

THE ROAD
TO
ANTIOCH

A Series of Sermons
from
Bruce Van Blair

Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3;
14:24-15:5; 15:35

WHERE IS ANTIOCH?

Everyone knows that symbolically speaking, the two great roads of the Christian Faith are the Road to Damascus and the Road to Jericho. Nothing I say is intended to diminish the importance of these two great roads or anything they represent. They are profound, and Christianity is unimaginable without both of them. But we have not had time yet to deal much with THE RULE OF THREE. Do you also know that in Christendom, things *never* come in twos? Christianity is a religion of threes: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Body, mind, and soul. Faith, hope, and love abide, these three. On the third day He rose again. And so on. So what happened to the third road?

The Road to Damascus is about encounter between us and Jesus the Christ. It is not a relationship between equals! Conversion. Transformation. *“Behold I make all things new.”* New life, new purpose – even a new identity aware of the caring and support of almighty God.

The Road to Jericho is about compassion for another. (By the way, it is not about compassion for “others” in general. It is about compassion for another in particular.) Having received mercy ourselves – having been befriended by the Christ of God – we long to be agents of His mercy. There is much good in people, and no culture or religion anywhere is a stranger to amazing good deeds. After all, who made us? But in our tradition, Jericho is bigger than feeling sorry for somebody. Nevertheless, it is not a relationship between equals. By definition, people we encounter on the Jericho Road are needy and, in some way or another, we are trying to fill their need.

In Christendom, what is the name of the road traveled by equals? We are a religion of love. Jesus’ earthly ministry is founded and survives on the power of friendship. No other religion in the world puts as much emphasis on relationship as Christendom does. We even believe that God wants relationship with us, and in turn wants us in strong and beautiful relationships with each other that stretch unto eternity. Are there no equal relationships in love? Where is the third road?

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Something crucial is missing. And while it is not entirely missing, the category itself has been growing dim, feeble, misunderstood, and neglected before our very eyes. For the next few weeks, I hope you will take a brief tour with me on the Road to Antioch. Of course, a sight-seeing tour is not the same as really walking the road. But if we know it's there, then at least we can decide if we truly want to walk this Road to Antioch.

First we need to get oriented. With a good Bible Atlas, it's not very hard to find Antioch on the map. There is another Antioch, called Pisidian Antioch, in the heart of Asia. Paul visited it several times on his journeys, but Pisidian Antioch does not concern us here.

Some less obvious items may be interesting to some of you. Antioch is just over three hundred miles north of Jerusalem. It sits twenty miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea. The Orontes River flows north out of the Lebanon Mountains for over a hundred miles and then turns sharply west in a fertile plain separating the Lebanon Mountains from the Taurus Mountains. Antioch is near this curve in the river.

Seleucia Pieria, the port city at the mouth of the Orontes, was a satellite to the great city. We think, "How strange. Why not build the main city closer to the sea instead of having to haul everything twenty miles upriver?" But in the ancient world, it was the best way to protect a city against the warships of an enemy nation. With Seleucia Pieria as a seaport and with a good navigable river, Antioch was considered one of the great maritime cities of its day. In fact, Antioch was one of the greatest cities in the world back in the time of Jesus. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire (Rome, Alexandria, Antioch). It is estimated that it had a population of 800,000. It was the Roman capital of Syria, was a free city, and was called "The Queen of the East." (It had been the capital of the Seleucid Empire before Roman domination.) Roman emperors often visited Antioch. Its "Groves of Daphne" were ten miles in circumference, with waterfalls, cypress trees, and beautiful gardens. There was a famous sanctuary to Apollo there. It was a huge "pleasure" area.

Antioch included an exclusive district built on an island in the middle of the Orontes River – ancient Balboa Island. Eventually, the king's palace and grounds were built there, and only royalty and royal guests were allowed on the island. Severe earthquakes destroyed the island in the sixth century A.D.

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Where is Antioch? It's easy to find on the map. You can also find it in the Bible. (Acts 11:19-21) Many followers of Jesus fled from Jerusalem and Jewish-controlled territory as the persecution of Christians mounted. Stephen had been stoned to death. King Herod beheaded James, the brother of John. He arrested Peter, who would certainly have died also if he hadn't miraculously escaped. (Does that mean God loved Peter more than Stephen and James, or less than Stephen and James? I remember asking that question back in fifth grade because of the dumb way our Sunday School teacher told us the story of Peter's escape.)

Some Christians stayed in Jerusalem, of course. They were the most Jewish – the most conservative – of the Christians. They loved Jesus, but they hadn't departed from their Jewish way of life at all. They were able to fit in with their surrounding culture and all Jewish practices, just as before. Their leader was James – not John's brother, who we just mentioned was beheaded – but James the brother of Jesus Himself. This James was never a disciple, never a follower, never a true convert during Jesus' life. But Jerusalem understandably had enormous reputation, and being a blood brother of Jesus had given James enormous reputation as well. So James was head of the Christian movement in Jerusalem, and wouldn't that form and set the pattern of Christian Life and thought for the future?

How interesting! The Jerusalem church was logically the center and headquarters of Christianity. It was where all the big stuff happened. It was the City of David, so why not the city of David's greater son – the Messiah? People tended to assume so, even back then.

And who lived in Jerusalem? Christians nobody could tell were Christians, for the most part. They melted into their surroundings, doing what they had always done, just as they had always done it. They did not spread the news very far; it would bring persecution down upon them. They not only refrained from telling Gentiles about Jesus, they did everything in their power to stop others from doing so. And when they couldn't stop them, they insisted that at least all Gentile converts must become Jews, totally: get circumcised; get kosher; obey all the rules of Jewish custom and tradition, along with swearing to obey Torah. It was only natural; in their position in Jerusalem, the more that Christians were associated with anything non-Jewish, the more precarious their own lives became. Does this remind you of anybody you know? Melting into the society and culture around us is a

pretty sensible thing to do ... unless we believe in something different, and strongly so.

Meanwhile, the people who believed in Jesus – who intended to *live* like they believed in Him and couldn't shut up about it – had to flee. They had to pick up and find someplace else to live. They headed for Jewish relatives and friends – that is, Jewish communities – but *outside* of Israel. Jewish communities that lived in the midst of pagan surroundings were not as stringent as Jerusalem. The Book of Acts tells us that they went to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. The largest collection ended up in Antioch, because Antioch was the largest city in the region.

Doubtless, Antioch didn't even notice their coming. It was busy being one of the greatest Roman cities in the world – busy with its commerce, pleasures, celebrations, and governmental affairs. But into Antioch came refugees from the persecution of a tiny sect in Jerusalem, three hundred miles away. They settled mostly in the Jewish quarter. They had only what they could carry with them. They had to find work, food, and a place to live. But something burned within them that ... well, you know the rhetoric. Does it remind you of anybody you know? Anybody in your house?

Then something happened that nobody planned. They were Jewish, but Jesus had changed them. Nobody knew what that meant yet or where it would lead, except it had made them homeless. They talked to Jewish neighbors there in Antioch, and to each other. Until – and it seems so innocent – some of them (natives of Cyprus and Cyrene) began talking to Gentiles also. They were Jews but they were used to Gentile neighbors. Nobody had ever said they shouldn't talk to folk they ran into. Only, the response was surprising. Some of the Gentiles were powerfully drawn to what they heard, and they wanted to be part of it. Suddenly there were Gentiles hanging around, coming to the meetings, excited about what they were learning. Some of them even began to pray, and to turn their wills and their lives over to Jesus and His Kingdom. They also discovered the presence of the Holy Spirit, and started to walk the WAY, just like real people.

Now the fat was in the fire! Nobody planned it. (Well, no human did.) Nobody designed it ahead of time. But there it was. Either these Gentiles must be accepted into the church or they must be driven away. If accepted, they must be accepted on the authority of Jesus' love, or converted to Judaism along with their devotion to Jesus. *These* were

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the great issues of the first-century church. This was the real drama. Roman persecution, when it came, was no fun, but these were the real issues. Would the Jerusalem church, under the leadership of James, decide these issues? Who else could?

Where is Antioch? Antioch is where followers of Jesus first became known as Christians. Antioch is where the Christian church began to wrestle with its real identity, and shape, and purpose, and truth. Antioch is where Christianity began to perceive itself as something new and different from Judaism; something in its own right; something with a mission it could not forsake, yet far bigger than it could handle.

Antioch is where the church became a faith community. Antioch is where the first offering was taken to help others in trouble. Antioch is where the Christian missionary movement was born. Antioch is where Christians first practiced ordination: laying their hands on chosen leaders who would go act for them, and the church promising its support and granting them whatever authority it possessed. (To lay hands on someone says, “You are my hands and you go where I cannot go, but my hands back you up and their labor will support you.”) Antioch is where Christians learned to pray and fast together; to argue together; to decide together; to trust that the Holy Spirit would guide and instruct them as a church – that is, as a group, as a faith family. Antioch is where Christians became accountable to each other for the manner and intention by which they walked the WAY.

Antioch is where it happened: the fellowship of believers, the community of faith, the body of Christ. The Christian movement that swept the world did not come out of Jerusalem, though its faith was born there. It came out of Antioch. Antioch was the true center of the apostolic church. Jerusalem and Antioch fought each other over who had the truth – over who were the rightful leaders of Jesus’ church. Sometimes the battles were cordial, sometimes nasty. Well, you know what church life is like. Anyway, Antioch won, or we wouldn’t be here. The Road to Antioch is the road to the church, to the body of believers, to the fellowship of the Christian Way.

Do you feel it? It cannot be *only* our personal relationship with God in Christ Jesus. That’s what the Damascus Road is about. It cannot be *only* neighbor love – good deeds, righteousness, our own caring. That’s what the Jericho Road is about. Something essential is missing. Even Damascus and Jericho put together can still seem like an individual

operation: my faith, my good deeds, my spiritual journey, my perspective, my struggles and victories and defeats and all the rest. That is *not* Christianity! Vital parts of the Path, yes – but not Christianity. American religiosity, perhaps – but not Christianity.

Antioch is the road to community. Nobody walks the Christian Road alone, not even alone with Jesus. It is a contradiction of basic truth. Christianity *is* a church – a fellowship, the body of Christ, a body of believers. Nobody can love alone, and nobody can follow the Lord of Love in a vacuum. To be Christian is to be part of a body, part of a faith family, part of a fellowship.

For many people in our time, Christianity (and church membership) has become such a vague and jumbled hodgepodge that they no longer realize it is the most exciting and important possibility in all of life. It no longer calls most people to do anything specific, to take any steps, to make any progress in their faith.

At *this* church, we keep trying to remember: To be a Christian, we must do some things. We must turn our lives over to Jesus Christ. We must pray and read the Bible every day. We must tithe. We must be carriers of the Message – find and nurture our six. We must each have a spiritual mentor. We must seek our vocatio. We must receive, claim, and give forgiveness. If we do not do these things, we do not want the Christian Life. If we do not do these things, we cannot experience the Christian Life. The Christian Life is made up of – and made out of doing – such things.

Each of these steps or stages has many dimensions. Every single one of you who has tried any of them has found incredible surprise and delight awaiting you, and no doubt some pain and challenge. And we haven't finished with any of these familiar stages yet; we haven't become expert in even half of them. But it is time to add another factor: we need to walk the Road to Antioch together, and on purpose.

One of the requirements for the spiritual life is a faith community, a fellowship of believers. We each need to be part of a body of faith-friends – larger than our immediate families, smaller than the village or town in which we live. Loyalty, devotion, caring, and concern for this faith community rank next to the immediate family. This body – *ecclesia*, people, church – is like a laboratory where you try out and practice Christian principles before taking them into the world beyond.

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Church is supposed to take time, energy, discipline, devotion. It is not for spectators. If nobody in your church annoys you, disagrees with you, or stretches your capacity to love, then your church is too small. It is not helping you to grow. If you are not engaged in some project or purpose with your church – beyond your own personal needs or desires – then it has not turned into a church yet, at least not for you.

I am not even trying to preach or teach any of this yet. Just trying to get the definition clear. Already it's enough for one day. So let me turn back to the Scripture readings for a moment, just so you will remember that none of this is my notion or design. It comes under the category of "obscure things of utmost importance."

The Apostle Paul is a member of the church at Antioch. He is not a freelance preacher or missionary, as many suppose. He does not go out on his own authority. He does not rely on his own prayers alone. He operates out of a fellowship. He is ordained – chosen and sent out – by his church, as representative of his church.

On every journey Paul takes, except when he is under arrest and cannot help it, he starts from Antioch and returns to Antioch, where he makes a full report and receives further assignment. Between journeys, we find him living, teaching, and preaching at Antioch. Antioch is his home, his headquarters, his home church.

Paul checks everything with his Lord, and is empowered by his Lord. But Paul also checks everything with his church, and is empowered by his church.

Christianity is not a "Lone Ranger" religion. If we want to be part of it, we must live in, and out from, a church. The Road to Antioch is the road to Christian community. It has fallen into disrepair in our time. I am hoping it is time for us to take, again, the Road to Antioch.

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We are talking about taking the Road to Antioch. That is, it remains to be seen how much any of us will take the road, but we are talking about it. It is our special phrase or code word for choosing Christian community. Christians, like every other group in the world, do not develop a special language to be snooty, but to save time and enhance communication. If I have to repeat last Sunday's sermon all over again, we have no time to say anything further. So this phrase, "The Road to Antioch," is to recall all of that, and still allow us to move on.

We are talking about taking the Road to Antioch – the road to Christian community. Like any other journey, the Road to Antioch requires us to do some things – that is, to take some steps – and to keep walking toward our goal, in the direction we have chosen, with a certain consistency and patience and endurance.

When it comes to journeys, the greatest hazard of all is to lose sight of the goal, to forget the destination. Even if we die along the way, at least we were heading toward our objective. If, at the end of each day, we can look back and see that we have made progress – that we have moved in the right direction, that we are nearer to our goal in the evening than we were in the morning – then it was a wonderful day, and we are happy people.

On the other hand, if, when evening comes, we realize that we have taken a wrong turn, gone down the wrong road, traveled in the wrong direction – if we are further from our goal in the evening than we were in the morning; if we are lost; if we have lost sight of the goal; if we can no longer remember what we were heading toward; if we no longer have the will or the energy to go further – then it was a terrible day, and we are miserable and unhappy people.

There are a few members of this church who have no concept of the Road to Antioch at all. They do not see the goal or travel toward it. Somehow, none of us have reached them yet. They have heard about Jesus but they do not love Him, or His Kingdom. Therefore, the Road to Antioch, if they ever think about it, seems vague at best – a lot of trouble without very much joy or vision to justify it. Naturally, they don't come around here very often.

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But only a few of us are that lost. Most of our members are more like you. I am not only talking *about* the Road to Antioch, but *to people* who are walking the Road to Antioch in some way. You have some interest in Christian community or you wouldn't be here. At least you wouldn't be here very often.

Some of you think that I am never satisfied with your performance. That is, you come here Sunday after Sunday and sometimes you hear me talking about things you haven't done yet, steps you haven't taken yet, dimensions of the faith you haven't noticed yet. Sometimes you feel scolded. You think I am never satisfied with you. Of course, that's true. And that's wonderful! It means we are not at the end of the road yet. Would you want it to end where we are now? Would you like to think that we have seen it all, and this is all there is to it?

The paradox is: I am often more pleased with you than you are. I often see the influence and impact of your faith and devotion more clearly than you do. If you are walking the Road to Antioch, you are having a greater effect on more people than you can possibly know. Just being who you are – and walking toward a goal you believe in – has a tremendous impact. You are not supposed to be aware of it all. That would take your eyes off the goal. Results are supposed to be the Holy Spirit's business. So I wanted to take a moment to remind you that, as we talk about the Road to Antioch, you may feel there are things you are not doing yet, or that you are not doing well enough yet. Of course! Because we love this road, and our Lord, we will be sorry that we are not doing better. This seems appropriate to me. It comes from caring. But we will also feel drawn by new possibilities – if we see them clearly, and believe we have a chance to attain them. So we need to stay open to change and growth. That does not mean we are bad or that we have not been doing *anything* right so far.

Now, I have a lot to cover, so I can't fool around as much as usual. That means I have to keep it clear and simple. First, I want to say a bit about the Bible and our theology. I want you to know that the Road to Antioch is grounded in our Scriptures and tradition as solidly as the Road to Jericho or Damascus. Secondly, we will take a quick look at some general suggestions for improving our journey to Antioch. We will get to some more-specific suggestions later.

I.) THE BIBLE

There is so much in the Scripture readings for today that it is actually painful for me not to say more about them. But you are not slow. And some of you will read them over and ponder them more carefully when you get home. They are about Christian community, the body of Christ, the Road to Antioch. The imagery is clear and telling: We are all participants in Jesus Christ – in what He is, in His mission, in what He came to earth to accomplish. None of us can do it alone. We truly need each other. All of us have our parts to play. Every one of us has an *important* part, no matter what we or anybody else may think about it. Only the Holy Spirit knows how important, and how it all fits together.

These familiar, but never too familiar, truths are at the very core of our faith and tradition. The concept of the church as the body of Christ is one of the pivotal, cornerstone beliefs of Christendom. In short, we are looking at the center of one of the three major roads of Christendom – the Road to Antioch. Quite simply, these Scripture readings ask: Are you part of the body of Christ? Do you know it? Are you glad about it? Do you rejoice in it? Do you live it and walk this road on purpose – as part of the Kingdom, as part of the church?

If not, you are not nearly as happy (fulfilled) as you ought to be. If not, your life is not counting for nearly as much as it was designed for. If not, you have missed, at least for the moment, one of the greatest invitations in life.

Now, that is not what I came to tell you. That is what I figure you already know. I am just reminding us, getting us on the same subject. After all, I'm not preaching to the masses. Some of you pretend, but you are no longer amateurs. You study the Bible and pray and ponder such things every day. You have been in and around the church for a lot of years, and I am not the only one who has ever spoken to you about our Faith. God has invested a great deal in you. God does not do things without a reason.

What then do I want you to see? More clearly than ever before, I want you to see and know that the Road to Antioch is, in truth, as high as the other two “high roads” of our faith:

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- The Road to Damascus: Love God.
- The Road to Jericho: Love your neighbor.
- The Road to Antioch: Be a member of Christ's body – the church.

Love and care about your fellow church members. This has always been our pattern and our truth. It has always been the framework of our faith and tradition. But our generation has lost sight of Antioch. Our generation has lost awareness of the importance of the church. We scorn organized religion, and speak scathingly of all the weaknesses of the church, as if *we* were not the church – the ones Christ calls today to be His body. Therefore, we grow sicker and sicker socially, along with our society, and our souls starve for true community.

Back to the Bible – if you want to know how things work, get the manual, read the instructions! Now I want to show you something I suspect you may not know. That is, I don't think you are conscious of it enough to explain or teach it to others, and you need to be. Your soul knows it, which is why you will recognize and understand it as soon as I point it out.

All through these last chapters of First Corinthians, Paul is giving us interesting, fascinating, important instructions and information about the church. He tells us about life in the church, what the church is, and how it operates. Again and again he turns and returns to the analogy and core imagery of the church as the body of Christ. There are other important issues, but this is the major theme. Paul also talks about how to live in a pagan society, about the gifts of the Spirit, and about the importance of love. These are all big subjects. But Paul is talking about them in the light of what they mean to the body of Christ – the faith community, the church.

We need to pay attention to all of it, but just for the moment, forget all the details. Hit the peaks, get the overview. Look at it from the top of the mountain. It is beautiful. What Christ Jesus started, we are all part of now: bringing reconciliation between God and the people of our world. Christ is still the head. The Holy Spirit still guides and controls this operation. But we are all members of the body, with our individual skills and gifts to contribute, with our individual assignments to accomplish. We can only get glimpses of the overall mission. Mostly we need to pay attention to our own appropriate task and contribution.

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I preach a sermon; you teach a class; he calls a neighbor; she visits a friend; they confront somebody at work and tell them in honest love that they are not performing. The Spirit knits it all together, and changes the world ... if we stay faithful – if we stay attached to the body. Most of the time, we only see a tiny portion of what is going on. We only see a part of what is happening in our immediate vicinity. The foot and the hand and the heart and the liver must trust the head to understand and coordinate what is going on. Christ is the head! We never are.

There are a lot of people running around today talking about the Christ within, the Christ nature, and achieving their own Christness. They think that means they are the head. But they never are. The Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ – our resurrected Lord – is the head. We get to participate in Christ, but as members of the body. Others may want to forget that. Let us never forget it. (Or you know what part of the body we will become.)

From Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which is about the church, let me pull just three verses:

“When we bless ‘the cup of blessing,’ is it not a means of sharing in the blood of Christ? When we break the bread, is it not a means of sharing the body of Christ?” (I Corinthians 10:16)

“We must test ourselves before eating our share of the bread and drinking from the cup. For he who eats and drinks eats and drinks judgment on himself if he does not discern the body.” (I Corinthians 11:28-29)

“For Christ is like a single body with its many limbs and organs, which, many as they are, together make up one body. For indeed we were all brought into one body by baptism, in the one Spirit, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free men, and that one Holy Spirit was poured out for all of us to drink.” (I Corinthians 12:12-13)

Okay. The subject is the body of Christ – the followers and believers, the faith community, the church. Try to stay on the subject. Try not to wander off to other topics, theories, or considerations. The subject is the body of Christ – the church.

“When we break the bread, is it not a means of sharing in the body of Christ?” Now, here comes the exam: When we break the bread, it is a means of sharing in what? A means of sharing in the church – the faithful community. You see? Everybody keeps trying to change the

subject. They want to get on some irrelevant argument about transubstantiation. Does the bread actually transform into the physical flesh of Jesus? That misses the whole point. That way, we don't have to do anything or be anything. That kind of theology saves us from being saved, changed, or personally affected. But Paul *did* make his subject clear. We have to try to stay on the subject.

Yes, Jesus died – sacrificed Himself, gave Himself – and rose again. And without that, none of the rest would be open or possible to us. But communion is not a sacrament to celebrate Jesus' incredible deeds. Sacraments *never* merely celebrate the past. Sacraments make *us* sacred, change us, put us into the story. Communion is also about NOW: about us becoming part of the body, members of Jesus' community, participants in His mission. It does not in any way matter what the chemical analysis of the elements is. It is not the chemical analysis that matters; it is the spiritual analysis that matters. If you eat the bread and are totally convinced that it is the flesh of Jesus but it does not make you part of the people of Jesus – the church – it will not make any difference in your life.

If you eat stale bread with mold on it but know that it binds you, heart and soul, to the community of Christ's followers – *that* will change your life, and the lives of many others through you.

“He who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment on himself if he does not discern the body.” (Are you hearing Paul yet?) Try to stay on the subject. All the same remarks apply. And further remarks apply: If you take communion for yourself alone, like some private saint – trying to find or use or keep the power, benefits, and truth of the Gospel for some personal spiritual journey or some personal evolution – then you are in grave danger. This meal is to incorporate you into the body. If you eat the bread and drink the cup, you must “discern” that the people around you are part of the body too. They are bound to you, and you to them – and all of you together in Christ. If they stumble, you fall. If you achieve, they are increased. These are your people. You cannot walk the Christian Way without them. If you take this bread and cup without discerning the body, you bring down wrath.

I always have to stop at a word like “wrath,” since so many of you are refugees from fundamentalist thinking. I don't have time to explain it. I can only tell you what Paul means, and you can argue with me later. In this context, wrath means: people will end up living in a world without community, where people are lonely, estranged, aimless, confused; where

no deep-level communication takes place; where folk seldom get the chance to experience true cooperation, love, or hope, or the joy of the Kingdom, or the satisfaction of knowing that their lives are worthwhile. What most people call “wrath” is a picnic in comparison to that.

Anyway, I wanted you to see that the Road to Antioch is bigger and more important than our present generation of Christians seems to realize. Paul links both baptism and communion – and even the coming of the Holy Spirit – directly with the Road to Antioch. I am hoping that this will be clear, and start opening doorways in your mind. I am hoping that when we take communion from now on, it will not only remind you of Christ’s great love for you, but will also remind us that we are Christ’s people together. And that, in His name, we are always being knit together in a faith fellowship where we not only serve Him, but love each other – and where we not only have our names and pictures in a church directory, but also live and work to serve and worship God together as our *primary* purpose in life.

II.) STEPS TO TAKE

Now to pragmatic and practical levels. If we want to walk the Road to Antioch, what can we do? Of course, it depends upon God. Grace is our only hope. But we can do little things to cooperate – to try to work with God, instead of against him.

A.) First of all, if you have understood these things, throw in with us. Do you know what that phrase means? Have you really done that yet? Somewhere along the line, when we are contemplating any move, we pass through a phase where we are checking it out, being cautious, and holding back.

That is appropriate. There needs to be a courtship before marriage. Oh no! I used the wrong analogy. Our generation doesn’t know *that* one anymore either. How will we recover understanding, when marriage and church membership are the best illustrations of each other, and we no longer remember the principles for either one?

Nevertheless, some people never get past the courtship phase. Even if they get married “on the books,” or join the church on the books, they never get past the first phase. They just keep wondering, year after year, if they will like it, if it will be fun for them, if it will be good for them. But they never jump in – they never go for it and get married. To be a Christian – to experience what it’s like – a person has to “throw in” with Jesus and His people. You know: “For better or for worse, for richer

or for poorer, in sickness and in health.” That’s what it means to throw in with somebody.

Have you thrown in with the Christian church? Are you married? Is it for keeps? Is it your people, come what may? Is it your family, next only to your immediate family? That’s what church is. That’s what being a member of the body is like. Throw in with Jesus and His people.

B.) No matter where you are in your commitment, consider where the church is on your priority list. Now move it up a few notches. It should not come above spouse or children. It should not come higher than your devotion to God in Christ.

But the church should come higher than recreation. It should not necessarily exclude, but it should come higher than other social organizations, don’t you think? It should even come higher than other political organizations. It should come higher than television, or watching sports, or trying to save the world on your own wisdom or power. Am I being too vague?

I am saying: Consider your part in the body of Christ, and put the church several notches higher on your personal priority list.

C.) Thirdly, if you have children, bring them with you. By that I mean, teach your children that they are part of the body too. Among other things, that means you are going to have to talk about such things openly and sincerely in your home. So far, most of you are teaching your children that the church is among the many, many things life has to offer – that they should see if they like it, and participate if it pleases them sufficiently or entertains them consistently.

That is a terrible misunderstanding. Many children today, with greater logic than we like, are applying the same approach to their loyalty toward marriage, toward family life, even toward God. Your children will have no comprehension of church until, like you, they realize that they *are* the church. If church is no fun, it’s only because its people are no fun. And if we walk away, we simply walk out of the most important dimension and possibility in life. If we are not the church, where will we experience Christian community? Will we simply keep church-shopping until we find a place where others are putting on a good show and we can watch?

Throw in with us. Raise the church on your priority list. Bring your children into the faith family with you.

John 13:31-35
Galatians 5:13-6:2
I Peter 1:22-2:3

A LOVING COMMUNITY

Years ago, I was in a very pleasant verbal sparring match with Rabbi Sy Dresner. It went on for several years and he usually won, but not every day.

Abe was an accountant. He worked too hard, but he was a devoted family man and a very loyal member of the local synagogue. His number-one priority in life was to get his son through college. The boy was at Brandeis University and doing very well, but one day Abe received a letter. It was carefully written and carefully worded, and it told that his son had become friends with some Christians on campus. The friendships had grown, he had started to go to their meetings, and now he had decided to become a Christian. In fact, he was to be baptized the following week.

Abe was beside himself. He couldn't eat or sleep. Finally he went looking for his friend, Isaac. "O Isaac," he said, "what am I to do? My son – my precious boy for whom I have prayed and planned and labored all these years – is going to leave the faith of his fathers and become a Christian. Oy veh! What am I to do?"

"Funny you should mention that," said Isaac. "Only two days ago, I got a telephone call from my boy. Very same thing. Here he is, three years at Brown University. Suddenly I learn that, for the past two years, he has been getting more and more involved with a group of Christian friends. I am devastated. Now he tells me he is joining their church this Sunday. What have I done wrong? What can I do now?"

In grief and confusion, Isaac and Abe went to see Jacob, one of the teachers at their synagogue. "O Jacob, what are we going to do?" they said. "Our sons – the precious ones upon whom all our hopes rest – *both of them* are about to leave the faith of their fathers and become Christians. Surely there is something we can do. Tell us what we can do."

"Funny you should mention that," said Jacob. "Just this morning I got a fax from my son. Very same thing. I send him through Hebrew school, teach him as well as I know how. Now, off in college, he starts getting friendly with Christians. Next thing you know, I get this fax

telling me he is leaving the faith of his fathers and converting to Christianity. This is terrible – terrible.”

So all three went to call on Rabbi Joseph. “Rabbi,” they said, “if ever we needed your wisdom and learning, it is now. Our sons, all three of them, have decided to leave the faith of their fathers and become Christians. We are bereft. We don’t know where to turn or what to do. Please, please advise us.”

“*Funny you should mention that,*” said Rabbi Joseph. “I received an email from my son at Stanford just a few hours ago. Very same thing. Here I am, a rabbi. All my life I have devoted to our God and to the ways of our people. Now my son, my only son – who grew up in my home and ate at my table – has decided to leave the faith of his fathers and become a Christian.”

Finally the four of them, in tears and consternation, turned to the only source of comfort left. They went into the synagogue together to pray: “O Lord our God – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – we come to you with heavy hearts and much anguish. You alone can help us. We come to tell you that our sons, our precious sons, are leaving the faith of their fathers to become Christians.”

There was deep silence in the synagogue. And then a quiet voice, but with depth and resonance beyond telling, said: “*FUNNY YOU SHOULD MENTION THAT.*”

We have said that the church is not made up of the people we choose. Rather, it is made up of the people who are responding to Jesus – to the call of the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ. The bond between us is more than some mutual-admiration society – far more than our agreements or disagreements with each other on any particular subject. Because Jesus has called to us in some way – and because we have tried to respond – it’s like “any friend of His is a friend of mine.” That does not mean we automatically love each other. But it does put us on the Road to Antioch, where learning to love each other, and acting in love toward one another, is inevitably and inescapably our aim. More and more clearly all the time, we realize how much it is Jesus’ aim.

There are, of course, endless things to be done for and about Christian community, especially when we perceive it to be part of the “body of Christ” in our world. We will not get it all done here. We do not want to get in charge of each other’s lives here. So we must keep

studying the frameworks, seeing the vision, letting the Holy Spirit give us our assignments. That will be plenty to keep us busy and happy for as long as we are here.

The Road to Damascus is about the love of God. It ends with our loving God, but it starts with God loving us.

The Road to Jericho is about loving our neighbor. It also depends on God loving us first. You cannot give it away until you have received it.

The Road to Antioch is about a loving community. And that depends upon the individuals within the community personally knowing the love of God. Even after that, a loving community is more than a conglomerate of individuals loving their neighbors. The Road to Antioch is more than just a lot of Jericho Roads piled on top of each other or end-to-end. The Road to Antioch has some surprises and limitations and even some disappointments. You ready? Here we go.

Everybody hold hands. We are talking about the Road to Antioch – the building of a loving community. Clearly you cannot walk such a road alone. Everybody hold hands. If you are sitting with somebody too unfriendly to hold your hand, move. Kind of embarrassing, isn't it? How do these people feel about having to hold your hand? I know some of you hate it when the minister tries to get into this sticky, touchy-feely stuff. But you know me better than that by now. Come on, hold hands. Some things are hard to communicate. I need you to help me.

I can hear your thoughts: Sermons last about twenty minutes. It's going to be a nervous, sweaty situation if he tries to get us to hold hands through the whole sermon. Already we know he's trying to get us to see that we have to hold hands all the time, in deeper ways, if we are to be Christ's church. There are no Lone Rangers in Christendom. But we can get the point without holding somebody's hand.

Please, hold somebody's hand for a while. Imagine now, with all of us holding hands, trying to go somewhere together. How can we decide where to go or which way to move first? What "head" gives instruction to the body? Do we not all move at a different speed, with different stamina? Helping each other and being together sound wonderful in theory. But what a limitation! What a severe curtailment to our individual freedom. Maybe we could each decide to "be together" when we felt like it, and go our own way the rest of the time. But then, when would anybody be around when we *needed* or *wanted* to be together?

That is what modern American community has been turning into, is it not? At least the modern American church. “I’m with you ... if it isn’t inconvenient ... if something better doesn’t come along.” “I’m a bridge over troubled water ... if the creek has run dry ... and I happen to feel like it.” How much loyalty is there in that hand you are holding? Would it hang on to you if you were in trouble? Would you hang on to it if *it* were?

Don’t be afraid to move your hands. After all, they are alive. But please keep holding hands a little longer. Say nothing, but think quietly for a moment of some way in which you feel superior to or further advanced than the person whose hand you are holding. If questioned later, you can always insist that it was the person on the other side you were thinking about. But there are things you can do better than the person next to you. What are those things? Don’t be afraid of truth. That is part of community. You are stronger or smarter or more advanced in some way than the person whose hand you are holding. That’s life. It is also what you have to offer – and what they have to gain. And it will be fine – something you can both be happy about – unless you get judgmental or scornful about it.

See? It’s fun to hold hands. But it can go either way, depending on whether we enjoy giving and receiving, or decide to be independent and scornful. Can you also imagine the person whose hand you are holding having some skill or gift or wisdom that is superior to your own? Can you also imagine being willing to receive something from them if they offered it? Most people think that the church’s trouble is that not enough people are willing to give (“It is more blessed to give than to receive”). But that is not the real truth. A much larger problem in the Christian Life is that most of us are unwilling to accept or receive. That is not an admonition; it is a statement of fact. Therefore, we have to work much harder to become gracious receivers, even of the love of God.

Imagine now that some person came bursting through the door full of anger and vengeance toward you and, at least in their mind, for some legitimate reason. How would it feel to have all these people with you and for you? What impact would that have on your accuser? Sometimes it’s good not to have to face things all alone.

Now, if you will, look at the hand you are holding. Turn it over, and back. Does it have lines, scars, calluses? What an amazing thing this hand is. Have you *any* notion where that hand has been? What it has done? What it has been through? Do you know how hard it has

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worked? How many skills it has acquired? Look at it! How many times has it been hurt? How many times has it held on when something or someone – or life itself – depended on it? Has it killed? Has it caressed? Has it fed? Has it stolen? Has it struck? Has it carried? Has it crafted, and created? Has it been folded in prayer, and lifted in supplication? Do you realize what you hold, when you hold a hand?

Of course, you do know that everything we have just said and thought about holding hands is a parable of the church, right? It is an introduction to the endless layers of what it means to be a loving community.

Now notice that the hand is connected to other things: a wrist, a shoulder, a face ... a heart, a mind, a soul. Dare you look into the face? Can you look into the heart or mind? Can you touch a hand and not touch a soul?

Do you remember that God loves that hand, that face, and that soul more than any human mother ever loved her child? And God has dreams for it, plans for it, hopes for it – for that hand and face and soul. And you want to be part of those dreams and plans – to help with them, not hurt or harm or destroy them. That is the Road to Antioch. Jesus the Christ revealed such truth and possibility to us. Jesus the Holy Spirit invites us to walk in the Spirit and with each other – to walk the Path, to follow THE WAY ... together.

I Corinthians 14:6-12
Ephesians 4:11-16
I John 3:11-18

BUILDING UP THE BODY

Today is the culmination and climax of the series of sermons I have been preaching on “The Road to Antioch.” I will have a few more things to say about this road to Christian community next week, but today is what the series has been leading up to.

In truth, and as always, I wonder what you have been “hearing” these last few weeks. What I think I am saying and what you think you are hearing are often attached by only the thinnest of threads. And the person sitting next to you is frequently hearing something quite different from what you are hearing. Some of you are ENFPs, some of you are Virgos or Aquarians, and some of you have recently fallen in love or been promoted, while others are dealing with deep grief, or looking for work, or wondering if you can stay married. It really is an amazing mix. And we call this a church, a faith family, a community of followers of THE WAY? You bet! “Pilgrims” doesn’t mean we are all fixed up pretty, life is easy, and we have all the answers. It means we need each other – it means we enrich and support each other on THE WAY. That is exactly why the Holy Spirit calls us together, and offers to guide and strengthen and save us.

So we don’t always hear things in the same way, even from the Bible. But here are some things I think and hope the majority of us are hearing and taking to heart:

1.) The Road to Antioch is one of the big three – one of the three major “walks” or “ways” of the Christian Life. If you are a Christian, you do not *go* to church – you *are* the church!

2.) We are “the body.” Christ Jesus is still the head! We do not turn into the head because of length of service, because of status, or because we have accrued knowledge over the years, or for any other reason whatsoever – not ever! Jesus is our head: the leader and guide, the brains of the outfit. Our only hope is to keep reporting in – that is, each of us continually returning to our prayers. It is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day. Some of you who mocked this at first are now saying, “You mean every *hour*, don’t you?”

3.) The fellowship of the church (the Christian community) is a special bond between people. It is somewhat less encompassing than the bond of marriage (if that marriage is in Christ). It is somewhat *more* than all other covenant relationships on earth. It requires time to be with – time to come to know – others in the fellowship. It requires discipline. It is about love. Throw in with us.

4.) The church – the faith community – is a place to invite others into, IF you start to really care about them. Try to remember: such an invitation is just one cut below a proposal of marriage. On the other hand, this is no place for the perfect. It is a fellowship of sinners. The church is a place of healing, a place of service, a laboratory of love. It is a place to learn and grow, and to try on faith principles before taking them into the outer world. If you were a gardener, I would tell you that the church is like a greenhouse. If you were a soldier, I would tell you that the church is like boot camp. Yet these analogies are only partial. Christians always return to the fellowship to regroup and refresh. They also always go out again from the fellowship – *sent* as servants of Christ. Whatever you are doing, do it for Jesus.

5.) Today I want to talk about “building up the body.” It is a phrase and concept that Paul mentions again and again. It is inherent in Jesus’ teachings about loving one another as He has loved us. But the specific teaching about building up the body comes from Paul, as he wrestles with the task of helping pagans understand what it means to come into the church (the body of Christ).

In Israel, the concept of “kneset Israel” is established and familiar since Abraham. The Chosen People – the whole community, the kneset that makes covenant with God – is a powerful reality.

In Israel, even if, as an individual, you have sinned and God despises you and you fully deserve to be annihilated, nevertheless you are not abandoned if you are still part of the kneset (community). If you are part of the community, God would have to destroy the whole community in order to destroy you. There was a time when being “banished” – excommunicated – was considered a terrible punishment. Flogging was much preferred, even though many died from it.

We seldom think in such terms anymore. But the concept of the kneset is still the foundation of the church, whether we know it or not. We breathed it in with the Jewishness of Jesus and Peter and Paul and

the others. God deals with us as individuals, but God *also* deals with us as members of the covenant community. Even if we totally foul up on one side, the bonds of the other will hold us up until we get straightened out again.

In our day and time, most people's awareness of the riches and realities of the faith community is severely eroded. We do not trust, experience, commit to, or comprehend most of the dimensions of CHURCH (*ecclesia* – the people of God).

When the Apostle Paul began to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ into the pagan world, he was carrying a message about dramatic individual worth. Never before had *anybody* conceived of individual human beings as having anywhere near the worth or value that Paul, in Christ's name, was proclaiming.

Paul was saying that each and every child, each and every woman, each and every man – no matter what station, race, or reputation that person had, no matter if they were slave or free, criminal or governor – Paul was proclaiming that each person had an infinite, precious, personal value to almighty God.

Any person who would (could) believe it, trust it, open themselves to it, and receive it would discover God's eagerness and readiness to be friends, to be in constant contact. Of course, God was still God. He would still want things his way. God would be making a few changes: "This life under new management." And God did have plans and purposes and a methodology that were often quite surprising. Nevertheless, many people who listened to Paul thought this was incredibly exciting. Even though it might be full of surprises, or even sacrifices, what many of them had experienced in life so far had not been all that terrific. They figured: Why not take a chance? A try for something was better than staying with nothing.

But Paul said: "You think you understand, but you don't understand yet. You have been ransomed. You think that means, 'Okay, so some Creator cares something for the creation, and I'm one of the creatures, so I have more importance than I thought.' You are not listening! When the Son of God lays down His life for you, it gives your life the value of – the same worth as – the Son of God. If the Son of God loves you and refuses to leave without you, that gives you the inherent value of the Son of God. It doesn't matter that you and I know

what a worthless piece of trash you really are. If the Son of God will not go on without you, then the universe must end up dealing with you as it would deal with Him. It may not want to, but it doesn't get a choice. Christ gives it no choice. Christ just keeps saying and proving that 'If you abandon them, you abandon me, because I am with them.' Love is like that."

Sometimes we get confused and all twisted up in fancy theories and sophisticated theology and forget the simple reality: LOVE IS LIKE THAT! And we are loved by the Messiah, the Chosen One, the Son of God.

Paul was carrying this message, a message unlike anything the world had ever heard before. (If, indeed, it has heard it yet.) And Paul would try to explain what had happened to reveal this incredible truth, and why people could trust it. Then everybody would gather around, beat the hell out of him, and throw him out, chase him out, stone him, flog him, or leave him for dead. Paul would then wait until he could walk and talk again. Then he would go to the next town and do the same thing all over again.

You think I'm all broken up because a few people say some unkind things about me? I just keep reading the story. And I think, "Gee, my life is so pleasant, and so many of you are so wonderful to me, I must be doing something really wrong. Nobody has actually tried to kill me for quite a while now." Of course, the real truth is that Jesus and Paul and thousands of others have broken trail for me. They have for you too, if you will follow it.

So far, so familiar, right? At the time, Paul did not know if anything would come of his efforts. He started churches – that is, a tiny handful of people started meeting together. No cathedrals were being built; small communities were forming. If you had to bet the church's future on the tiny faith community or on the mega-cathedral, which would you choose? I mean today, in our time? There were huge cathedrals (temples) in Paul's day too, you know. They were built for Diana, Apollo, Venus, Zeus, Caesar. They were most impressive and enormously wealthy, and thousands upon thousands flocked to them.

But Paul just kept talking about a dead Jew who wouldn't stay dead. And here and there, people said, "You know, I think I met Him, only I thought it was just my mind playing games with me." "Yes," Paul would reply, "and I bet they were better games than this outer world is trying

to play with you. Why don't you go invite Him to play some more – only this time, pay attention.” So they did, and after a while nothing in this world could bribe or control them anymore. They lived, breathed, worked, and suffered for a different reality – a Kingdom not of this world. And when they looked at you, they did not see you in terms of this world anymore, but in the light of that other reality.

Nevertheless, at the time, Paul had no way of knowing if anything would come of it. In one sense, that didn't matter. He was doing what he was supposed to do, what his prayers had guided him to do, what his church had laid its hands on him to do. The results were not in his hands. Don't you wish we could all get and keep that one straight?! The results do not depend upon us! We do what the Holy Spirit guides us to do. We do not have to decide if it is worth it or if any good will come of it. That's none of our business. We are not the brains of the outfit. Christ is the head. We are the body – the hands and the feet and, when we get lucky, the heart.

In Paul's case, the time came to go back through the towns he had been thrown out of, to see if anybody there had heard the message. Had anybody remembered it? If so, could he be of any further assistance or encouragement?

It seems incredible to me that there were *always* people who had heard and remembered. They had formed into small groups of followers. Not followers of Paul, but followers of the ONE he proclaimed. And they still met, talked, and supported each other. They lived a different life because they now trusted this different truth. What Paul had told them had proved to be true for them. Once awakened to it, they knew the presence of the Holy Spirit to be with them.

In short, this message of the extreme worth of every individual invariably created a fellowship between believers. It created community. The inherent quality of Christ's love, though it did not always duplicate itself exactly, did infect the fellowship. *“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* (John 13:35) As usual with Jesus, we discover that what He said was not just “pretty words” – it was the power and principle of LIFE. The words kept (and keep) coming into being.

So Paul started this string of tiny churches. We wouldn't even call them churches. No bylaws. No buildings. We cannot imagine that

they could survive, especially when the person carrying the message was so ill-treated and unmajestic, and the world was so big and busy with other things. It seems impossible.

But then, as the churches got established, as they grew larger and larger, Paul discovered that many of these new believers had very little comprehension of community. Fights and factions developed simply because, in real life, groups must make decisions and deal with problems that arise. What do you do when people cannot all fit into the living room anymore? What do you do if Jake says it's okay to work for Claudius, who builds pagan temples, and Jack is sure Jesus wouldn't like that? What do you say to Diane, whose husband is devoted to Mithraism and beats her every time he finds out that she has gone to a Christian meeting? Should she stay married to him? What will become of her and her children, in A.D. 50, if she leaves her home and her only material security? Have any of these questions really gone away?

During his later years, people were asking Paul these kinds of questions everywhere he went. Often he answered in detail, to the best of his ability. Often he reminded people of the principles of their faith. Sometimes he even admitted that there were no good answers; we just do the best we can and try to stay faithful, and trust Jesus to save us despite ourselves and the alienated, imperfect world we live in.

Since the details are endless and the situations we find ourselves in are ever-changing, it is best to have principles rather than rules. I tried to remind you of a big one last Sunday: Remember that the hand you hold is connected to a face, a heart, a mind, and a soul. God loves and has plans for that true person. You want to help with that – be part of it – not hinder or destroy it. Remembering that is better than endless lists of specific rules.

Today I want to remind you of what Paul called “building up the body.” He gave much specific advice about it. He talked about morals, and he talked about not thinking too highly of ourselves. He warned against factions, and he encouraged us to be humble. He gave us many pictures of how we are all needed and have different abilities, and yet we fit together in a larger whole. He talked about keeping order, respecting leaders, and not letting the larger community around us think we are a threat to them, or that we live a lower life than they do.

I was planning to drag you through all of these instructions because we have all the same issues, in different garb, still today. Then it became obvious to me that these were better suited for a Bible Study class than for sermons.

And then I realized that behind all the specific advice, Paul was also telling his Christian friends that the way to think most clearly in every new situation was to remember the big principle: **What will be most likely to build up the body?**

You know very well that Paul was not talking about membership rolls, getting more money, or building nicer buildings. Not that he would have objected to such things, but he was clearly talking about the “body of Christ” as a group of people – the church – who knew themselves loved and forgiven; who returned that love; who therefore wanted to spread the love, and serve the One who gave it.

How can we build up this body? Not the outer trappings, but the inner fellowship. It seems clear that there are a thousand ways. It is equally clear that certain attitudes and approaches will always tend to tear down the body. Suddenly, most of Paul’s practical wisdom clicks into focus. This is what he was always asking himself. This is where his answers were coming from. He was always praying, and this concept was right in the middle of his prayers. **What will build up the body?**

So the questions poured in: What about divorce? What about women not wearing hats, when everybody thinks hatless women are harlots? Can we eat meat from the market of pagan temples, when we know their gods are no real threat to us? What do we do with a person who keeps coming to our meetings but keeps living the same old way? And on and on the questions kept coming. But Paul just kept asking himself and others: **What will build up the body of Christ?** What would the head of the body want? Even if all the members vote for chocolate ice cream, is that what the head would want? Is that what would be best for building up the body?

This is one of the most incredible principles we will ever try on. It is deeply satisfying. It is a different level of seeing and obeying. It is a whole new principle for pilgrims to apply as they walk the WAY. To live by this principle is a whole new layer of joy. And it is incredibly delightful to discover other people who are already using this principle all the time. You can feel it in the way they think and talk and act.

What will build up the body? Try it in real life for the next four weeks. Every time you decide anything, every time a new subject enters your head, every time you attend a meeting or get into an argument, every time you feel hurt or angry or unappreciated, or enthusiastic or full of energy – for the next four weeks, as many times as you can remember to do so each day, ask: **What will build up the body?**

Lock it in even tighter. I want you to have great joy and true fun. Keep asking, **What will build up the body?** Then LIVE by the answer that comes.

I Thessalonians 4:9-5:28
I Peter 1:22-23
I John 3:13-20; 4:7-12

LOVE OF THE BRETHREN

Thanksgiving Day will be here in a few weeks. I had some desire to speak to you about how giving thanks cures depression, gloom, pride, greed, some doubt, and quite a bit of fear. But it seemed to me that we have been on those themes enough recently – that anybody who wants to has heard the message and is already moving to become a more thankful person.

I did have occasion myself, a few days ago, to spend about thirty hours with nothing better to do than contemplate what I am most grateful for. The impact was so great that I realized that if I could do this every month or two, I would probably become a saint. Sadly, I also realized that I have neither the good sense nor the spiritual maturity to build such a discipline into my normal schedule.

Words only hint toward truth, but I found myself profoundly grateful for the love of God that means I don't have to live in fear anymore. Among the other things I found myself grateful for, I was surprised at the amount of gratitude I felt toward you. I am thankful for many of you as individuals, and also for you as a group, a people: the people who make up "my" church – the people who make it possible for me to live in a faith community. It is a paradox of our age that churches are everywhere but that faith communities are not easy to find.

I don't know how it feels to you, but it came very clear to me that my life would be bereft if I could not live in a faith community. Do not suppose that means I will never be angry, disgusted, disappointed, or eager to make changes in our life together here ever again. We don't do it perfectly. You worry me when attendance drops or study groups cease to meet just because I'm not here. Do you stop praying too? Is Jesus no longer important because I'm away? Are you no longer important to each other, or no longer engaged in the mission of the church, if I am gone?

Oh yes, there are still things that are tentative, even half-hearted, about our commitment to Christ and the bonds of our fellowship in His church. Do you think I mean *you* any more than myself? Not at all.

We are human, and we live in an imperfect world. We have doubts and scars from our experiences, and we are children of an era during which the church has given some very mixed and confusing signals.

Some of the marks of our tentative commitments are also the marks of our honesty, and they show us where we are; Christ uses even that to help us and teach us on the WAY. But what came clearer than ever before is that I am grateful for you not in spite of this, but because of this. In my own confusion and doubt, I need and want to be part of a faith community that is more honest than right; that is more interested in finding the real God than in looking good; that is more eager to learn what it really means to walk with Jesus than to find ecclesiastical fame or success.

So I am grateful to be among an imperfect people who nevertheless want to find the Christ again – and not just in somebody else’s creed, but for themselves – that they may learn, step-by-step, how to live with Him, and for Him. In this place, despite all our problems and imperfections, we do also make covenants with each other, and with our Lord. If they are not always as high as Heaven or as beautiful as Shakespeare’s sonnets, nevertheless we mean them, and walk by them. So we learn and grow, and Jesus helps and heals us more and more, and we become more His church as we go.

So I find myself grateful, this thanks-giving time – deeply and profoundly grateful – for the Christ, and for you. It is enough. I find myself strangely happy at last. I long to do more, and the more grateful I become, the worse that gets. But it is also enough. If I get to go on doing what little I can, each day as it comes, finally that is enough. The monkey is finally starting to climb down off my back. I hope yours is too. It sure does make for incredible thanks-giving.

If this all sounds a little too nice, a little too “up,” remember that I also just got back from Israel. You know what that does to me. Just a few days ago, I was standing in the streets of ancient Capernaum again – seeing the remains of houses that stood there when Jesus lived there – looking at the ruins of a synagogue that must have been where His “home” synagogue was. He had healed and taught in every village in all the slopes around there, had called fishermen from the villages along the shore of the lake stretching out before me – and the whole story came crashing in on me once again.

Jet-lag is fun for me, but Israel-lag is another matter. I have not fully recovered from last year, and this year hit even harder than last year. So if I hug you a little more tenderly or speak with more sentiment than good sense, be patient for a while. Maybe ... maybe I will get over it, with time.

When I left, we were talking about the Road to Antioch and the road to Christian community. I finished a series of sermons on that subject before I left. This one is a leftover. Some of us like leftovers; some of us don't. It is usually all we ever give to God. In any case ...

I want to tell you what I think is wrong with the church's vision of itself today, because I think that could help us to see and claim a clearer purpose and a higher hope in our own "here and now."

Let me suggest then that it is the modern liberal church's concept of "love" that is choking it to death. Love is, of course, our central theme. We think of it as our message, and we hope it is also our product. Not that we produce it, but we claim that God's love is revealed to us in Jesus Christ – and that this transforms us from within, and is what we also want to proclaim and make available to others.

Because love is our theme and aim, we are always singing its praises, speaking of how it is to be applied, and calling each other to give more time and money – that we may demonstrate and show love in various situations. So we talk about "becoming more loving" as our proper response at all times and in all situations. Therefore, if anyone speaks a word against love or suggests that trying to be more loving is not always appropriate, it sounds and feels like blasphemy in the church.

I know that the theory is incontrovertible. I also know that if you all meant what I mean by love – or if all of us could agree on what Jesus meant by love – our truth would be clear again. The fact (as I see it) is that the modern church's ideas about love are choking it to death.

When the church keeps telling people today to apply love in all their circumstances, most people are not hearing what that used to mean. If you live with a tyrant as a boss or spouse or parent, and you go to your church and it sends you back to be more "loving," what does that *mean*? Does it mean swallow it? Confront? Fight? Forgive? What

does “forgive” mean? Capitulatate, knuckle under, stop thinking you have any worth or rights?

If the church can no longer use its best words without total confusion and complete misunderstanding, what has happened to us? What has happened is: the concept has become so nebulous, so general, so glib and ethereal that there is very little love left in the church, and very little *strength* to love coming *out* of the church.

The teaching – the understanding – of the church today seems to be that “love of neighbor” is the function of the church and that everybody is the neighbor. Therefore, it makes no difference whether I’m thinking about you, my children, the fellow who lives across the street from me, someone in prison for rape and murder, an Arab in Nablus, or a Hindu starving near the Ganges River. I am supposed to feel the same concern, have the same regard, and show the same amount of compassion and caring for each and all. Am I also supposed to act as strongly and decisively in each case?

The Christian Faith drives us to that conclusion because God’s love includes everyone – because Christ died for all. If you could take any one of us individually to any of those people as individuals, and if time and life gave us a chance to relate, they should feel and hear from us that we know and believe that God cares about them and has plans for their lives if they will believe it – if they will cooperate with the inner voice of the Holy Spirit trying to reach them, just as the Spirit tries to reach each of us.

That is the truth and the power of the Gospel, and we are each supposed to know it and carry it and spread it. So what is my complaint? It seems to me that the way the church speaks of this love and comprehends its application has turned it into weak mush. Love, as the Christian church teaches it today, has no integrity. It is no longer the dynamism of a personal and passionate caring that changes a person’s life and calls them also into personal and passionate caring. It has degenerated into an institutional theory that grants everybody some kind of “right” to wonderful treatment, no matter what they do or say. And we think the mission of the church is fulfilled by simply calling all of us to support bloodless institutional approaches and programs that vaguely rest on this theory that everybody should be treated with a general flavor of concern and good will. But who is doing real loving, and who is receiving real love?

Years ago, when I first began to discover that Mariana maybe loved me, it had a huge impact on my life. There was some anguish mixed with the joy, to be sure. (Can you remember back that far?) But I really did know that something IMPORTANT to me was going on.

Let us be clear: Christianity has some pretty strict rules, for some very good reasons, about the amount of sexuality that is to be expressed in our love-bonds within the fellowship of the church. But if you are loved – by God – you ought to *feel* something! If we love each other, we will also *feel* something, don't you think? It will be one of the most powerful realities in our lives.

For the most part today, the people of the church back the church's programs with approximately the same kind of enthusiasm that matches a general "welfarism" approach which expects very little authentic change and requires very little from its recipients. I'm saying that when the atmosphere is dull and the results are dull, we have reason to suspect that something has dulled the concept itself.

Welfarism is money without labor. The integrity is lost. Value is exchanged for no value. No goods or services come in return for the value. If there is deep and authentic gratitude in awareness of the value given, then eventually value will come back. The injustice will be repaired and the wounds healed. Otherwise, the damage will increase until it destroys. Welfarism, if it grows – if, instead of help in time of trouble, it becomes a way of life – will destroy the state. Before that, it will destroy the people who succumb to its way of valuelessness. What irony. Because you are important, we will support you even though you don't produce; therefore, you are worthless. No matter how many reasons or rationalizations we use, if we receive without giving, we turn bitter, and soon nothing green grows near us. (Yes, I was recently at the Dead Sea.)

Spiritual welfarism is love without relationship. That is the kind of love which is choking the church to death. The Thanksgiving basket; the help that carries no invitation to a different life; the money that asks nothing in return; the kind of caring that doesn't want to know you or be with you – it is a killer compassion. It reverses the old phrase, "It kills the soul but not the body." A more overt and obvious evil is far easier to handle.

Sex without love is an abomination. We have bad words for it like “prostitution,” “licentiousness,” and “lust,” which is one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Genuine or true love is the virtue at the center of LIFE. What is at the other end of the spectrum? *Agape* without affection – love without relationship. It is an evil just as grievous, but we have no bad names for it and we have precious little awareness of its dangers. Therefore, it kills the church and no one sounds the alarm.

What happens in the church is that we get enamored of our high theories and forget that they rest on foundations of integrity and reality. Maybe I can get that clearer.

If I join the church and if you join the church, we have signed up to learn to love each other. That means we covenanted to relate to each other, get to know each other, argue and work and care and sing and pray and sometimes fight with each other. If we do not do that – if we do not come to care for and love each other – then we do not have anything to give that the Christian church cares about. We are not yet about what Christianity is about. Any love we talk about or offer or invite others to come be part of stands on a foundation of personal relationship, friendship, and affection, or it is a lie. All genuine love has to have an “I” on one side of it and a “you” on the other.

From my perspective, the church has been so busy (in most places) trying to talk and act loving in the face of all of the world’s needs, that it has spent less and less time on its relationships. Spiritual welfarism is love without relationship. The integrity is gone. The power is missing. Nobody is getting changed. It is a charade, a shell game.

Our Scripture reading today had some marvelous passages about the brethren, from among the 191 places where the New Testament talks about the subject. (I should have read Romans 12:10, where Paul says, “*Put a little affection into your love of the brethren.*”) We have whole denominations named in honor of the special relationship that is supposed to exist between “the brethren.” We cannot use this word anymore because of its masculine, exclusive flavor to modern ears, but in the old language, it simply meant the faithful community, the congregation, the other people you shared the faith with. (We cannot use the word “cistern” either. That refers to whole rooms – some as large as this whole sanctuary – hewn out of solid rock to hold water. See, I’ve been to Masada, Hazor, and Megiddo too.)

The point is: The fellowship of the brethren was an enormous part of the early church's reality, pattern, expectation, functioning. For the most part, people today don't even notice this category and dimension of our faith. What is the difference between your relationship with your secular friends and your relationship with the brethren? What guidelines do you follow when dealing with an enemy, in distinction from dealing with one of the brethren? Are you clear in your mind about how you want to treat and deal with people at work, in contrast to the way you want to deal with and treat the brethren?

"I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (Romans 12:1) That is a very high passage, but would Paul make such a statement to anybody *except* the brethren?

I am trying to say that there is a whole layer of life – a whole dimension of acting, feeling, thinking, relating, striving – that is appropriate with the brethren, and nowhere else. If we have no brethren, no congregation, no faith community, we cannot experience this whole layer of life and growth. Yet this dimension of life is nearly lost in our day because the churches, in their very understandable concern for all the problems of the world, have forgotten the distinction, or they have decided they don't have time for Christian community anymore. They think it's selfish and self-centered for us to be nurturing ourselves or enjoying our own relationships in Christ. We must be out saving the world. We must be doing something about all the pain and trouble everywhere around us.

The motive, as usual, has been good and understandable. But in most places, we have lost the disciple bands and the congregations of Christian friends that have given us the power to make a difference in the first place. A movement about love that no longer fosters loving relationships between its members is not going to help anybody in this world very much, for very long.

Is this a call for all of us to focus more on our covenant bonds *with* and our caring *for* each other? Yes it is. To move from theory to reality, we have to get specific. We need to get into each other's homes and lives more. It IS happening, thank God. Occasionally we design an event to try to make it easier. When those programs come along, I hope you will cooperate every way you can. But you don't have to wait for them.

LOVE OF THE BRETHREN

That's why I am preaching this sermon: To remind you that every member of this church has promised to be your friend, and you have promised to be theirs. You maybe didn't notice, and they probably didn't either, but the promise is there: To love each other as Christ has loved us. Start calling on it with each other – testing it, trying it on, calling it forth. Get a little risky, a little daring, a little creative. What if you goof? What if you bother somebody? What if you make somebody angry? You can always call on their forgiveness. That's part of the contract too. But don't wait any longer. Love each other. It is the direct command of our Lord.