

40 DAYS OF COMMUNITY- WHY ARE WE HERE

By Rev. Leo Douma
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Tell me, what on earth are we here for? If you were alert as you got the milk out for breakfast this morning you would have noticed your 40 Days of Community fridge magnet. You would have seen that there is a question listed as the theme for this first day in the program: “*Why are we here?*” Well what do you think? Why are we here? Now, do I mean that as to why we are in worship this morning, or what is the purpose of us being a congregation? Or is it to do with the ultimate meaning to life: Why are we here? Which is it? Yes, all the above.

If we were to pin all of life down to a single theme, what would it be: love-to love God and to love each other. That sounds about right given that Jesus summarized the whole law of God: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength, and love your neighbour as yourself.*” Everything we do in life is about making that happen. A person called C. Morley wrote in 1990: “If we discovered that we had five minutes left to say all we wanted to say, every telephone booth would be occupied by people calling other people to stammer that... they loved them” Then he added “Why wait until the last five minutes?” To be human is to be in relationship with another.

You may remember a number of years ago when the Soviet Union collapsed that we got to see some orphanages in Romania. Remember the sickly pictures of young children stunted in their development because they were never picked up and hugged. There were those who had died because of lack of love. I thought it was just the kids who suffered like that. Listen to this. Some years ago, Dr Karl Menninger, a noted psychologist was seeking the cause of many of his patients’ ills. One day he called his clinical staff together and outlined a plan for developing an atmosphere of love in his clinic. No unloving attitudes were to be displayed in the presence of patients, and all nurses and doctors were to go about their work with a loving attitude. At the end of six months, the time spent by patients in the institute was cut in half. We all thrive on love, on nurturing relationships. That’s one of the reasons why migration is tough- you leave all your family and friends and networks behind. The first 18 months can be difficult till you get some new friends; you find a new family, like our congregation.

So it will come as no surprise to us that when we explore the Bible as to “Why on earth are we here?” that it tells us about loving each other. Here in our text in John 13:34-35 Jesus

says *“A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”*. Now notice what he says just before that in verse 33: *“My children, I will be with you only a little longer...”* You get the drift. What do you say if you know your time is nearly up? What’s most important! (I love you!) Jesus knows he is soon to be crucified, after which he will leave the disciples and return to the Father (Note verse 1). These are his final, parting words. And what does he focus on? *“Love one another”*! It’s the first subject he puts to them so it gets great emphasis.

But why love? Well basically, because it’s the main character trait of God himself. John in his first letter writes that remarkable line *“God is love”*. It means the very essence of who God is, is love. But isn’t love a relational thing between people? How can an individual “be love”? Well, as you know, God is three in one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is a community, a love so deep, a relationship so close, that the three are one. If we look in chapter 17, we see Jesus prays for his disciples after teaching them. Actually he is praying for us as well. Listen: *“My prayer is not for them alone (the disciples). I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message (that’s us), that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you”*. When Jesus says *“...you are in me and I am in you...”* he is describing the heart of how the Trinity works. The three create space for each other in each other and embrace so tightly, so to speak, they become one.

Ultimate reality is not the individual but the relationship. We are made in God’s image, so we too find our true identity not in our individual self but in relationship, in community, in love. Note how Jesus pleads with God that those who believe may be one just as Jesus and the Father are. What Jesus says is mind boggling. So the whole point of his redeeming work is to invite us into the relationship he has with the Father. That’s why love is so important. Being deeply loved by God, loving him in return, loving each other, is what true life is all about. It’s why we are here! It’s why Jesus died on the cross: to bring forgiveness- that we might all be one- a deeply loving community.

You remember the fruit of the Spirit: *“Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”*. What do you see about these characteristics? They are all relational. You can’t grow in any of these on your own. You must be in close relationship with at least one other person if you want to develop patience, or express kindness. Notice the first of the fruit; that which sums up the heart of the rest: love. Why are we here, why emphasise love; because it’s the character of God. And because love is

God's character trait it will always be there- for us as well. You remember how Paul wrote (I Corinthians 13:8) "Love never fails...but where there are prophecies they will cease, where there are tongues, they will be still, where there is knowledge it will pass away." But love abides. When Jesus returns and all of creation is changed, when there will be no need for the sun or the moon, when we will no longer live by faith but by sight, what one thing will remain? Love! On the new earth the thing that will be most wonderful is the deep love we will have for Jesus and each other. Why are we here? "Love one another!" In other words get into practice for eternity!

Now, in all this talk about love we are not just talking emotions or mushy sentiment. As Sam Levenson wrote in his book: "Love at first sight is easy to understand. It's when two people have been looking at each other for years that it becomes a miracle". Real love is giving, it's sacrificial. Note what Jesus says in our text "*Love one another....as I have loved you*". In saying that he was referring to the foot washing we see earlier in this chapter. Here was the rabbi, the master, giving himself in very humble service, acting the slave to his disciples. It was unheard of. It was embarrassing to the disciples, especially Peter. Now, Jesus' point in washing the feet was to give a 'live parable'. It was an expression of how he would give himself to the lowest by dying on the cross and suffering the deepest agony of hell. No one ever has before or since, stooped so low, so deep for another in their love.

After washing the disciples' feet he said "*I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you*". What a challenge. Jesus does not ask us to do anything that he did not first do for us. And the reason he calls us to love each other like he has loved us is so that we can show to others something of what Jesus is like. Jesus says to his disciples "*By this will all men know you are my disciples.*" And John writes in his letter (1 John 4:11&12) "*Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one had ever seen God; but if we love each other God lives in us and His love is made complete in us.*"

That's why Jesus emphasizes what he does with his disciples. If they are not truly loving no one will know what God is like. But more than that, as John says: "*God's love is made complete in us.*" The love of God which originates in himself and was revealed in Jesus, is perfected, is made complete in us his people. You get it? God's love is only fully completed when we truly love each other as God's people. The distinguishing mark that let's everyone know we are Christians is our deep love and affection for each other. This is our badge that tells everyone who we are.

So why are we here? To love God and to love each other. This is why we are involving ourselves with 40 Days of Community. We want to encourage community. We want to get to know each other and grow in our care for each other. Now for that to happen we need to do more than just talk about it. We need to get into our elders groups, our weekly small groups, into our homes and really relate and care for each other. Now I know it's not going to be easy, given we have so many new families and we all live so spread out, and we have incredibly busy lives. We might not have the emotional energy to get into it.

Let me tell you a story I read by a newspaper columnist and minister, George Crane, who tells of a wife who came to his office full of hatred toward her husband. "I do not only want to get rid of him, I want to get even. Before I divorce him I want to hurt him as much as he has done me." So Dr Crane suggested an ingenious plan. "Go home and act as if you really love your husband. Tell him how much he means to you. Go out of your way to be as kind, considerate and generous as possible. Spare no efforts to please him, to enjoy him. Make him believe that you love him. After you have convinced him of your undying love and that you cannot live without him, then drop the bomb. Tell him you're getting a divorce. That will really hurt him." With revenge in her eyes, she smiled and exclaimed, "Beautiful, beautiful. Will he ever be surprised! And she did what he said with enthusiasm, acting "as if" she loved him. For two months she showed love, kindness, listening, giving, and sharing. When she didn't return, Dr Crane called. "Are you ready now to go through with the divorce?" "Divorce?" she exclaimed. "Never! I discovered I really do love him".

You see what happened don't you? Her actions had changed her feelings. Motion resulted in emotion. The ability to love is established not so much by talk but by often repeated deeds. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote, "Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbour; just act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him." It's like Jesus says: "A new command I give you..." We are commanded by God to love. Just get on with it and do it and the rest will flow.

Why are we here? The Word of God commands us to love each other. And when it's all said and done, that's precisely what all of us need; to be loved and to love. We are currently a congregation predominantly of migrants, many very recently. There are so many new people in our congregation, with whom we have had little opportunity to get to

know each other. We live over many suburbs, miles from each other with little opportunity to naturally come across each other. We are predominantly very busy professionals, with few at home during the day. If we are not careful we have a clear recipe for isolation, loneliness, drifting from each other, drifting from the Lord.

Recent migrants I would guess are very much looking for new friends and those who will be family to them. But there are also those who have been around for some time but still want a real friendship, a love that is practically expressed. It's my prayer that we can grow close as a new congregation with real love for each other. Let's start by have some good discussions in the elders groups after the service that encourages us to do some practical things for each other. Let's be involved in the small groups so we can spend a night together each week and really share and pray together. Let's read the devotional book together as a family and encourage our own walk of love with God. When you read your devotional book "Better Together" this week, you will see that the first week's theme is "We're compelled to love God's family". In the seven days readings we see why we are compelled:

1. Because God loves us-
2. Because God commands it-
3. Because it is how we love God-
4. Because it shows we are saved
5. Because we are a family
6. Because it is practice for eternity
7. Because it is a witness to the world.

We are better together- Christianity is not an individual private thing it's a communal thing. *"By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* Why are we here? To love one another!