

“REDISCOVERING OUR IDENTITY (#2): GATHERING”

(Isaiah 56:8; Hebrews 10:19-25)

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[Prop Needed: Body of Christ Photo-Mosaic, w/focus on Hands]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 10-12-08]

–I–

1. Read Text: Isaiah 56:8; Hebrews 10:19-25 and Pray.
2. **[WATCH BODY OF CHRIST PHOTO-MOSAIC:** *Zoom in from pictures of church members in activities of Worship & Fellowship, then out to HANDS of Jesus, then to entire picture of Jesus with others]*

A–We’re in the midst of a sermon series Rediscovering Our Identity, in which we’re unpacking the meaning of our church’s new mission statement, not only for us corporately (as a community of faith) but also individually (in our personal lives).

B–The statement is found on the front of your bulletin, and after talking last week about the meaning of the initial descriptive phrase (“*A Mosaic of God’s family*”) today I want to turn our attention to what we’re calling the “3-Gs” (*Gathering, Growing, & Going*)...

C–...and how these three words provide not only a framework to understand both our *identity* and our *calling* both, but also how each of these build on each other as we fulfill the biblical functions of people of faith. ¹

D–Today’s word (“GATHERING”) is actually just a short-hand way of describing a more complete statement of our calling, both as a church and as individuals... **“GATHERING to embrace God and all people.”**

3. To understand this phrase, I’d like to ask everyone to look at your hands in front of you...

A–Now, what is it that hands are used for? What’s their purpose? **[Wait for responses..]**
(Possible answers: to hold or pick up or grasp things; etc.)

B–Good. Now, let’s think about this more: If I was to stand in front of you and gesture like this (wave with hand), what am I doing? (Saying “*hello/hi*”)

1–If I walk up to someone (walk up to congregant) and extend my hand like this (do it), what would I be saying and asking for? (“*Hi*,” and “*shake my hand back*”)

2–What if I’m a soldier on a battlefield who’d just run out of ammunition, with an enemy approaching me with a loaded gun. If I did this (raise hands), what would I be saying? (“*I surrender*”)

3–If I’m a referee at a football game and I do this (make touchdown gesture), what would I be saying? (“*Touchdown!*”)

4–What about if I was to gesture like this... (outstretched hands gesturing in invitation)? (It means “*you’re welcome here; come on in; come closer*”)

5–And what if I was to walk up to someone, put my arms around them, hug them, and pat their back – what would I be saying? (“*It’ll be okay. I love you. Hang in there*”)

4. Now my point, of course, is that even though it’s not usually the first purpose we think of, our hands enable us to communicate or express our feelings to others, right?

A–And that’s why, at the beginning of this sermon, you saw the photo-mosaic zoom in on the *HANDS* of Jesus as a way to think about what it means to be “*Gathering to embrace God and all people.*”

B–In this simple phrase, we find the first two biblical functions of God’s people, both corporately (as a church) and personally (as individual Christians): we’re called to be people of **WORSHIP** and of **FELLOWSHIP**.

–II–

5. Think about it: ...hands raised or stretched out – on a battlefield, football field, or even in worship – symbolize *invitation, surrender, victory, or praise*, depending on the situation.

A–Well, aren’t all four of those supposed to happen in our **WORSHIP** of God?

1–In Verse 19 of the Hebrews 10 passage, we read about “*confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus...*” – Isn’t that saying that in worship, we’re *invited* into God’s presence because of what Jesus has done for us?

2–And when Verse 20 talks about “*the new and living way that he opened for us...*” isn’t it an invitation to *surrender* ourselves to that way?

3–And when Verse 22 talks about being able to “*approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean...*” isn’t that describing the *victory* that’s possible from God that leads us to *praise* Him in worship?

B–You see, “hands” represent our call to be people of worship, because in worship we’re called to “*embrace God*” as we gather together.

1–A little boy was once seen going into and out of a church sanctuary several times one day. And someone who saw, later asked him, “*What did you ask God for when you were in there all those times?*” The boy replied, “*Oh, I didn’t ask God for anything. I was just in there loving Him a little!*”

2–You see, worship is not so much a time or place to ask things *of* God, or get God to do things for *us*, but simply is about us *embracing* God in love and praise and thankfulness.

C–So let me ask: Why are YOU here today? Are you here to get something from God? To prove something to yourself or someone else? To see and be seen? ...OR...Through what you sing, say, think, and do, are you here to *embrace* God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? Are you here “*just to love God a little*”?

D–My prayer is that that would reflect who each of us is and why we’re here... because the very first function of God’s people is worship – you and I were made to worship God. ²

–III–

6. And yet, we worship God so we can learn about how to more effectively carry out our second function as God’s people: ...FELLOWSHIP with one another – or in the words of our mission statement, “*Gathering to embrace ...all people.*”

A–That’s really what the drama/skit that we saw earlier was all about.. .the idea that in God’s family, *everyone* (e.g., “*all people*”) are welcome!

1–In fact, the first scripture (Is.56:8) emphasizes this: “*Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.*”

2–Do you hear the radical inclusiveness there? Not only are we as God’s people to welcome folks who are like us (e.g., the “*outcasts of Israel*”), but also those who are different from us (e.g., the “*others besides those already gathered*”).

3–Pastor John Ed Mathison once said that “*The church is the only organization in the world that exists primarily for non-members*” ³ – *opposite* how most of us think!

B–Now, that means that our fellowship (both as a church & individually) can *never* stop with our little clique of folks like us, but must always seek an ever *wider* circle for others.

C–And that’s why “hands” are make a great symbol for Christian fellowship – because the the “embrace” of a handshake, or a hug, or a pat on the back can all convey relational love and support to someone.

1–Remember Verses 24-25 of the Hebrews 10 passage? “*Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another....*”

2–You see, Christian fellowship is about encouragement and challenge – we gather together in fellowship to “*comfort the afflicted... and afflict the comfortable.*”

3–And we gather NOT as some inwardly focused clique, but as a family who actively seeks & welcomes *others* who are not yet here to join the journey of faith with us.

D–You see, you and I are not only made to *worship* God, but also to be in *fellowship / relationship* with other people.

–IV–

7. Worship of God. Fellowship with others. These are the first two reasons why God made you and me, and so it's only proper that these also be the first two dimensions of our mission statement as God's church here at East Cobb UMC. ⁴

A–So, are you **Worshipping** to best of your ability... discovering that its not about a particular ritual or form, but about the *relationship* you grow with God?

B–And are you involved in Christian **Fellowship** the way you need to be? e.g., Are you in a class or small group, praying with and supporting others? Are you growing in your love for people who are different than you?

C–You see, in the end, you and I are called to be people who *Worship* God and who extend God's *Fellowship* to others.

D–In the end, you and I are called to be **“GATHERING to embrace God and all people.”**

8. [PRAYER]

9. [CLOSING SONG]

ENDNOTES:

1. Last week we identified these five as worship, fellowship, discipleship, service/missions and evangelism.

2. How does one our contemporary Christian songs put it? *“You and I were made to worship? You and I are called to love; You and I are forgiven and free; When you and I embrace surrender; When you & I choose to believe; Then you & I will be who we were meant to be”* (Song and lyrics by contemporary Christian Artist Chris Tomlin, Song “Made To Worship,” Album See The Morning).

3. Heard by Pastor Germano at a missions conference (“Beyond These Walls”) October 3, 2008. John Ed Mathison is the former (retired) pastor of the UM mega-church Frazer Memorial UMC in Montgomery, AL.

4. Some will ask “WHY do we need to ‘gather’ as God’s people (i.e., WHY do we corporate worship and fellowship? Why not simply do it from home and worship via televangelists and/or online? Well, quite frankly, we must “gather” because God knows that we’re stronger together than apart.

Consider the example of the redwood trees of California. The average redwood stands 275 feet tall. But it is amazing that such an immense tree has such a shallow root system. Their roots reach out and grow together, intertwining with each other for support and even sharing nutrients. It is the same in the body of Christ: reaching out and asking for help is not easy for many of us; but God knows our need for worship, fellowship, and support, and provides us with a network of sisters and brothers. In loving and caring for one another through both worship and Christian fellowship, we can find strength to endure the trials of life. Notice, too, that both worship and fellowship are about *relationship*, not ritual or form. This further reinforces the relational nature of the first two biblical functions of people of faith.