



*Rev. Chris Taylor - 11.10.19*

*"Five Smooth Stones Sermon Series: Fellowship"*

*Psalm 133 and Ephesians 4:11-16*

In this series called "Five Smooth Stones" we are looking at the essential practices of our faith. Like David putting those stones into his bag as he prepared to face Goliath, these are the practices we need to carry with us, the practices that are going to make all the difference as we face our own giants, and as we move forward along life's path.

In the past weeks we've looked at sacrifice and faith. This morning we turn to fellowship. In this social media era of superficial connection, real fellowship is more important than ever as we strive to open our lives to God's presence and God's power.

Last weekend I was looking at the climbing wall at Camp Crestfield during our men's retreat. It is pretty impressive and offers a nice range of climbs. It took me back to high school and a program we had there that was loosely based on Outward Bound. It was as part of that program that I was first introduced to technical climbing.

We didn't have climbing walls back then. No one had ever heard of them. There were just the natural climbs that you would find in places like Carderock along the Potomac River, or Seneca Rocks down in West Virginia. We had instructors, and we never climbed alone. It was just too dangerous. In fact, on a trip to Seneca Rocks one of our instructors had found the body of a young man who had been climbing solo and had fallen. So we always used ropes. We always had someone to belay us: someone to take hold of the line and catch us if we began to fall.

Having that person on-belay was key for me. I knew that with that person on belay I wasn't going to fall and kill myself. It didn't take away all the fear – I remember times when my legs were shaking uncontrollably as I tried to climb. No, it just gave me the courage to move forward even in the face of my fear.

But there were other things that person on-belay offered, as well. From above or below, wherever he happened to be, he could often provide some

perspective when I got stuck – suggesting hand-holds or foot-holds that I might have missed because I was so close to the rock face. And sometimes, if I needed to stretch for a hold that involved some risk, I could call out “tension,” and he could tighten the line to offer some support as I reached out.

All this is to say that working in tandem, not trying to make those climbs on my own, allowed me to try things and achieve things that would have been way beyond my capacities otherwise.

That is something of what it means to be in fellowship with other Christians. It is what the psalmist was getting at when he wrote, “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” God didn’t make us to travel this path alone. We were created to be in community, created to be connected with the people around us. We need each other. We need to be sharing this life together.

Even for a dyed-in-the-wool introvert like me, I know that fellowship is a life-essential. It offers nutrients for the soul that we aren’t going to find anywhere else. As the psalmist put it, “For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.” Life forevermore, life at its best and fullest, not when we are alone, not when we are trying to make it all by ourselves, but when we are together – when we are united with brothers and sisters in the faith.

It is there in those connections that the Spirit moves; there that we experience Jesus’ touch and guidance. Not when we are alone at home sitting in front of our computer or messing about with Facebook, or Snapchat or Instagram, but there “wherever two or more of you are gathered together” – that’s where Jesus has promised to be present.

Think about rock-climbing and the value of working in tandem. We need people in our lives who are like that person on-belay; people who are there for us; people committed to helping us succeed; and people for whom we can do the same. We are hard-wired for those kind of connections.

I’m not talking about an entire congregation here. I’m talking about maybe three or four people who are close enough to be truly involved, close enough to make this journey with us. Jesus had his twelve, and then he had his three – Peter, James and John with whom he shared the most important moments of his life.

Share your life like that, and these three or four others are going to be in a position to offer some perspective. Like that person on-belay, they are going to be

able to see things that we might have missed – that handhold just a little further to the left; that path over to the right that offers a better way to the top. How many devastating mistakes, how many broken marriages would have been avoided if only we had people in our lives who were in a position to help us see what was happening, and help us find a different way?

Of course it is not just their perspective that they can offer, it is also their support and their care – those moments when they become Christ's own presence amid our grief or struggles. Back in Colorado we had a member of our church who was going through a particularly difficult divorce. Her husband was abusive. This was something that needed to happen. But it was a very scary time for this woman. Her husband was making all kinds of threats; doing everything he could to intimidate her. In fact, when it came time for the hearing she needed a police escort to make sure she got safely to the courthouse.

It was the people in her small group, the people she was in fellowship with, who were there for her at every point along that journey. They were a constant support. In the days leading up to the hearing, they took turns staying with her. They made sure she wasn't alone. They made sure she had the support she needed, and enveloped her with Christ's own love and care.

We aren't meant to make this journey alone! Being a Christian is not a solo enterprise. Fellowship is one of God's great blessings. When we fall (and all of us fall at some point), our shame and guilt can push us further and further away from God. We need to know that we are forgiven. We need to know that God still loves us and that God hasn't turned away. So when our heart is in a dark place and our mind is spinning, who is there to speak God's grace into our lives?

We aren't going to find it at the country club or at Rotary. No, it is right here amid the community of faith, right here in our fellowship with each other, this is where we find it.

The church wasn't created to be God's great moral arbiter in the world today. When someone has fallen, the last thing they need is more judgment and condemnation. We do a pretty good job of that on ourselves. No, what they need to hear is the good news of God's love and God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ. That's our call. That's what God created us to be. We are here to proclaim and live this grace that has come to us in Jesus. It is what the world needs. It is what our country needs, and our co-workers and our next-door neighbors. It is what each of

us needs, and it is only here amid the community of faith that we are going to find it.

So who is on-belay in your life? We all need those few who are close enough to know what is going on, committed enough to share the truth, caring enough to lift us in prayer and love, Christian enough to share the gospel. That kind of fellowship doesn't just happen. It takes more than just showing up on Sunday mornings. We need to be intentional about it and actively seek ways to connect with our sisters and brothers: getting involved in a ministry or mission; becoming a part of a study or fellowship group; reaching out to people and inviting them into your home, or reaching out and getting together for a cup of coffee...

There are so many different ways to find the kind of fellowship we are talking about. If you don't already have it, the important thing is to start looking. The important thing is to take hold of this third stone and make it a part of your life. What a difference fellowship makes when the giants start coming our way.