

“Building a Strong Family of God – Make Commitments”

October 10, 2021

What builds a strong family - whether we're talking about the people close to us or the larger family of God? If we claim to follow Jesus, we should reflect what God is like to the world - God who loves, blesses, cares, gives, and invites us into relationship. That sounds great! And yet, we struggle to be faithful stewards of all of God's gifts - even that good message of God's grace.

So how does God build us up and make us stronger? We started with faith, which makes sense as we consider the people whose faith has influenced us. Last week, we tackled forgiveness - not easy or quick - but vital to who we are as a family of God, who is gracious and merciful and abounding in love that never fails. Today we move to another tough issue - commitment. And in a time when so much has changed, commitment still matters. Ultimately, our commitments show what matters to us.

Perhaps we struggle with a fear of commitment - not wanting to get ourselves into anything too deeply, especially if there's not a way out. When you sign up for a class or a sport, sometimes you want to know that there's an out - just in case! Have you ever had to finish something you started even when you didn't want to? May you've heard (or said), “You made the commitment, and you need to stick with it!”

How many of us over-commit and then don't follow through on what we promised? Maybe we know what it's like to be on the receiving end of that - to be disappointed when someone doesn't do what they said they would do. And I'll speak for myself (and maybe you can relate) - I've been the one who hasn't followed through on a commitment.

And if I'm honest, it's because I didn't make it a priority. We follow through on what's important to us. We make time for the things that matter most to us. We re-schedule and adjust. We make it happen if we want to. That's the hard truth as we consider making and keeping commitments.

Making commitments is a part of our spiritual life, and we have to be intentional. Being accountable to God and our relationship isn't a new message. Jesus said that discipleship comes with a cost. It requires something of us, and it should show clearly in our daily lives. It shows in how we spend our time and money, in how we use our gifts and skills, in how we interact with the world.

And we don't always like to hear the challenge of Jesus. It's our hearts he's after because when he gets a hold of our hearts, it reorients us. There's a transformation. We don't all have a conversion story where we were knocked down on our duff or picked up from a low place or something more dramatic. Sometimes we learn about commitment

from watching it. Growing up around the church offered me a lot of models of commitment, but I had to make the decision (and it's still a daily decision) to be committed to Christ.

We start with God's commitment to all of us - not because of who we are or what we've done, but because of who God is. In this account of the early church, the people come together because the Holy Spirit is active in their lives. They've just been given the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost - remembering the chaos in Jerusalem when the Spirit descended, and everyone thought it was a raging party of drunken people! No, it was the work of the Holy Spirit to bring unity. And that sense of unity grew into a community where sharing was the norm: sharing faith, sharing food, sharing resources, sharing life together. There was trust among them, and God did amazing things!

It was a witness to the world and continues to be a great best vision for who we can be together even as we fight against the temptation to keep what's mine and grasp tightly to our stuff. The church in Acts challenges us to see how the Spirit can transform us into people who make and keep commitments of faith and trust with each other. And it all happened in times of challenge, persecution, and difficulty.

We hear some specific things that were happening among them to make them stronger. They were learning together. Still, studying Scripture with others is a powerful experience because we hear different perspectives and grow together. They were building relationships, and we know how important it is to have those connections in a church community. For many of us, that's the draw - that we have a community. They were praying together, which some say is a good way to measure a church's spiritual health. How are we praying with one another, offering to pray for others, and praying for those around us - knowing that prayer should lead us to act in ways that align with God's call to love others?

This account of the early church also says they were meeting needs - certainly specific needs like food, but also needs of belonging and support. In order for that to happen, they had to sacrifice time, energy, and give sacrificially and generously. His wasn't a mandate, but a response to the power of God at work in them.

Perhaps they even had to give up convenience. How many of us are willing to be inconvenienced? That's a struggle for us in a world where we want everything to be convenient.

In all of this, people were drawn to the community, and people put their faith in Jesus because of it. I wonder how many people are waiting for you and me to do something or say something that witnesses to God's love and care?

SLIDE: Membership vows help us to keep commitment to God and each other. We profess our faith in Jesus Christ, and then we commit to worshipping together in-

person or watching online, being intentional about nurturing our faith outside of worship, serving God and others inside and outside of the church, giving proportionately to our income, and sharing our faith with others in word and deed.

Prayers (talk to God)

Presence (time with God)

Gifts (treasure to support God's work)

Service (time and talents to do God's work)

Witness (tell about God)

For the early church, the connection of their hearts and souls in faith showed in how they shared their life and possessions. Faith is lived out; what we believe shows in what we do and how we live and give. For them to live this way, there was trust among them. No one was fearful of not having enough; no one was boastful about how much they had. They had to trust that their shared resources were used wisely. To be able to share openly and generously cultivates gratitude.

We'd call them a strong community, and it's because they were committed to living their faith. If we think that it's easy to rely on the Holy Spirit, Jesus reminds us that it's difficult to live life relying on the Holy Spirit to guide us. It takes strength and courage.

Commitment isn't automatic. Commitment is a choice that we make – whether it be to family, friends, God, church, career, or something else. Commitment takes time and work. Commitment requires that we look beyond ourselves to the needs of others.

SLIDE: Stephen Covey says, *Make small commitments and keep them. Be a light, not a judge. Be a model, not a critic. Be a part of the solution, not the problem.*

We need to see people of faith, and we need to be people of faith. We need to remember that God doesn't leave us when times are tough. God doesn't stay with us because God has to. God wants to be with us and help us and offer us grace.

I invite us to think about our commitments – and what they require of us. Look at your calendar. What's on it? Where does our commitment to God and others show? To be committed to Jesus Christ is to recognize my need for him in my life - to save me from my selfishness and save me for furthering what he calls me to - love, justice, grace, mercy. It's a daily call that's renewed over and over again. Commitment to God and the church community means that I see myself as an important part of God's working in the world.

Maybe you have a family history of being connected to a church. That alone doesn't make us committed; our willingness to truly be connected and open our hearts to God's leading and loving us into servant disciples is vital. Many of us have said membership vows, but that doesn't mean that everything changed suddenly. We made

the commitment, but are we keeping it? **SLIDE:** Marta Wilson says, “Commitment is defined by both our decisions and our actions.”

When a child is baptized, we promise to love and care for that child and the family. How are we supporting the nurture of young people in the faith - passing on the faith we’ve received? I was grateful that Ana shared the church’s role in modeling service in an interview about a club she belongs to at school. It was a reminder to me that the community of faith has an impact - and helps us to make and keep commitments.

Carrying out the vows – offering our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness - helps us be good stewards of all of God’s gifts. It’s a whole life stewardship practice - not just a check we write, but a way we live faithfully. We’re called to serve God wholeheartedly and cultivate true community with one another.

We know that commitment means that we honor relationships. Many of us have made a commitment in marriage - being faithful and loving one another through the ups and downs. We’ve made a commitment to care for children - helping them and teaching them so they can grow up safely. We have loved ones to care for, too - staying connected and doing our best to help honor them as a part of our lives. Being a friend means committing to stay in touch - listening to struggles, being compassionate, offering advice if asked, and praying for them.

When we make a commitment to Jesus Christ, our lives change. We are a community of people who seek God’s help and hope for our lives, who seek forgiveness and mercy through Christ, and who seek to be guided by the Holy Spirit. Some days that’s not so easy! We build community with one another – people we don’t know or understand, people who are different from us. A colleague wrote, “To join a church is to commit to a social circle you do not get to choose.” There might be no other way for us to come together - except for our connection in Jesus. And in all of it, we trust in God who can do more than we can ask or imagine!

Make commitments. Keep commitments. **SLIDE:** Abraham Lincoln said, “Commitment is what transforms a promise into reality.” How do our promises become reality? This month, we’ll be invited to offer our faith commitments. We’ll be asked to make a commitment of our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness as a part of the Body of Christ. This really is a spiritual practice and discipline to open our hearts and consider how we will participate in God’s vision for our lives through the community of faith. Jesus needs us, and we need him.

God chooses to work through people - the likes of you and me and the person sitting next to you and the person who comes to mind when you think about people who have made and kept faith commitments - a parent or grandparent who took you to

church or made sure you got there, the Sunday School teacher who showed up and shared Bible stories, the choir director, the pastor, the kind person who knew your name and encouraged you along the way. Commitments matters, and we wouldn't be here without God's commitment to us - and others who have made commitments and kept them.

May our commitments reflect God's commitment to each of us.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.