

The Rock: 06-21-2020**The Church****First reading:****Title:** Encourage one another**Scripture:** Hebrews 10: 19-25**Theme:**

Why it is important that we gather, and it is not simply to exercise our right, but rather to build each other up.

And even though we have been separate, the gospel has not been silent.

Introduction:

As I sit and begin typing the message for this week, our first in-person gathering in fifteen weeks, much flies around in my mind.

I am ever prayerful for a healing in this country as we continue to tear ourselves apart over the racial injustices and inequalities in this country.

Losing too, the ability to say, we value every human being. Black lives

matter, all lives matter, blue lives matter.

Our first responders, and particularly our police officers went from heroes to villains in one horrific event.

But the people of God, the BODY OF CHRIST, is better than that and should be the loudest voice for justice, ready to listen and learn. Because when one part hurts, we all hurt.

Pray for Brian, as he and his fellow officers navigate this frightening tension right here close to home. He is one of the finest men I know, and has dedicated his life to serve as a police officer.

So much has happened, since March 1, when you made the decision on a new pastor for the first time in 37 years.

A lifetime for many of you. For everyone of you, with the exception of perhaps 4-5 people, have not heard a voice other than Pastor Roland.

Giving that life happens at 60 seconds a minute, and that we all are really journeying through to the promised hope in Christ, we all have had our ups and downs over the course of this endeavor.

Some would actually think that this was anything but a smooth transition, but the truth of it is this: It has been a very smooth transition.

In large measure, in fact in all measure, because of a few things.

First: Your elders. Parks, Lynne, Sue, Martita, Claude, Brian, Trish.

They are your leaders, called by God to give oversight of this community. Quietly behind the scenes, we covenanted together from the start to meet every week to pray, and to talk about this community and your needs.

Prayerfully making sure you were fed the word, that decisions were made which were best for all of us. Pray for them, and thank them for their oversight and Godly leadership.

They love you deeply and care about the success of God's people.

Second: The staff. Rachel, Lynne, Stephanie, Cathy, Laura, Jen, Gail, Gerry. They had to learn how to work with and for me in a way that is very difficult. Yet, each one of them has done a fantastic job with everything that has been handed to them.

They gathered every Tuesday virtually at first, and then in person to discuss all of the particulars of re-opening. Putting wheels to the thoughts in my head, as well as repositioning and fixing those wheels when they were not going to work.

Third: IT. By definition, the information technology folks, IE: video, sound and anything else needed to make our services are what they are, go unknown and unheard.

That's the way they like it, because typically attention is drawn to them when something goes wrong. Then everyone wants to know who is in charge of the "stuff" that makes all this happen.

Gail had faithfully edited and posted almost every message since March 15, and that has blessed all of us.

However, if it had not been for Alicia and her dedication to every assignment given to her, frankly we would not have anything for Gail to post.

When life went sideways for all of us, we discovered that because of what we already had in place, adjusting to on-

line, while a bit hiccuppy, would end up being ok.

Not easy, but ok, and then very good. It took about five weeks to settle out what we believed as a team was the best for us, as the Community of God at The Rock, to put out there as a Sunday morning service.

All because of the foundation that had been set here over the years.

I just kept telling people to extend GRACE, especially to yourselves. We are, after all, rebuilding the plane at 40,000 feet while still flying at 500 mph.

Lastly: Because of all of you.

Your faithfulness in prayer, in giving, in figuring out how to take care of one another in a very strange and new reality, and in your patience with the process, even when you didn't want to be patient.

I have gotten to know many of you simply by voice, as we have had phone conversations, learning about one another.

Sabrina and Lucas, if I close my eyes, I will recognize your voice Sabrina.

That's what happens when we chat on the phone but hadn't gathered here yet.

Marie, in a phone call to thank you for leading your life group with Pastor Roland through these strange times.

Chris and James, for the encouragement of a text message here and there to say: "I'm praying for you. How are you doing?"

Patty and Linda, wanting to find a way to encourage the ladies within our community, started the card ministry again.

Rich, for your encouraging word sent to us about how God had turned your world upside down, but that through it all you were driven to your knees, well one knee, in prayer.

Your relationship with him and it seems your soulmate have grown strong through this. You asked, and she said yes. I'll wait for your call.

Donna, you said goodbye to your soulmate, a strong, kind and loving man. Peter was lost to cancer, but is in glory, healthy and waiting for that day when he will see you again.

Your ladies, thank you Sue, circled around you Donna, literally, with the first of many "drive by" celebrations to encourage and love on one another.

Community does that.

Sean and Jenna, while we lost Peter, we gained Layla. In deep sadness, we find great joy, as the Lord, with every birth reminds us that all life is precious and He desires that we continue on in His calling for us.

Gerry and Shirley -You folks had a bit of a scare, well a few scares. Even though Gerry, you were in hospital and Shirley you couldn't see your husband, Kevin, you showed up to pray with him and encourage him.

Using your gift and position at the hospital to be this community's representative when I couldn't and Shirley couldn't. Encouraging one another.

Patty, you as well, when you were in hospital and getting ready for a procedure, found yourself alone, but not alone.

Verlaine showed up, talked with you and helped you and prayed with you. God's

people, in God's way, placed to serve and encourage one another, in love.

Little Azran , Valerie and Chad's son. Dan and Candy, Patty and Tadge grandson, when he was hurt, the elders went into prayer that God would heal him.

The bridge for me between my former church and here, as Patty and Tadge were two of my best friends for my time at AGCC. She still is, as the last thing I did as pastor there was to celebrate Tadge's life, as we said goodbye to him. Another kind, and tender-hearted man.

In God's goodness, we were and all are still connected. It is a small world and God's people are always linked. Azran is home now and recovering with injuries, yes. But far less than we thought. God is so very good.

Valerie, Chad, Azran, and Arco, you are still in our prayers for healing.

Annie, you as well, my friend, as your little cousin continues to recover are in our prayers.

These things won't make the evening news, they won't garner the headlines

of our local paper, but in the treasure trove of heaven, rest assured, they are filed for that day when God looks at each one of you and says: Well done, my good and faithful servant.

The Story:

We have been shut in, but the Gospel and God's people have not been shut up. You all just looked for the next right thing to do, and then, you did it.

There are many more stories just like these to tell, that we may never know about, but perhaps we will.

Perhaps over these fifteen weeks, we had not been able to gather together, but I would challenge that notion.

Perhaps we haven't here in this facility, a very important thing to do, I agree. But it seems to me and sounds to me as though, you all have been gathering in whatever way possible to love, to encourage one another, and to pray.

Most especially pray. We can do anything given to us by God once we pray, but nothing before.

I personally have been held up and held steady because of your prayers. Each

one of you who silently went before the Lord asking that I be helped, strengthened, and encouraged, have had your prayers answered.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says of that type of intercessory prayer:

"As far as we are concerned, there is no dislike, no personal tension, no disunity or strife, that cannot be overcome by intercessory prayer. Intercessory prayer is the purifying both into which the individual and the community must enter every day."

-Life Together: Pg. 90

This is why I wanted to end our church series here in Hebrews, in that place where the verse that has gotten so much air-time over these past fifteen weeks, sits.

The not neglecting to gather together. I'm not going to go over once again where we should be in light of that and our "rights", for I have sufficiently dealt with that.

Let's read that whole section and take a few minutes to just talk about three things, in our remaining time:

"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

-Hebrews 10:19-25 ESV

Three things and then we are finished, since they have already been preached and "unpacked" as I like to say in your faithfulness over these weeks:

Number 1 - Let us draw near with true hearts in fullness of faith.

Number 2- Let us hold the confession of hope firm

Number 3- Let us pay attention to each other for the provoking of love.

1-Draw near to what, or to whom? To God and then to one another. You have done that.

With true hearts and full of faith, you have tended to one another and the needs of God's people. Even those outside of our body.

Martha's kitchen especially has been blessed with the outpouring of help. Love and food. Hospital workers, through Rise up and Catalyst as well, have been blessed.

Because the Church is a people and not a place, we can draw near as much through what we do as where we are.

You see the first two here are made much easier because of the third. Prayer. That is the universal means by which we are connected, even though we are apart.

Much as with our cooperate singing, and lifting our voices before the LORD, prayer goes to the very throne room of God as Jesus intercedes on our behalf.

It is the universal and heavenly "Love language" of God's people. We draw near with full hearts through prayer.

I can only image what a vision and sound it must be as the cries and prayers of His people are lifted before him and all the angels sing: Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God almighty.

Our praise and our prayer joining together to make that joyful noise and fragrance before Him.

2-Hold the confession of hope firm. We know who it is we believe in, and we know that He is in complete control. Our simple duty is obedience to do the next right thing.

Why can we do that? Because we hold firm to the hope we have, that Jesus has risen, ascended and intercedes for us every day! Our prayers are heard and answered.

We are then encouraged by that as well as by each other, as we are reminded that God's sovereignty is a soft pillow upon which we can rest our heads.

A body knit together in this way cannot fail or fall apart. Because our focus

is correct. Upward -toward God and outward-toward each other.

3-Provoke one another toward love. Not to anger, frustration and agitation - but toward love.

Doing that reminds the world just whose we are, WHO WE BELONG TO. Jesus said if we are functioning right, they will know us by our love.

Not our opinions, our political positions or even our social standing. But by our love for one another. Our first reading this morning:

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

-John 13:34-35 ESV

Couched within all of that, is where we are encouraged to **gather together**. Not so we can go to a place and somehow feel good that we have done so, and as quickly as possible to get on with our Sunday.

But rather, to grow as the community of believers right here in St. Albans VT

by doing these very things when we gather corporately IN PRAYER and SINGING, and to hear HIS WORD preached.

That is why we are to not forsake the gathering together. The importance of gathering is not just to check a box. That type of people and church will not long survive a world that needs answers in all of the storms of life.

No, the Church that has a true heart full of faith, that holds tightly the confession of the hope we have in Christ, and that gathers together to actually provoke one another to love and to do so all the more as we see that day of His return fast approaching.

You, this community of believers here in the Northwest corner of little old Vermont have done just that.

I am very proud of all of you, am blessed to be your pastor and am prayerfully looking forward to what God has for us in the future, as we journey together.

Hold the line, and stay the course. Love one another, encourage one another and as we are now allowed to, make it you Sunday priority to gather together

and serve one another in any and all capacities God has gifted you in.