

Matthew 16:18 (NLT2) ¹⁸ Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means 'rock'), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ.

Amen.

When the church shut down for several months at first I enjoyed sleeping in on Sunday mornings. We would tape the service during the week so on Sunday morning I did not have any responsibilities except to get a good night's sleep. After couple of weeks something inside of me felt rather empty, incomplete, like I had forgotten to do something real important, but I did not know what it was. We were working hard in our home writing and putting devotions online, doing prayer meetings online, and more, but still there was something not quite right, something absent. Yes, it was great to sleep in on Sunday mornings but that gnawing feel of having lost something significant did not die down and I did not know what it was.

Christianity at the core is relational. Since the Garden of Eden God has always been calling, gathering, and bringing together an assembly of God worshippers. God is so glorious. God's glory gives to us reason to worship with God's people. God set aside one day of the week for that specific purpose. Having a day of rest and worship is in our DNA. God created that day for us, not us for that day. There is no one, there is nothing that is worthy of our worship other than God. And God always calls people together to worship Him. During shelter in place, we lost the privilege of gathering together, of being together, of enjoying one another's company in the Presence of God. That left an empty feeling that I did not like, nor did I ever get used to.

When the doors reopened, I think we all gained a new appreciation of being together in the name of Jesus under one roof. Christianity at its core is relational; let me tell you why. At

the core of who God is, God is the essence of relationship. God created us in His image so at the core of who we are is a relational mode for which we were created.

1. **God is the essence of relationship.** What do I mean by that? Who is God? God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God in three persons, blessed Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have always been in a perfect relationship, in harmony, completely one with each other from eternity past and will be for all eternity future. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit's relationship with each other is why at our core we are relational beings, being created in the Image of God. God has wired us first of all to be in relationship with God and secondly in relationship with each other in Christ. In Christ, we are one family, one in Christ.

Matthew 12:47 (NLT2) ⁴⁷ Someone told Jesus, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, and they want to speak to you." **Matthew 12:48 (NLT2)** ⁴⁸ Jesus asked, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" **Matthew 12:49 (NLT2)** ⁴⁹ Then he pointed to his disciples and said, "Look, these are my mother and brothers. **Matthew 12:50 (NLT2)** ⁵⁰ Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!"

2. **Christianity at its core is relational.** The first relationship any of us have is with our parents and siblings. At birth, our lives are completely dependent on our parents. If they did not feed us, change us, and love us, we would die. The connection between parent and child is life saving and life giving. Jesus tells us in the passage I just read that Christ in us means we are each other's mother, brother, sister, father, all who live and do the will of God. The church is the family of God. We are family united in Christ. We were born again into a family that we will be with forever and ever.

Something in the state of Washington that we are known for is our Salmon. Eating barbecued salmon that is covered with lemons and spices is something that is out of this world. I did not appreciate it until I moved away. My mouth waters just thinking of eating salmon with

potato salad and more at reunions with family and friends. Add to that homemade ice-cream for dessert and it is a huge feast.

I do know how great Salmon tastes. Something else I know about Salmon is they were created to live in water. If a Salmon happens to jump onto dry ground and cannot make it back into the water eventually that salmon dies and does it ever stinketh. Salmon were created by God to live in the water. It is their habitat. Out of water they dry up and die. In the water they thrive.

Please hear this. God has gifted us by saving us and adopting us into God's family.

3. **Christianity is relational, and it thrives when we gather together as family to worship God in all His glory.** It is called being the church, the body of Christ. Any Christian jumping out of the church or missing the weekly gatherings is like a Salmon trying to thrive on dry ground. Before long the salmon dries up. Christianity is a corporate act. God gathers us together into one body, under one roof, to enjoy the Presence of God together in a close-knit family relationship,

Created in God's image, we are relational beings. Saved by grace through faith God has brought us into God's family. Inside of us resides the Holy Spirit and it is the Holy Spirit inside of us that draws us into the church, week after week. It is how we live. The church is not a building. It is being in relationship with God and with each other. It is what we were created for. The Holy Spirit links us, binds us together, and gives us a bond of love for one another.

During my sixth-grade year I asked my mother if I could go to a Christian school. I wanted to be in a Christian atmosphere. As I look back now, I know God was calling me to that particular school in North Seattle. The door opened for me to attend and there I was from 7th to 12th grade. All of my teachers were committed Christians and every class started with prayer. God was at the basis of our studies. My Dad always told me, "Make your teachers your best friends" and that I did. I had super long conversations with my teachers, one on one. They told

me their testimonies, how they came to know Jesus. They would tell me what God was teaching them in their devotions. They would pray for me and yes, I would pray for them and with them. In these conversations I would begin to feel something that I did not know what it was. It was a real good feeling. Sometimes that feeling brought tears to my eyes. I expressed to my teachers this feeling and they told me I was sensing, I was feeling the presence of God as we conversed, as we fellowshiped with each other. My teachers literally spent hours with me and I with them for all those years. They poured their lives into me and in all this God was greatly glorified. Those bonds of love did not end at graduation. I would visit those I was closest to yearly until God took them home to heaven. The fellowship we experienced was sweet, God ordained, completely of the Lord.

4. **The church is God's institution for God's family.** The church was birthed by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost although since Adam and Eve, God has always had a community of believers gathering to worship God and to have fellowship with one another. God has gifted us with spiritual gifts to build up the church. God has gifted us with Himself, God's Presence within us and that is Who draws us into the church to be in relationship with God and each other.

After high school I attended a Christian college and then seminary, cramming 8 years into 12. In all of those years the Christian fellowship was deep, good, and healthy. We had weekly prayer meetings where God's Holy Presence was strongly felt, and we had such love for each other. The church is God's gift to us so we can thrive, living for Christ, being a light in a dark world.

5. **Christian friendships are treasures from God that will last for eternity.** One person has said, Christian fellowship helps us to see God more clearly. When we have conversations centered on Christ, we can see something of God in the person or persons we are speaking with. In Christian friendships we feel affirmed in Christ, accepted totally, and loved unconditionally. It is what the church is all about.

I know what it is like for God to flood my heart with love for a particular person and a particular group of people. I am a Lutheran pastor because God flooded my heart with love for my Lutheran brothers and sisters in Christ and called me to serve in the Lutheran church. I believe God calls us to a particular church, to a particular body of believers where our souls are fed and where we experience together the Presence of God in the word and sacrament. As relational beings we are motivated to build friendships one with another in Christ that sustain us in this life and will remain in the life to come.

When life gets tough it is those healthy relationships with one another that we draw upon. God sets those friendships up for our good and for the greater glory of God. The church is God's gift to us. We are God's gift to each other.

Since coming to St Mark, I have met the finest Christians I have ever known. The fellowship has been sweet, of the Lord, God ordained, and Spirit anointed. We are all in this together. God has brought us together, into this body of believers and in this God is so very good.

God is the essence of relationship. God has made us to be relational beings. We were brought into this world to be in relationship with God and to be the loving family of God.

6. **Christian fellowship is being bonded in love by God so we can all grow into the full stature of Jesus Christ.** That is the purpose of the church. What a great gift from God. Amen and Amen.