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God's Twitter: Wisdom for the Community Proverbs 29:2; Matthew 5:13-16

The Toone family is really treasuring our last few days of August. With our eldest Rachel heading off to Whitworth on Labor Day weekend, we are trying to soak up as much time together as we can. Last Monday the four of us we were walking the Harbor. Rachel had her arm draped through mine and we were walking and talking about her imminent departure for Whitworth University. It was very sweet. But within the first few hundred yards of our walk, we were greeted by three well-wishing Chapel Hill folks. (We never resent that, by the way. We consider it a privilege that folks want to acknowledge us and speak to us. We feel very loved.)

Still, as we left behind our third conversation in five minutes, Rachel turned and said, "I wonder what it will be like to take a walk and have nobody know me!" It wasn't a complaint. But both our kids have had the rare privilege of living in the same town and being in the same great church for all their lives. Rachel really **doesn't** know what it's like to be a stranger in a community. I'm very grateful for it. This community has made an eternal difference in our family. And I pray that we have made a difference, too.

In the Proverbs, Solomon has a lot to say about living in community. Normally, when we talk about "community" in a sermon, we are talking about church community. What does it mean to live together as the Body of Christ? How can our church life be the example of love and fellowship and support that the New Testament teaches?

But that's not what we're talking about this morning. Solomon cares about how believers live together and treat **each other**. But he also wants to remind us that the children of Yahweh have an impact on the **community around us**... or at least we should.

One of my favorite regions in the country of Turkey is Cappadocia, an area sprinkled with the most unusual geological formations called "Fairy Chimneys." In one particular area called Goreme, a monastery was established. It had 365 different chapels carved into these Fairy Chimneys. For hundreds of years, Christians retreated from society into this area to pray and worship God in seclusion.

But that's nothing compared to a guy from another city in Turkey called Antioch. Remember, Antioch was the home of the first Gentile church. This was the church that sent Paul and the other missionaries to evangelize the world. Some of the most important Christian leaders in the history of our faith came out of Antioch. And some of the weirder ones, too. In the 500s, a guy from Antioch named Simeon decided that he wanted to be closer to God and farther from civilization. So, he started living on top of a pillar. In fact, he came to be called Simeon the Pillar-Dweller.

And he liked it. In fact, as the years went by, the pillars got taller! In the end, Simeon was living on top of a 50 foot pillar on a platform 3 feet square surrounded by a wall so that he wouldn't fall off when he fell asleep. This is a picture of what is left of Simeon's 50-foot pillar after centuries the souvenir hunters got done with it.

There is certainly something commendable about a person who longs to be closer to God. We whose lives are so busy and noisy could learn a lot from Simeon. Maybe it wouldn't hurt us to climb up onto a pillar or into a tree house or on top of a mountain once in a while...just to shut out the noise; just to get closer to God. But I cannot imagine Jesus saying, "Go ahead and just stay on top of your pillar. I want you to escape from society." Jesus did say, "You are the salt of the earth." How can we be the salt of the earth when we are stuck high on our own religious pedestal? The only way you can be salt...the only way you can flavor and preserve this world...is to what? Climb off your pedestal! Get sprinkled throughout society!

Proverbs says the same thing. In this book, Solomon calls his people "the righteous." This doesn't mean that we are perfect, that we never make mistakes or are better than anyone else. The "righteous" in Proverbs are those who love God and are seeking to obey him; who are trying to live wisely in this world with a wisdom that comes only from God. The opposite of that is the "wicked." The Wicked are those who do not care about God, about God's wisdom or about living God's way.

Solomon assumes that the righteous will be mixed right into the middle of a wicked. And Solomon's conviction is that when we are, the world will be a better place. The Righteous... the lovers of God...the followers of Christ... when they climb down off their holy pedestals and inject themselves into their community... make it a better place. You've heard the expression "a rising tide lifts all boats?" Well, Solomon would say that God's people ARE the rising tide and that every boat, even those owned by pagans, will be lifted by our presence. Put differently, wherever God's people are found, they ought to bring blessing to the community around them.

That's what our text says: **"When the righteous thrive, the people rejoice; when the wicked rule, the people groan."** When God's people are living God's way with real integrity, not only does it benefit them; it benefits everyone around them. The more that God's values and standards are lifted up, the more the community has cause to rejoice. On the other hand, when the wicked rule...when those who do not love God and do not care about living his way... **are the dominant influence in society**, the community is miserable.

This theme... the powerful influence of the righteous upon larger society...appears again and again in Proverbs. (11:10-11) When **the righteous prosper, the city rejoices; when the wicked perish, there are shouts of joy. Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed.**

Or (14:34) Righteousness **exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people.**

The righteous in society... again, not the perfect people, but rather those who know and love God and seek to follow his ways... they make society better. They lift society up. And this is true for political leaders, too. Surround leaders with godly influence, and you will have better leaders and better society. (25.4) **Remove the dross from the silver, and out comes material for the silversmith; remove the wicked from the king's presence, and his throne will be established through righteousness.**

Solomon would say...and hundreds of years later, Jesus echoed his words in the Sermon on the Mount...society is desperate for the wholesome, life-giving influence of God's people. When they climb down from their religious pedestals...when they walk out of the church doors and inject themselves into their corner of the community...they make a difference for good. They bring hope and healing to that community. They provide a reason to rejoice.

Last week was the primary election. I am so proud that followers of Christ...one from within this church body...were willing to put themselves out there... put it on the line and run for office. What courage that takes, to expose yourself in that way! Win or lose, it is an honorable reflection of this theme. Followers of Christ offering to be the salt of the earth. And I'm sure that every single member of this congregation exercised their godly influence by taking the time to vote... right?

That is the implication of these passages. God's people...Christian folks...are not holed up in their churches, hiding from the world. They are coming to church to be equipped and encouraged and empowered so that they can go back into the world as salt and light. They are challenged to climb off of their religious pedestals and right back into their community... to be a blessing to the world.

Sometimes, we have no idea of the difference we are making. If we are seeking to live in a way that honors Christ, we may not even notice the lives that are being touched. In fact, sometimes, those that seem to have it most together in this world...successful, wealthy, connected people...are the ones who are most desperately in need of the hope and grace that only the Church can offer.

One such person is Ken. I want you to hear his story:

I had been separated from my wife for 6 months in 2003 when I heard of a new rock and roll service starting at Chapel Hill. I hadn't been to church in 25 years, and I didn't know that churches were allowed to play music with drums and electric guitars. I showed up to see what this church thing was all about. I hid up in the dark balcony not wanting to talk with anyone. When the music started, tears started flowing from my eyes and they wouldn't stop. I was so full of sadness, grief, regret, guilt, fear and anger. I had focused on my job and earning money for the prior 10 years and didn't even realize how all of the important relationships in my life had totally fallen apart. I had just gotten a good size raise at work and finally felt I could relax and enjoy life. I looked around and I was totally alone. I had driven away everyone who was important to me; my wife and kids wanted nothing to do with me, my parents live 1000 miles away and I had never developed or invested in building any friendships.

I started to attend church here every Sunday, weeping and sobbing up in the balcony, slowly starting to release all of the feelings I had stuffed and inside of me all of these years. In June 2004, my angry, controlling and prideful ways got me arrested in a family dispute. I felt I had all the answers, that I was in charge, and no one could tell me anything. My attorney thought it would be good for me to show that I was addressing my issues. So a month later I walked through the doors of Celebrate Recovery. I had considered going for months but was afraid...and couldn't admit that I couldn't fix myself on my own. I needed a nudge from the courts and was required to attend 12 sessions. I have now been to CR over 250 times. The first 12 times were required and all the rest have been voluntary.

I walked thru those doors a very angry, controlling, prideful and broken man. The vibes I was throwing off kept most people away, but there were a few people there who were brave

enough to approach me and talk with me. I remember my first meeting sitting in a small group of only men. No one was laughing or judging anyone. What they were doing was accepting and connecting, things that I had never been introduced too. It took a few meetings before I trusted enough to talk, and at the time, I had no idea what was even wrong with me. I learned later that all of my anger, pride and control was just masking the huge amount of fear, sadness, low self worth, and fear of abandonment and rejection. My heart was like a tangled reel of fishing line. When we tangle a fishing line what do we do? We usually cut it out, restring the pole and put on a new hook...it takes about 3 minutes. I was hoping that was how I would be fixed, but God doesn't work that way. God chose to start untangling my heart which takes quite awhile. God is the only one able to comprehend the mess I was in and the patience it has taken to get me where I am today. God is still working on me.

I came to Chapel Hill and CR a non believer, searching for something to help take away my pain. That first year I was in a CR step study working step 2, which is accepting that there is a power greater than myself that can restore me to sanity. I realized I didn't believe there was a higher power. I trusted only myself. That's when the leader of my group told me I didn't have to be a believer in Christ to participate in this program; I just had to be open to the possibility that Christ might be the Son of God. If the door to my heart was shut to that possibility then this program would not work. I then realized that the door to my heart was not only shut but locked. I chose to crack the door open just a little, God showed himself to me and that's when I became a believer.

Six years later the quality of my life has improved greatly. My relationships with my children have improved dramatically. I have real friends for the first time in my life, and I feel things. I feel all the feelings I was numb to 6 years ago. You can't heal if you can't feel.

I still struggle but I have a strong support network. I am still learning how to fully trust and surrender my will to God. I've been on 2 life-changing mission trips through Chapel Hill, one to South Africa and one to Israel. And, I'm slowly overcoming my fear of public speaking. I can't even believe I am standing up here talking with all of you.

Thank you, Chapel Hill, for helping me to experience real life. Your influence changed me forever.

One of the most important decisions a church can ever make is this: **do we exist for ourselves...or do we exist for others?** Do we exist as a monastic community where we can talk to each other and learn more religious things and hide from society? Are we all huddled on a pillar high in the air, away from the world and closer to God? Or...do we exist to serve the community around us? Do we exist to love the world that Christ loved and died for?

Our local paper, the Peninsula Gateway, runs a weekly "Cheers and Jeers" column. It's a chance for the readers to offer a public pat on the back or a poke in the eye for something on their mind. A few weeks ago, I read a "cheer" that said essentially this: "After looking for a long time, we have finally found a church that offers a great worship service on Sunday and doesn't pressure us to do anything." In other words, we can come and experience inspiring religious entertainment... and not have anything required of us.

That will never be your experience at Chapel Hill. We will always ask something of you because we do not believe we exist for ourselves. We exist, as a Church, to be an agent of hope and redemption and change in a society that desperately needs it.

That's why Go Sunday matters. Not because of all the work we will accomplish next week. (And we will.) But because, when our community sees us leaving our church building behind on a Sunday morning and worshipping God by serving the people around us, whether they love God or not... God will use that moment to lift this entire community up. He will use us to bless the people he loves. And they will rejoice.

Hundreds of us have signed up to be a part of Go Sunday next week. If you have not, could I plead with you to ask yourself, "Why not?" **Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted.** God is already using this church to bless this city. Go Sunday will be another unique and wonderful opportunity to do so again. So...no pillar-dwellers here, right? Today...after this service... won't you get signed up to bless our community?

Sermon Questions

1. Pastor Mark talked about Simeon the Pillar-Dweller. What are the good impulses that prompt Christians to pull away from society like this? How do Jesus' words from Matthew 5 about "salt and light" speak to such a decision?
2. How should we understand the people whom Solomon calls "the righteous?" What are they and what are they not? How are WE "the righteous?"
3. Now, read the following passages one after another and then comment on the role that Solomon envisions for "the righteous" in society. Proverbs 29:2; 11: 10-11; 14:34.
4. In what ways is it easy for us in the church to become Pillar-Dwellers?
5. How is Go Sunday an opportunity for us to fulfill this calling to be a blessing to our community? What are your plans for that day?