

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church  
Des Moines, WA  
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**A Healthy Church = Enjoys Christian Fellowship**

- 1. Understanding the concept**
- 2. Recognizing the source**
- 3. Putting it into practice**

**Hymns: 227 – 492 – 494 – 327**

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984



Do you remember this picture? It was the promotional picture for the movie "Home Alone." The picture is a hard one to forget. For one thing, it fits the title of the movie perfectly. The movie was about an 8-year old boy who was mistakenly left home alone as the rest of his family flew on a trip to Europe. As a couple burglars gradually find out that fact, the movie takes some humorous turns as he lays traps to fend them off in their attempts to break into his home.

The picture is also very fitting because it represents that deep down it was scary for him to be home alone. In fact, the movie brought out his fear at times when he was alone and his relief at the end when his family came back.

That picture probably isn't the best picture to show in representing the true feelings of what it is to be alone, due to the movie memories it evokes. Perhaps this one is a better one to pick:



It's a reminder that being alone is usually not desirable. In fact, it can be downright depressing and painful. God knows that. Way back in the Garden of Eden, God said, "*It is not good for the man to be alone*" (*Genesis 2:18*). Think about that. The first thing that we hear God pronounce as "not good" in his newly created world was man's being alone. God made us social creatures from the beginning. He made us people who need people. Even people that God creates in such a way that they enjoy "alone time" often, or people that don't feel a burning need to get married, such people still need people.

Today, we are in the second week of our new sermon series called "***A Healthy Church***." Each week we are looking at a Scriptural characteristic of a healthy congregation, and examining our own church for this characteristic. **This morning, let's spend some time talking about how a healthy church is one that enjoys Christian fellowship:**

- 1. Understanding the concept**
- 2. Recognizing the source**
- 3. Putting it into practice**

**1. Understanding the concept**

Maybe the first thing we need to do today is explain or define what we mean by fellowship. There are people who hear the word "fellowship" and think only of things like dinners or outings to the bowling alley or a baseball game. They make a distinction

between social functions – what they'd call fellowship – and spiritual activities. Others think of "fellowship" only in the sense of spiritual activities. They would say that when we worship together, we are practicing fellowship, but when we have father/son dodgeball or the church picnic, we are just socializing. Who's correct? To complicate it further, there might be some who view the word "fellowship" in a negative sense. They would say that "practicing fellowship" means that we separate from those who hold to and promote false teaching (which we are supposed to do). But is that what fellowship is all about?

Let's read from Acts 2 to see a Scriptural example of fellowship. In this description of the first church at Jerusalem after Jesus ascended into heaven, *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."*

Would you have loved to be a part of that congregation? The members of that congregation genuinely cared about one another. They wanted to be with one another. They were like one big, happy family. They sought out each other's company. They ate meals together. They shared what they owned. They met in their homes. Their attitude was "Mi casa, su casa." This attitude was also evident in their spiritual life of faith. They learned from the apostles together. They "broke bread," which can also be a reference to receiving communion, together. They prayed together. They enjoyed outreach to new people together. We could say that their "fellowship" involved all aspects of their contact with one another – spiritual and social – and that the main application in their lives was a

positive one for them to experience. It was a beautiful thing.

We're not saying that the people in that congregation were sinless or that they never had problems that threatened their unity. If you've read the book of Acts recently, you know that things were not always so ideal. At one time, factions arose because the "old timers," the Jews, were having trouble letting go of the past in the Old Testament law of circumcision when new people were coming into their congregation. Another time, a couple by the name of Ananias and Sapphira lied to Peter and the congregation about an offering that they were making. They allowed pride to cause an ugly situation. Like any church, that first congregation in Jerusalem was made up of sinners. But in this snapshot view of that church, we see healthy attitudes of Christian fellowship that they shared in their bond of unity in Jesus their Savior.

This fellowship filled a great need that they had. That early church would undergo much persecution together. They would suffer hard times at the hands of their enemies and the hands of the Roman government because of their faith in Jesus. It was no different than other times in history. Remember the depressing times of the prophet Elijah in the Old Testament, when he lamented to God that everyone had forsaken God's ways and "I am the only one left"? Martin Luther went through some terribly depressing times as he struggled for the true doctrine of Scripture against the church of his day, a struggle that seemed overwhelming at times.

This is still a need today. Pastors need such fellowship from their members. I need you. I'm thinking about Paul's words to the church in Rome: *"I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong - that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith"* (1:11,12).

I need your support and your encouragement. I need you to struggle in prayer for me and for our congregation. I need your friendship and warm relationship. And deep down inside, all of you have such a need to fill as well. Who would ever want to be part of a

church that could be described as “cold and aloof?” That is not a compliment for a congregation, and it’s not the way God has designed us in our needs.

## 2. Recognizing the source

Now that we’ve defined what Christian fellowship is, we can’t go any further until we see what the source of such fellowship is. This is important because inside of us a sinful nature lives that has a selfishness and oblivious spirit. Our sinful nature doesn’t want to see beyond ourselves many days: My wants, my needs, my family, my fears, my time, my opinions, my ideas, and my possessions. How can we remove those implanted lenses that cause me to see everything in the world from my perspective and learn to become more conscious of my brothers and sisters in faith?

1 John 4 puts this into perspective well: *“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”*

Do you notice how God uses John first of all to call us to repentance? A loveless, selfish life is not the Christian life. To think that everything is okay in my relationship with God when I’m selfishly thinking only of me and ignoring the needs and lives of my brothers and sisters in faith is to be deceived. To have a congregation that is “clique-y” and divided is wrong. To be sure, we very likely have church members that we relate to better than others. That is not wrong. But to be clique-ish in a congregation? Or oblivious to others? That is not right! And to be honest with you, it is an attitude that I see regularly in our church.

Thank God John gives this instruction, and that he also continues with words of hope for sinners. There is hope for us because of God’s love and action toward us that restored our fellowship with him. God the Father loved us so much that he put his own feelings aside and sent the Son whom he loves to die for us. God the Son loved us so much that he accepted that mission to save us. He set aside his glory in heaven to become the servant and Savior of all, to live a humble life and then to die the most painful death imaginable for us as he paid for the sins of the world on the cross. God the Holy Spirit loves us so much that even though we are works in progress in our sinful ways he still works on us through Word and sacrament and calls us to repentance again and again.

Such love from God turns our hearts around and leads us to have love and Christian fellowship for those around us. It binds our hearts together in a unity of faith. Who can be closer than people who share the confidence that Jesus is their Savior, their sins are all forgiven, and heaven is their home? Who can be closer than a family of faith who has the same Lord, the same Baptism, the same God and Father? Who can be closer than a group of Christians whose hearts are filled with the source, the love of Christ?

## 3. Putting it into practice

So how do we do it? How can we put Christian fellowship into practice? That’s a legitimate question to ask! There are many threats to a church being able to practice and enjoy the Christian fellowship among members that God wants us to have. Can you think of any?

- We live in a day and age that makes this challenging. Some of you might remember the days when American homes had front porches that were used. People sat on them and visited with their neighbors and friends. Today, the most visible part of homes in new communities is... the garage! The door shuts and people disappear.
- We live in a day and age where work schedules and school activities stretch

the family week to the limit. With bills to pay and opportunities for children's activities, finding time for Christian fellowship can be a challenge.

- We live in a day and age when it is wise to be wary of others. The world is not as "safe" as it used to be in older times, and outgoing friendliness is not as prevalent.
- We live in a time where social networking has many options electronically. It is true that texting, Instagram, posting comments and pictures, sending e-mails and messages, and Twittering can be great blessings of communication. But they can also be a great curse in that these standard ways of communicating are not personal, face-to-face interaction. Since that is most people's idea about communication, it can be a challenge.
- We also live in a time of the information age, where news can be immediately seen and purchases can be made without me having to see or encounter anyone.

All of these things in our culture do not help in our pursuit of genuine Christian fellowship!

I'd like to apply the way we ought to show Christian fellowship to one another in three ways. The first we see in Hebrews 10, where it says, "*Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*" Our Christian fellowship will begin in our worship together.

Last week we discussed how worship is so vital and edifying because our God speaks to us through Word and sacrament. There is a horizontal activity happening in worship. God convicts us of sin and comforts us with the message of forgiveness in Christ our Savior. We also respond with thanks, praise, and prayer in the worship service.

But there is another dimension to worship, a horizontal dimension. We encourage one another. We sing together ("A Mighty Fortress

is our God"). We pray together ("Our Father who art in heaven"). We confess our faith together ("We believe in God the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth"). The benefits and encouragement that we receive from each other is where our Christian fellowship begins. Our attendance at God's house and our participation in the worship service is not only between us and God but an expression of the faith we share.

A second way we can be a healthy church in our Christian fellowship is by enjoying the church events and activities outside of worship that build our Christian friendship. A Fellowship Committee is an extremely important committee in a large congregation, for the larger a church grows the more the individual can feel alone. Therefore, a committee is needed to plan for fellowship events, and WELS churches have such committees that plan many things:

- Advent and Lent suppers before Wednesday worship at certain times of year.
- New member potlucks
- Wednesday "Supper with the family" that was started in September
- A church campout
- Ladies' *Advent by Candlelight*
- A church picnic
- Easter breakfast
- Open gyms
- A baseball or hockey game outing
- Game nights

As fellowship events come up, why not plan to come to some to foster your Christian friendships?

And then there's "one-anothering." That's a strange term to use, but it really is the best one. Our personal one-anothering is going to be a personal way that we express Christian fellowship in our personal lives. There are many one-anothering passages in Scripture:

- "*Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must also love one another*" (*John 13:34*).
- "*Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above*

*yourselves*" (*Romans 12:10*).

- "Live in harmony with one another" (*Romans 12:16*).
- "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (*Romans 15:7*).
- "Agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (*Romans 15:7*).
- "Serve one another in love" (*Galatians 5:13*).
- "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (*Galatians 6:2*).
- "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (*Ephesians 4:32*).
- "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (*Ephesians 5:21*).
- "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another" (*Colossians 3:13*).
- "Encourage one another and build each other up" (*1 Thessalonians 5:11*).
- "Do not slander one another" (*James 4:11*).
- "Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling" (*1 Peter 4:9*).
- "Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another" (*1 Peter 5:5*).
- "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other" (*James 5:16*).

Why would we want to do such things? For a Christian, it is normal and natural to respond to the mercy and grace of God to us by showing such acts of fellowship toward one another.

Home alone? Church alone? It's not a Christian concept. A healthy church enjoys Christian fellowship! May God bless us with such fellowship among us! Amen.