

“Someone to help”
Ecclesiastes 4:7-12
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July 4, 2021

Once every several years the 4th of July falls on a Sunday morning. Such is the case this year. What a strange thing to gather as Christians on Independence Day. A Christian is many things, and the freedom we find in Jesus Christ is an absolutely amazing blessing and gift, but a Christian is not independent. A Christian is created to be dependent upon God. From the God who walks with us in the cool of the evening to the shepherd who leads us beside still waters to the sacred promise that with Jesus Christ we will never be alone, Christians are not independent. We need God. And we need relationships with other people. It is not good for the human being to be...alone. As the writer Ecclesiastes puts it, “I saw something meaningless. There was a man all alone...” So on a day where independence is being marked with fireworks and great celebrations, let us be reminded, “Two are better than one...if one falls down, the other can help...if two lie down together they will keep warm...how can you keep warm alone? One may be overpowered, two can defend themselves, and a cord of three strands is not easily broken.” Or in the words of the psalmist, “Behold how pleasant and how good it is when God’s children live together...in unity.”

Betsy Ross is credited with making the first American flag. Tradition has it she made that flag in 1776. Something else was happening in 1776, and that something else is what we celebrate on the 4th of July. The Declaration of Independence was being written. Which means, while independence was declared, at just about the same time a flag was being sewn together representing 13 colonies who all were sworn to work together. I guess that isn’t all that different from when Israel was set free from the tyranny of Egypt, and the next thing you know Moses is having his hands held up because he needed support, and then he is getting counsel from his father-in-law, “Don’t do it yourself.” Get others involved. I recently read a biography of Thomas Jefferson and was

reminded that not long after the Declaration of Independence he was sent to France to build an alliance. And Benjamin Franklin had been sent with the same task. And so was John Adams. The heroes of our independence recognized they needed allies. They recognized we as a nation needed allies.

Maybe I'm trying too hard to convince you of something you already know. We can celebrate independence and at the same time we can recognize how much we need each other. I probably could have skipped my whole introduction and said, "Remember how it felt during COVID?" Being alone was lonesome. We missed the relationships. We longed for human interaction, for human touch, for human empathy, for human laughter, for human tears, for human empathy. We longed for human relationships.

What a fruitful image the preacher from Ecclesiastes gives as we think about the importance of relationships. A cord of three strands is not easily broken. This morning I am thinking about how long those three strands of the cord are. Could it be that the strands might stretch from one end of this church to the other? Could the strands reach across town? Could those strands connect people who are miles apart? Could those strands stretch thousands of miles?

This week we rejoiced in the gift of many strands stretching many miles and extending through more than twenty years. We welcomed a visit by friends from our days in Houston. In case you were wondering, Houston and Westerly are separated by 1,773 miles. That's a mighty long strand. The particular strand represented by this relationship has been woven together over 26 years. We were there when this couple was married. The husband belonged to the church, and so did his parents. He met the young woman and they were married. Now as a couple they were members of our church. We were there a few months after the wedding when the husband was diagnosed with testicular cancer. We were there as he went through chemo. We were there when he received a clean bill of health. We were there when the wife became pregnant and a daughter was born, and we were there when it happened a second time. On a week when we are celebrating Independence Day, friends we have known for more than 20

years came to our home. Their girls are now 19 and 16. One is headed off to college. The Eberly family loves fireworks and hot dogs and apple pie and crowded beaches and flags flying. But for us, independence would mean little if we did not have the richness of relationships.

The girls who visited were in Sunday school when Julie was teaching the middle school students. Julie didn't settle for reading some verses and sending the kids home. She invested in the kids in her class. She got on a kick making her own pasta. She called these two girls up and said, "Come over and I'll teach you how to make pasta." I came home to an explosion of flour that made the dustbowl look like a minor windstorm. These two teenage girls were holding a ribbon of pasta that stretched nearly 20 feet long. Covered in flour, as white as ghosts, their smiles beamed from ear to ear. When we left Houston those two girls held Julie close and expressed their love and appreciation. These are the relationships that are formed when we come together, not as independent people, but as people who recognize we need each other, and we recognize the richest blessings come when we build relationships.

The husband of this family has parents. His parents were also members of our church. Unfortunately, their family had experienced a painful loss. The sister of the friend who visited, one of the daughters of his parents, passed away. We wept with that whole family when they wept, and the cord became a bit more connected, the bonds became a little stronger.

The mother of our friend who came to visit was a quiet and very thoughtful woman. She just had a sense of how the Spirit was at work. We had a Sunday night worship service, but that was not a service this woman attended. She did not want to be overcommitted, so she did not come to the Sunday night service. Out of the blue, one night she came. We were all surprised. She didn't say anything. She gave no reason. She just smiled and made her way toward the service. That night, that one particular night, a person came to our evening service that we had never met. I greeted her, and I could tell she needed to talk. She poured her heart out in a few sentences, saying that she had just lost an adult child. She was broken. Her grief was overwhelming. She felt like she needed a

church. She showed up to our church. That very night was the one night, the only night the mother of our friend who visited happened to be at the service. She knew all too well the pain of losing a child. I asked her to come and talk with the woman who was visiting, and these two grieving mothers held hands, shared tears, and then joined in prayer. In yet another way the bond of faith was strengthened, as these two women poured out their hearts. Moments like these are powerful. Moments like these are profound.

This family came to visit on this week when we celebrate Independence Day, and we remembered the bonds we had formed with them. We remembered the bonds we had formed with his mother. As we remembered we found ourselves treasuring the relationships that are formed in the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ...you tell me where you learn about independence in the Body of Christ. Independence is not in the Body of Christ. In the Body of Christ, every part is connected to the other parts. Every part is dependent on the other parts. Every part is in relationship with the other parts. Every part of the body works in unison with the other parts. It just happens that the 4th of July falls not only on Sunday, the 4th of July falls on the first Sunday of the month. This a communion Sunday. On communion Sundays we remember there is one Body, and one Cup, and one Baptism, and one Lord, and one God and Father of all. Talk about relationships. Talk about a cord that is not easily broken. Talk about being united.

I told you about the mother of the friend who visited. Our friend's father is a pretty special man in his own right. The man's mother and father traveled with us when we led a trip to Greece and Turkey in 1999. That trip was the last trip my parents were able to travel with us. My dad had been diagnosed with a progressive disease, but it was in the early stages. To see my dad in Athens by the Parthenon, in Corinth by those ancient ruins, on the streets of Istanbul, making his way through the marketplace of Ephesus, those are memories I cling to. My dad did pretty well, considering he had a progressive disease. But in Philippi, he stumbled. The terrain was rough, rocky, uneven, and my dad was unsteady. I was hustling up ahead in the

front of our group, being the tour leader and all. At one point we stopped for the slower members to catch up. The father of the friend who visited this week was among the slower group. Not because he was slower. He could have done just fine keeping up with the fast group. But he was with the slow group, because he noticed that someone in the slow group needed help. He saw my dad struggling to make his way and so this man, his name is Roger, he is the father of the friend who visited us this week with his wife and his two daughters, this man named Roger was holding my dad's hand and safely guiding him along the precarious path.

Oh, I can celebrate

Independence Day with the best of them. I love fireworks. I love singing anthems and crossing my heart and pledging allegiance and all the rest. But if all we had was independence, all we would be is alone. One family came to visit, and because we had shared a relationship in a church, like the church we are part of now, so many bonds had been built, so many strands had been woven together. Weddings, baptisms, confirmations, cancer, death of adult children, countless acts of kindness and compassion, a steadying hand to hold up a father who meant the world to me. These are the things that build the strands that support and sustain us. These are the relationships that make life rich and rewarding. These are what is meant when we talk about the bonds of Christian love.

I have been told by numerous people of a tradition the Dunn's Corners Church practiced for many years. After celebrating the Lord's Supper, when the congregation was smaller, a circle would be formed. Hands would be joined. A song would be sung. The song was, "Blest be the tie that binds." We knew we loved this church from the moment we spoke on the phone with the Pastor Nominating Committee. That feeling was solidified when we came to visit and snuck into the Christmas Bazaar and watched you all working together, depending on each other, supporting each other, enjoying each other...loving each other. Then after I had only been here a few months I was invited to meet the man who was the first pastor of this church, Joe Peacock. Several founding members gathered in the home of Ellen Madison, whose mother Florence Madison played such a key role in helping this church get started. I thought we were just going

to have some cookies and punch. But this group, a group so typical of this congregation, a group made up of people just like you, they had come together to celebrate the bonds of Christian love that had been knit and woven together over the course of many years and through times of trial and times of celebration. I came for cookies and punch. Joe Peacock had other plans. There among a small circle of friends, a small circle of Christians, a small circle of disciples, a small circle of brothers and sisters in faith, our first pastor asked us to join hands. Then he started singing...

Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love

The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above

A cord of three strands is not easily broken. Whenever two or more of us gather in the name of Jesus, he is with us. Behold how pleasant and how good it is when the people of God live together in unity. Blest be the ties that bind. It is good to be together. We need each other. Together, made one through our faith in Jesus Christ, together we are the Body of Christ, knit and woven together.