. Yes, we are secure in Christ. Yes, God is our loving Father in heaven.

But still, **our God is a consuming fire**. Still, we worship and pray to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We bow before the holy God of heaven. To approach God in worship and prayer is to enter the most holy place.

So, when we worship and pray we come with both ***boldness and humility***. We seek the Lord with blessed assurance, knowing that we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. But we also pray and bow with full reverence and submission - overwhelmed by the glory and power and holiness of God. There is a beautiful tension here.

On the one hand, we wrestle with **the TRANSCENDANCE of God**. God is exalted and glorious, beyond our ability to comprehend much less to approach. He transcends us in every way.

But at the same time, we celebrate **the IMMANENCE of God** - His closeness to us. This is what the incarnation of Jesus accomplished. God came near. We have direct access.

What bridges the gap to the transcendent God of heaven is JESUS - our great High Priest. Apart from Him we would be absolute fools to approach the holy presence of God. But with Jesus beside us, we can approach God and we are invited and exhorted to in passages like this one. LET US draw near. Listen to the language of the temple.

1. **Seek** God Together
	* **Calling** on Jesus’ Name

“Let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” Heb. 10:22

***Two things were used to cleanse people and objects*** in the temple area: blood and water. The blood of a sacrifice was sprinkled on the altar and utensils and at times on the priest himself. “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” But water was also used to wash hands and prepare a priest to handle the holy things and approach the glorious presence of God.

**Jesus cleanses with the water and the blood**. He provides a perfect atonement that enables us to draw near with a clean conscience - no longer hindered by our past sins and failures; knowing that we have been washed, we have been purified.

***Do you see what unites us?*** This is true connecting in the deepest spiritual sense. We celebrate Jesus, and we seek God together. Worship and prayer are the practices of the church that bind us to the Lord and to each other. We worship and pray as individuals but also in small groups and in large groups. We unite our hearts around the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Third.

**What True Community Looks Like:**

1. **Stand** Firm Together

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering.” Heb. 10:23

Here is the second command. Hold fast. The early church was severely tested in the confession of the gospel. Again, we are very blessed to have freedom to preach and teach the Bible. We can not only be Christians without fear, but we can share about Jesus without risking prison or persecution. But there were times in the first and second century when ***naming the name of Jesus was overtly illegal***; when Christians were called before judges and forced to deny Jesus and exalt Caesar or die.

The book of Hebrews was probably written during the time of Nero, the first Roman Emperor to actively persecute Christians. Both Paul and Peter were killed by Nero, along with hundreds of other believers.

<https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/persecution-in-early-church-gallery>

**Persecution in the Early Church**

* Claudius expelled believers from Rome - A.D. 52
* Nero set fire to Rome (blaming Christians) - A.D. 64
* Domitian named himself “God the Lord” - A.D. 81-96
* Trajan killed Ignatius of Antioch - c. A.D. 110
* Marcus Aurelius increased persecution - A.D. 161-180

Much of the New Testament addresses these very ***real and pressing concerns*** - these legitimate fears for life and limb. Paul was beheaded. Peter was crucified upside down. Ignatius was torn apart by wild animals.

The way that Trajan set up to grant pardon to an accused Christian was for them to offer a sacrifice to the Roman gods. Of course, true followers of Jesus refused to do this and were executed. So, it was no small thing to hold fast the confession.

1. **Stand** Firm Together
	* Confident in the **Faithfulness** of God

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.” Heb. 10:23

Many believers did waver. Many fled the persecutions. ***But many believers stood firm*** and willingly gave their lives, standing firm in their hope. How? Because they trusted in the promises of God, that the end of this life is not the end. And so ***“the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church.”*** The testimony unto death of so many faithful followers of Jesus - including 11 of the apostles; all but John died for their faith.

And so, we stand today ***on the shoulders of giants*** like Ignatius and Justin Martyr, like Polycarp and countless nameless believers who refused to compromise their testimony. And many, like Athanasius - to whom we owe our clear understanding of the incarnation of Jesus, fully God and fully human - lived most of his life in hiding and on the run; often in exile because his views were the minority.

Fast forward to more modern heroes like **John Huss and John Wycliffe** - the early pioneers of Scripture in the common tongue. Huss was burned at the stake and Wycliffe died of a stroke, but his remains were burned and his followers were severely persecuted. William Tyndale followed in their footsteps and was strangled and burned to death. The list goes on into modern times with people like Jim Elliot and Nate Saint.

Heroes of the faith who held fast the confession without wavering - even in the face of great fear and death. Because ***they knew that God was faithful***. They knew they could count on the promises of God, especially of eternal life in Christ. Look down to verse 25.

1. **Stand** Firm Together
	* Confident in the **Faithfulness** of God

“Encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” Heb. 10:25

This is how we encourage each other - by looking to the day that Jesus comes back and makes all things new. **The Great Day of the Lord** is coming, and it is coming soon, brothers and sisters. When the last trumpet sounds, we will see Jesus, riding a white horse and leading the hosts of heaven, coming in blinding glory and total victory, to reign forever - with every enemy defeated before him. Death will be no more. Sin will be gone forever. Evil and injustice will be removed. Pain and sorrow and suffering will be a thing of the past. He will wipe every tear from our eyes and welcome us into our eternal home - a remade earth, forever united with His spiritual kingdom.

***This is vital to our fellowship together!*** We need to encourage one another with these promises and remind each other of the goodness and faithfulness of God. Study His promises and hold fast to them with great gratitude and joy. This is why it’s so helpful to study the Bible together - because every page highlights the goodness and faithfulness of God; His grace and mercy; His unending love.

Sometimes, on our own, ***we can lose sight of who God is and how WORTH IT*** all of this is for His sake and for the glory that awaits us when we cross the finish line and step into eternity. Just to hear our Father say, “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master.” Just to see His smile. Just to feel the embrace of King Jesus. Just to see God face to face. “He who promised is faithful.”

So, we celebrate Jesus together. We seek God together in prayer. We stand firm in our faith together, through all the ups and downs of life. And one more.

**What True Community Looks Like:**

1. **Serve** Faithfully Together

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good deeds.” Heb. 10:24

The translation I grew up with for this verse was ***“spur one another on”*** - more of a cowboy translation. The ESV makes it “stir up one another.” Same idea, just more of a beverage analogy. Things do tend to settle, don’t they? Like that old ***Kool-Aid powder*** from when you were a kid. Or - for us older people - ***Metamucil***. I am an avid preacher of the benefits of Metamucil. But if you let that stuff sit, for even a minute - it turns to jelly. Super gross. You have to stir, stir, stir - and then drink, drink, drink.

***People are like that too***. We need to be stirred up. Our passions tend to settle. Our love tends to stagnate. Our joy can deflate. ***We are like regular balloons***, instead of the helium kind. The writer of Hebrews is showing us where to get the helium to fill us up - from the gospel; reflecting on the person and work of Christ; coming together to celebrate Jesus and prayerfully seek the Lord.

But here the stir up to is different than before. You’d expect, with the context here that’s all about the priestly work of Jesus and His once for all sacrifice, you’d expect the calling to stir one another up to passionate worship and fervent prayer. But the call here is to love and good deeds. As Paul says in Galatians 6, ***we must not grow weary in doing good***.

And it’s easy to grow weary, isn’t it? Serving people, loving people is hard emotional work. Especially messy people. Imagine that **social worker** sitting down with a troubled teen who is in her third foster home. You know this teenager needs your full attention and understanding but you are tired. You are frustrated. You know the options out there for a troubled teenager are very limited.

Or think of the **nurse** in the cancer wing at the end of a long shift. She is exhausted. She had three patients die this week alone. She got yelled at multiple times today, not for anything she did wrong. She doesn’t feel appreciated by the doctors or hospital administration.

Or think about the **teacher** with another batch of bratty little kids. What is wrong with parents today? Do they not believe in discipline at all? Do the kids run the home? They certainly try to run the classroom. But the teacher has to buckle down and help them with reading and math and knows that one kid will need extra time today - and the teacher’s aide called in sick yet again.

The list could go on forever, right? You volunteer with the **kids or the youth group**. You help out on **workdays** and end up pulling the same weeks and cleaning the same gutters year after year. You have **aging parents** who seem to have an unending list of needs and doctor’s appointments.

This is why we need each other! This is **why CONNECTING - real community** - is so essential for every one of us. On our own, we will wear out. We will settle down. We need some people beside us to cheer us on, to stir us up.

1. **Serve** Faithfully Together
	* Consistently **Encouraging** One Another

“Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.” Heb. 10:25

If you are going to stir up your brother or sister, if you are going to encourage them, guess what? **You have to SHOW UP**. You have to meet together. Regularly. Consistently. The average churchgoing believer attends worship twice a month. The U.S. average now is pretty bleak. 20% of Americans attend church every Sunday. That number jumps to 40% who attend at least once a month.

<https://www.churchtrac.com/articles/the-state-of-church-attendance-trends-and-statistics-2023>

So, 60% of Americans don’t go to church at all (even if some say they do). 20% show up once in a while. 20% are there pretty much every week. What those numbers tell me is that ***Half the people who “go to church” are kidding themselves.*** Because the Bible is clear. It’s not just this verse that commands us to meet together regularly. It’s the expectation behind the other **50 one another commands** in the New Testament. How are you going to love and serve and build up one another without showing up?

***Jesus washed his disciples’ feet*** and then dropped the mic saying, “There you go. That’s the example. That’s what it looks like to love each other. Do that.” You can’t wash feet over zoom or catch it on YouTube. You have to show up. You have to be physically present.

This series is called CONNECTING. If you’re not in a Community group or Discipleship Group now, or some kind of Bible study or regular gathering with other believers - that is your assignment between now and Easter. Find a group. Plug into a fellowship. Find at least one or two other believers with whom you can obey this passage.

“Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day approaching.” Hebrews 10:24-25

Who can you regularly stir up? Who is good at stirring you up? Who can you encourage? Who is good at encouraging you? It has to be both ways. This is not about going to the salon or the massage parlor to get your needs met. It’s about **ONE ANOTHERING**. That’s connecting - giving yourself away and experiencing the love of Jesus in a new way in the process.

We have **all kinds of groups at Oakwood**. They meet at different times in different places. Some just men, some just women. Some mixed groups. Some with older folks, some with younger. Some like early mornings, others like evenings. If you can’t find a group that works for you, then it’s time for you to start a new one. We embrace the Home Depot motto here - ***YOU CAN DO IT, we can help***. For too long the church has done everything like a full-service buffet. We have communicated, as paid church leaders, WE CAN DO IT, you can help. But that’s backwards. YOU CAN DO IT. My job is not to arrange everything for you and let you decide if I did it well enough. My job is to equip YOU to do the work of ministry.

And central to the work of ministry is CONNECTING. We are Oakwood COMMUNITY Church. Community is literally our middle name. And this is our vision for community:

**What True Community Looks Like:**

1. **Celebrate** Jesus Together
	* Covered by His **Sacrifice**
2. **Seek** God Together
	* **Calling** on Jesus’ Name
3. **Stand** Firm Together
	* Confident in the **Faithfulness** of God
4. **Serve** Faithfully Together
	* Consistently **Encouraging** One Another
* We are a church family united in celebration of Jesus - and His finished work.
* We are a community that seeks God together in prayer, calling on the Name of Jesus to work in us and through us.
* We are connected so we can stand firm, united through the storms and challenges of this dark and broken world - because “He who promised is faithful.”
* And we are committed to serving - we are about loving the hurting and broken, making a difference in this world. To do any of this we need each other. We need you - connected and growing with us.

Come back next week to see the POWER of true connection. Something happens when you risk real relationship. Jesus shows up.

Let’s pray that the Lord would bind us to Himself and each other like never before!