

Nov 24th 2013 First Peter series #6-1 Peter 1:17-2:3-
"Two Essentials For A Healthy Church"

The Baptist Union of WA has, as one of its major goals, the growth, development and encouragement of 'healthy' churches, and I reckon that's a fantastic goal to aim for. But in aiming for that goal we need to know what are the characteristics of a healthy church as far as God is concerned.

Some may say that a healthy church is one that is financially blessed; or has lots and lots of people going to it; or attracts young people; or is very busy; or is extremely active in its community—and there is truth in all those suggestions.

Yet I reckon that if we were to ask the Apostle Peter the same question he would direct us back to the first two chapters of the letter he wrote to groups of Christians scattered through other countries because of persecution. And he would point out to us how he encouraged them to praise and thank the Lord for all He has given them despite the things they were suffering. And how he stressed the need for them to truly understand the value and cost of their salvation and to be holy because God is holy.

And then he would say to us, this joy and holiness is an integral part of a healthy church. But because the church is not just an organization but a living community of believers united together by God the Father, there are two very practical things that are required to make it healthy.

Then he would take us to chapter 1 and verses 22-23. To that point in his letter where he gets to the nitty gritty of living life together as the Body of Christ.

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. ²³ For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

In the original text this sentence begins with the word having. "Having purified your souls by obedience to the truth".

It relates to something that happened when they first obeyed the true word of God the Holy Spirit to their hearts and claimed the cleansing power of the blood of Christ Jesus. That was the time when they became Christians and at

that moment they became in God's sight pure and without sin, and there was also generated in their hearts a sincere love for other believers.

In a sense that became for them their default position from the time of their conversion. Their sinful souls from then on became pure, and within their hearts they discovered this seed of sincere love for fellow Christians. Sincere means real and I'm sure we have all felt it often.

I myself have fellowshipped with groups of Christians in many different countries and I have always sensed a kinship with them that is something of a mystery, because I know nothing about them except that they are my brothers and sisters in Christ. There is a love for them that God the Holy Spirit has planted in my heart.

Well says Peter, that sincere love is good, but if group of believers wants to be a healthy church together, then that sincere love has to become so much more. It has to become deep love for one another that comes from the heart.

This is the first of two essentials for a healthy church. The practical and ongoing deep love and caring for one another that comes from the heart. And that makes a lot of sense because the Lord Jesus Himself put so much emphasis on loving God, one another, and our neighbor, and the other New Testament writers stress the same theme.

John in His epistle has so much to say about believers showing love to one another and the following passage from 1 John 3:16-18 is just one example of that.

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

Now it can be seen from that single example that the love that is needed to make a church healthy is more than just a warm feeling. It is something that will cost us and take hard work. And that cost that we are asked to pay is not just financial or physical. It is an emotional cost too. It demands pity where pity is not our first reaction. Sacrifice when our hearts are fearful of

sacrifice. Mercy when our inner supplies of mercy are already strained and weak.

Peter, however, is more concerned about the things that stop deep love to others happening, than he seems to be about the work required for us to love. For after telling them to love one another from the heart he says in 2:1

Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.

The Contemporary English Version puts it like this:

Stop being hateful! Quit trying to fool people, and start being sincere. Don't be jealous or say cruel things about others.

I believe that we can all look at that list and agree that these are the thoughts, the opinions, the attitudes, the motives that so easily sabotage deep love for one another and for those outside of the church that we, as a church, are seeking to help. I believe that we can also see how such acts, attitudes and feelings can at times take control of us.

Peter, I'm sure did not know these people to whom he wrote but the Holy Spirit did. And He knew the issues in that group that needed to be addressed. And He knows the issues in our lives that tend to affect our love for one another. And right now He uses Peter's words to challenge us about our love, because deep love for one another is an essential part of a Healthy Church.

The second essential is introduced at the very end of v23 and it is the Word of God.

²³ For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

Now Peter had referred previously in v12 to the Gospel that had been preached to them but now he outlines the place God's Word had in their conversion. The preaching of it had been used by the Holy Spirit to bring them to that place where they had been born again.

And this should not surprise anyone because God's Word is living and enduring. As Isaiah had proclaimed many centuries before, man's glory fades and disappears but God's Word stands forever.

And this is why the continual soaking up of God's Word and the growth in the knowledge of God that such brings, is a second Essential as far as being a healthy church is concerned.

When we gather together as the church, worship, prayer, the stories of others and fellowship are all so important, But what is absolutely necessary is that we hear from God's Word. Not hear about God's Word but from God's Word. And when as the church we separate physically from one another then it is vital that each member of the Body is faithful in their reading and study of God's Word.

Peter proclaims in 2:2-3

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

The CEV puts it a little clearer:

Be like newborn babies who are thirsty for the pure spiritual milk that will help you grow and be saved. ³You have already found out how good the Lord really is.

I have sat and watched in amazement little babies feed. So tiny, and yet the energy they put into sucking the milk into the bodies is just so great.

Are we thirsty like that for the spiritual food that God gives us through His Word? Are we eagerly taking every opportunity to feed upon God's Word. Is that a factor of our church life, because if we desire to be a healthy church in God's sight, then it needs to be.

Sometime ago now Judy and I were away with one of our families and they lent us quite a large dome tent for us to use. And as I put it up I was impressed by the simplicity of its design. It had two very long and thin fiberglass poles that were made up of several smaller poles screwed together. Once these poles were inserted into the canvas and the canvas was securely fastened to the ground—the foundation—the tent stood firm and solid against the wind. It became a haven for us but also a place we could invite others into. From it we were soon taking goodies we had prepared for our family and to it they would come when they were looking for our help.

Those two posts made the structure strong, viable, and useful.

The two essentials of Love for God, one another and others, and a craving for God's Word are the two posts of a healthy church. Other things are also needed but these two are vital. Which means that through our love and our desire for God's Word, everyone one of us has a part to play in making God's people here in Craigie a healthy growing church.