

Sunday, September 10, 2023 ***“COMMUNITY of CHRIST CONNECTED in Faith”***

Romans 12: 1-21 John 15: 1-11

How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live and worship together in unity.

(Psalm 133:1) Welcome everyone as we gather together as the Body of Christ in this place we call Glenwood United Church. We are able to worship God as a community of faith focused on Jesus Christ and this is truly a blessing, a gift from God. Why? Because there are people in some places in the world who cannot do what we have been able to do this morning! We got up; readied ourselves in whatever way needed and came to church—either by physically walking into this building, or by connecting online via computer. We are blessed and sometimes we don’t even realize it or know it. But why is it important to be a part of this community of faith today?

As we begin this fall season here at Glenwood Church, we are looking to define who we are as followers of Jesus Christ, as faithful disciples seeking to grow in relationship with God and to experience the Holy Spirit as we live and love others as Jesus taught. But how do we discern who we are and what is Jesus calling us to do?

Our Gospel reading today from John 15 Jesus states: “I am the true vine and my Father is the vinegrower. “ It is God the creator who removes every branch, that bears no fruit and those branches which do bear fruit is pruned to make it produce even more fruit. Those of you familiar with gardening and tending bushes and plants, or even grape vines know that in certain times caring for the branches and fruit is an ongoing task in order to have fruit grow in abundance; or even healthier plants overall.

Those listening to Jesus’ words would know what he was referring to as main vine was what was cultivated and cared for until such time it was strong enough to be able to support branches. Eventually the branches would grow to support smaller branches, flowers and eventually fruit. Jesus describes himself as the key part of the plant and those who trust and believe in him are branches which spring out and produce fruit. But there are also branches which used to be connected to the main vine which are no longer active, and needing to be

pruned away. By pruning those parts which are not doing what is expected, the rest of the plant may grow in new ways and eventually produce even more fruit.

Jesus uses this image of vine/ branch and fruit to remind us that we are connected to him as branches. But we must live out our faith through him, not do our own thing because we are tethered to him and He gives us life. We are branches on Christ's vine, but just how connected are you? This is a tough question to answer as we seek the guidance of the Spirit to help us to define the role of Community and why it is so important for us as a church.

We read in Matthew 18:20 that "the holy spirit is present whenever believers gather together." As a 'community of faith' within the United Church of Canada, our purpose is to "explore faith, worship and service and to join the hearts, voices and resources of the community to witness to the gospel and vision of Jesus for a compassionate and just society both in Canada and around the world." (the Manual B.2.1.1)

But why do we gather? As disciples of Jesus and followers in faith, we saying to God, "Thank you." Thank you God for your incredible work of enabling us to become one with each other in Jesus Christ. We are thanking God, the Creator for hearing our cries for help and enabling us to be forgiven of sin. Saying thank you to God just seems so little when God has done so much for us. Psalm 40: 1 *"I waited patiently for the Lord, and he turned to me and heard my cry for help."*

We also gather in community because God did not intend for us to live in isolation. He specifically designed us to crave and thrive with others. We are at our best when we experience life's highs and lows with others. Everyone needs community. Community is encouraging because you are given the opportunity to be around people at different stages of their faith journey and to bear burdens and celebrations together. Everyone can teach and learn together. We can lift each other up! We read in Hebrews 10 24-25: *"Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day of the Lord approaching."*

Community is also fun; it should never be forced or dull. As followers of Jesus, we do have fun but we do so knowing that life is to be fully lived and that we can enjoy each other's company as we experience the wonders of God's creation. Think of things in the past which we have shared together—special concerts, photos, tea time, laughing over coffee time, and just sitting with each other and hearing the stories.

Community attracts the Holy Spirit. When people gather in the Spirit to meet, eat and worship as one, all are moved to share in the joy of the living God. As Jesus' followers we belong to this church, but we are also part of different communities—for we play, live, exist and move amongst many people. This is where your outreach ministry happens because you are there as Jesus' feet and hands.

Community fosters love. Paul wrote to the Colossians (3:13-14) "bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all things- share love because love bind them all together in perfect unity. This is community.

But how are we connected with each other.. When we share in the two sacraments of the United Church we become connected. When the waters of baptism are splashed upon the infant or adult who is baptised we are witnesses to something amazing—a holy moment only then can we say we are family. For when we share in this moment we also renew our baptism as we receive and remember that baptism joins us as one and enables us to be a part of the family of God. When we eat and drink as Jesus asked us to in remembrance of him, we connect with each other—it is difficult to articulate how, but the spirit moves us to say we are no longer one but one with each other in the name of Jesus. This is connections which bind us. And this connection needs to be renewed from time to time.

Jesus Christ is God's promised One who made this possible. He taught "I am the True Vine" the one and only son of God. God as creator prunes away the branches whose connections to the vine are loose, lax and lifeless; But the branches that are strong are cut back in order to begin growing in new ways.

Jesus is the reason we are here. We are Christians on a journey and it is through him alone that we are able to be the church here in 2023. It is through Jesus' life- his teachings, healing, preaching; his death by crucifixion and his resurrection to new life that enables us to say we believe in him. Because He lives we live.

God gave us Jesus out of love for all whom he created. It is by God's grace that Jesus died on the cross, to save us from our sin when he did not deserve this suffering. However, he did this through the gift of sacrificial love. God's grace is his undeserved favor to us. . Grace cannot be earned; it is something that is freely given and received.

And grace is something that calls us to want to be more and do more as Christians. To be true Christians we are to follow Paul's words as shared in Romans 12:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another.

As we consider this new academic year and discern what God- Father Son and Spirit is calling us to do we are reminded of our faith commitment when we said we believe. It is time to renew that commitment as we encourage others to join us, to worship to work and love each other in the name of Jesus Christ.

We are a "COMMUNITY of CHRIST CONNECTED in Faith" We are called to be seen as Christians by our love for one another within these walls which are safe for all and with whom God calls us to share as we reach out in Christian kindness. WE are Glenwood United Church Community Connect Christ.

PRAYER:

God of grace call us and renew our faith as we are pilgrims on life's journey at this time and place. Help, guide and lead us we pray as we discern again that we belong to you in faith and in hope. Bless us pray in the name of Jesus Christ, the true vine, Amen