

“Let’s Stay Together”

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Series: *Church Planting*

Bible Text: Proverbs 18:1, Hebrews 10:24-25, 1 Peter 2:4-5

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If you have a Bible, you can be, well, you can be turning kind of all over the place this morning. You can start in Proverbs chapter 18. The texts are printed in your worship guide if you would like to take a look there, but will be in Proverbs, 1st Peter, and Hebrews. And if you've been waiting on me to preach a topical sermon, it's been 14 years, but this is it. You'll have to wait another 14 before we get to another topical sermon. But Brandon said earlier, by the way, love the five-year-old liturgy approach. It's possible that I got some things for the first time today, so that might say more about me, but we've been looking at some passages to help us prepare for launching our first church plant, which is happening January 18th. There'll be a preview service that's actually next Sunday, so here at CPC it'll be a little bit strange. Some of you won't be here. And if you're a guest with us today out of town, welcome, glad you're here. This might feel like a little bit of insider baseball, and that's by design, but hopefully there'll be some things for you, too. Last week we talked about why would we ever give perfectly good things away for the sake of the kingdom, and we listed some of those things. We talked about giving away people and volunteers and money and even friends, and this week we're looking at these three passages, and we're going to talk specifically about a task that is about to fall to all of us, whether you're being sent out with providence or whether you're doing the sending here from CPC, the need to reforge friendships, the need to actually reforge a sense of covenant community. So let's read these passages. They're printed in your worship guide. If you need them, well, you will need them. Let's read, because this is God's word,

Proverbs 18.1 Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire. He breaks out against all sound judgment.

1 Peter 2:4,5 As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

And then Hebrews 10:24,25 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Would you pray with me?

We do ask our Father for help, for help in understanding, for help in seeing, for help in believing. And Lord, would you do the work in our hearts that makes us the sort of people who want to be part of this thing that you're building in the world, this community of faith, the communion of the saints. We pray for your help in Christ's name, amen.

Having grown up the third of three children, I remember the experience of having older siblings leave the house. Some of you had this experience as well. Some of you just had this experience last fall. You had an older sibling leave the house. I think my sister left and went to college when I was six or seven. We were pretty spread out. My brother left and went to college when I was 14 or 15. But especially when my brother left, and it was just me and my parents left in the house, I'm told I didn't handle that very well. Allegedly, my behavior took a bit of a dip and I became incredibly disrespectful to my parents. And I'm a classic stuffer of feelings and emotions and, you know, other feely type things. And so it's not like I wanted to talk about it with anyone. I just would be a jerk and then, you know, act like everything was fine until my mother finally mercifully sat me down and helped me see, look, you're mad because your brother left and you're alone with us. You need to acknowledge the difficulty of this thing. And apparently the dam broke and I cracked and things started to change.

But really that was the hard part. That word I just said, change. Everything just changed. My relationship to my parents just changed. My relationship to my siblings just changed. The way that I viewed myself and thought about myself and thought about friendships and relationships, all of it had to change and change is not fun sometimes. It's a hard thing to do, especially when it is with friendships. Some of you have had the best friend that moved away and you thought, well, that's it. I had one friend and now that person's gone. I'm done. No more friends.

As we get ready to plant this church, we need to stare at something for just a minute. And it's this. We are about to willfully rip the relational fabric of our church apart. And we're doing it on purpose. We're doing this because, as we said last week, this is a good thing that we need to give away for the sake of the kingdom. Some of you will feel it very much. Some of you will. It'll be obvious. All of us will feel it at some level. What are we supposed to do about that? What do we do about the relational aspect of giving away friendships and community for the sake of the kingdom? We're going to look at these passages where the larger point is made. God wants his people together and that requires us to forge new friendships. So here's our outline for the morning. We're going to talk about our temptation to isolate. We're going to look at what is it that God is building in the church and then talk about why we have to keep meeting together. So that's where we're going.

Let's talk about our temptation to isolate first.

That's why we're starting with this this proverb, 18:1. It's because it gives a window into a reality that's really present everywhere. A human tendency. Look at it. *Whoever isolates himself seeks*

his own desire. He breaks out against all sound judgment. So the writer who's putting a finger on something that transcends time and culture, he's writing in an ancient world where people were much more communal than we are now, right? The movement of history had not brought about the assumptions that you and I wake up with every morning. You and I, we come out of the womb. We wake up every morning assuming I am an individual who happens to be in a family and this town or community, this other group of people. But whatever the case, whatever the nature of my relationships, I am primarily an individual and I choose how to engage with these other people. If I want to be alone, I can be alone. I'm an autonomous person who chooses my level of community engagement.

Their assumptions would have been something more like I am primarily a member of this family and a member of these people in this community. And I am whatever they say I am. And I will become whatever they say I will become. There was no sense of me in their day like there is in our own. And yet, even then, the Proverbs writer says, whoever isolates himself, it happened then, too.

So it doesn't matter if we are in an individualistic society or a communal society, a modern society, an ancient society. It doesn't matter if you're an extrovert or an introvert. Every human being at some level has a tendency to try and isolate ourselves.

Why, he says, is because they seek their own desire. They want what they want. Now, this can be complex, right? If this if my family structure is preventing me from being what I want to be or from doing what I want to do, then I need to leave them or put distance between myself and them so that I can be and do whatever it is that I want, right? This group of friends is going to hinder my pursuit of whatever it is that I am after. And so I need to pull away from this friend group so that I can get it.

And let me just say there are good reasons at times to separate from a friend group, even family members. But that's not what he's talking about. That's a different sermon for a different time about boundaries and, you know, coming out of whatever, leaving and cleaving, that kind of thing. He's primarily talking about I want what I want and my family or my friend group is going to try and prevent me from getting it because they think it's bad for me. And they're wrong. And I want what I want. And I don't care if I have to distance myself from these people to get it. This is a proverb about the raw, selfish impulse of the human heart.

This is observable in a number of different ways. I observe it at church. Sometimes people disappear from the church and sometimes they disappear for not good reasons. Actually, most of the time they disappear for not good reasons. And usually what's happening, if I ever get the chance of getting into it, is a person begins to think I want what I want. I want to live on my own terms. I don't want anyone to contradict me. This community is going to push back. This community is not for this thing that I want. And so I'm just going to drift away quietly. So there's a strong relationship between us seeking our own desires and this tendency that we have to isolate, especially if we think these people are going to get in my way.

And the author of the proverb says this person is breaking out against all sound judgment. This is he's literally saying the person who isolates himself because he just wants what he wants is insane, is losing his mind. He's running away from wisdom. Sound judgment here is one of those wisdom words in the Old Testament. This person is breaking out against the wisdom and advice of the community, and they're breaking out against the sound judgment of God himself.

But this is one of those places where the wisdom of God and the wisdom of our world really just collide. Because our culture says the opposite of this song. You know what our culture says? If anyone stifles you. If anyone opposes you. If anyone contradicts you. If anyone says anything you don't like. If anyone prevents your self-actualization and self-maximization, leave them, cancel them, get them out of your life. That is the constant siren call of the world around us. Our culture says the opposite of this. If anyone doesn't isolate himself when necessary, he breaks out against all sound judgment. And this goes against God's being and his design. His design is for community, not isolation. And it's because of who he is and his being. Philip prayed about this earlier, that God is a triune God, one God in three persons. He exists as a community of loving interaction, and he made humanity to be a community. Genesis one and two, the full picture of humanity requires, at a minimum, two people. And that extends to the family unit and the extended family and the community of faith. We have a tendency to break out against sound judgment and isolate.

What about you?

Does this seem accurate to you?

Does this ring some bells on your insides?

Can you see evidence, specific ways that you've actually done this?

Do a little self-counseling for a moment. When did you know that a friend or family member or church member was going to disagree with your decision? And so you preemptively pulled away from them before they could even disagree with you, because you knew it was coming. You ever done that? Do a little self-counseling. Have you ever known, I want to do this thing and I know other people aren't going to like it. And so before they ever even have a chance to say anything, I'm just going to go ahead and go my own way and distance myself.

This is usually the only kind of the kind of thing you can only see in hindsight after we've sobered up. We get drunk on our own desires, our own wants and what seemed like a good idea. And I have to go against the grain of my community to get this thing that I want. And then finally, that thing soured or God in his mercy gave me some insight. And I finally realized they were right. I was wrong. What was I thinking? That was so dumb. Now we see it.

This is how the human heart tends to work. We need to understand it for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is that we bring that mentality to this group, to the inside of the church. And this is a place where we take vows to be in community with one another, to be involved in each

other's lives. We even talk about friendship in the gospel. We use that kind of language. And yet the tendency of our hearts is to isolate, to get what we want.

That tendency is a direct assault on the community of faith, and that tendency will destroy it. If we let it, it has to be fought against.

And it's especially the case as we plant a church, because here's what's about to happen. Again, this is going to be specific to us for the moment. Here's what's about to happen. We're going to say goodbye to some friends or at least the way a friendship looks at this moment. And this is true for adults and for children. And it would be normal and natural to go through this and then to say, oh, that was really hard. Not enjoyable. I didn't like that. That felt bad. I don't want to feel bad again. And I'm in a church that says they're going to plant another church. What if I make another friend and then that person leaves?

When I was an intern at the church we were at in Charlotte, I had someone actually voice this to me as an intern. They said, no, we're not going to get to know you because you're only going to be here for three years and then you're leaving anyway. Which as an intern, I was like, well, thanks a lot for that. Appreciate that. Very kind. But we do that. We do that. I've gone through this pain of seeing a relationship ripped apart. I don't want to feel that way again. So here's what I'll do. I'll make sure that I don't get close to anyone. I will make sure that I keep everybody at an arms distance. I'm going to show up to church. I'm going to worship. I'm going to be part of some things, but no one gets in and I'm not going to let anyone in and I'm not going to get too close. That'll solve it.

And you know what? It will solve it. You will not get hurt again. It's true. But this is a great moment for a famous C.S. Lewis quote from his book, *The Four Loves*. Some of you knew we were talking about community and so you knew there was going to be a four loves quote at some point. This is it. This is what C.S. Lewis famously says.

Love anything and your heart will be rung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries. Avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your own selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.

Can't really say it better than that. I bet nobody in here wants a heart like that. I bet nobody in here wants a heart that is just solid steel and cannot be touched. We isolate to protect ourselves. When we do that, we go against God's design. We build a casket for our own hearts. We hurt ourselves. We hurt the church. We're running from God.

We're about to lose friends in some sense as we plant a church. Resist the urge to slink back and guard yourself. Providence Pres. folks, it's the same for you. You're about to say goodbye to some friends. Don't self-protect. Don't wall yourself off. Don't say, I will never feel this way again. And

so no one will get in. Isolation might feel normal and natural. And every voice around us might say, this is good. You're right. Yeah. Protect yourself. It's a lie. It's a lie from the devil. Resist it.

What will help us resist the urge to isolate? We're going to have to know who we are and what God is trying to do here. What is it that he's building? What is his plan for this community, for Providence Pres., for all of the different communities of the church in the world?

What's God building?

Second question here, second point. Look at the passage in 1 Peter. Peter is trying to help these Christians dispersed throughout the region of Asia Minor, understand that the Old Testament categories for the people of God, Israel, now belong to them as well. As he would say a few verses later, they are a chosen race, communal, a royal priesthood, communal, a holy nation, communal. But in our passage, he says they've come to Jesus Christ, who is the living stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God, chosen and precious.

This is Peter taking language from the Psalms and from the Book of Isaiah, language that was on the lips of Jesus about himself in the gospel accounts. And he's trying to help these Christians understand, this is your story. You have come to Jesus, who is the stone of stumbling. They tripped over him because he was offensive to them. The Jewish leadership rejected him. They didn't believe his claims and they killed him. They literally rejected him at that level. But he is God's chosen and precious stone. And God raised him from the dead and made him the cornerstone of the entire thing. The whole deal hinges on the person and work of the Lord Jesus.

But his broader point is that those who have come to faith in Christ, who is the living cornerstone, are becoming like him. You too, are now little miniature living stones, like individual bricks of a living dynamic spiritual house. And this is language that is most specific to the temple. God dwelt with man symbolically and sometimes with physical manifestations of cloud in the temple.

Lest we miss it, Peter is saying, each individual Christian united to Jesus is now filled with God the spirit and dwelt by God the spirit and is now part of the true temple on earth, the actual dwelling of God on the earth. Where does God dwell on the earth in this era? He still dwells in the temple. It's just now the temple is not made of physical stones. It's made of living stones.

It's you.

If you're a Christian, the spirit now indwells you. You're a living stone, but you're not just a stone that's filled with a spirit that's chunked out into the field somewhere and is by yourself. We're not just a rabble of stones scattered here and there.

We're mortared together.

We're stuck together. We're being built into this dynamic living building that God inhabits himself. Peter says it's in this building of living stones that we offer worship to God. Of course, we worship God individually. Yes, of course, we're indwelt by God the spirit individually, no doubt. But we actually can't worship God properly with true spiritual sacrifices as a holy priesthood, alone. Worship is corporate and communal in nature just as much as it is individual in nature. If all we ever do is worship God alone, never with his people, we might produce some fruit, but it's going to be misshapen. We're intended to do this together.

Think of what happens when we actually worship as a community together.

We come together and we have to actually serve one another and look to the interest of another person besides just me.

We have to love one another even when the other is not very lovable, and when I don't feel very loving.

We come together and we have to look to the needs and interests of other people.

We come together and use our gifts to help each other understand the word.

We have to do the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation because we have to come to this table together without any offense held against one another.

We sing together to God and to one another.

We confess what's true to God, to one another.

All of that happens here. He's saving us as individuals, no doubt. He calls us to walk by the Spirit and worship Him individually, yes. And you were never intended to just be an individual isolated Christian alone. He is taking each stone and putting us together with other stones and He intends to live here with His people.

So let me ask this question. In your view, what is the church? And would you say that you have a very high view of it or you have a very low view of it? There may be a lot of reasons for our answers.

If you have a low view of the church, it's possible you've been a part of some really bad churches or some really weak churches or some very imperfect churches. Just so we're all clear, you are in an imperfect church, right? There are no perfect ones. It's also possible that you've spent a lot of your life outside of the church or you're new to it. And so you're just unfamiliar. You don't really have a view. It's a low view because it's an underdeveloped view. It's also possible that you have a low view of the church because you know church people and you don't like them. So why would I subject myself to this? This is the famous bumper sticker, Jesus, save us from your followers, right?

I would urge us to take a view like the Bible's view, that the church is the dwelling of the living God, that we are the building for his presence made up of living stones. It doesn't negate the call for us to have an individual walk with God, a personal relationship with him. It doesn't negate that. It gives the context for that. It also doesn't mean that God is committed to the specific blessing and growth of our church or Providence Pres. or the PCA. I mean, something could blow us up tomorrow. Something could blow the PCA up tomorrow. Lord willing, that won't happen. God is committed to his capital C church, but his capital C church exists in thousands of expressions of lowercase little c churches everywhere. And we're called to be part of what he's building.

To be honest, it can be difficult for us because sometimes the living stones act a little dead, right? Sometimes the living stones yank themselves out of the wall and go somewhere else. And it's just really hard to even connect with them. Sometimes the living stones are super annoying, right? We can acknowledge that. Sometimes the living stones are more or less pure, as the Westminster Confession says. Regardless of our experience, shouldn't our view of what God is building be the same as the scriptures view, right? Just because we've experienced something negative doesn't mean that the whole paradigm needs to be shot. This was Aristotle that says, *abuse doesn't negate use*.

The Church of Jesus Christ is the place of God's dwelling. We're called to worship together, be on his mission together, be in community together and make friends here. And not for the usual reasons. You know why you make friends, usually is it's common interest, right? You also like whatever it is that I like. Pickleball. I don't like pickleball. But if we did, we might like pickleball together. Cycling, fishing, whatever it is. Some of you like British television and you like other people that like British, whatever it is.

Our common interest begins with our relationship with the living stone himself. And we have seen our sin and we've seen our need to be rescued by Jesus Christ. And we have called out to him for help and we've come to him by faith. And then we look around and we realize, oh, look, you too, you too. All of us are here because we actually need Jesus.

And if you're here and you're not yet a Christian, first of all, we're glad you're here. You may honestly have very negative thoughts about the church. You may echo that bumper sticker, Jesus save us from your followers. What I want to say to you is don't worry about the church until you've taken a very serious look at the head of the church, which is Jesus, not me or any other person. It's Jesus himself. Until you look at Jesus and deal with him, no one expects your view of the church to be great. We know that we're a bunch of sinners that are imperfect.

What I would encourage you to do is look at who he claims to be.

Look at how he died in place of people like us bearing justice.

Look at his resurrection from the dead. That's unique. No one else has done that.

Look at the offer of the gospel that a sinner could be forgiven and restored to his creator.

Look, look at Jesus and believe, and then let's talk about your relationship to the church. What will happen is you'll be like the rest of us. You'll have your eyes looking at Jesus and then you'll look around and realize, oh, oh, look, there are others. That's how we get knit together.

We're about to take some of the living stones out of this wall and send them off down to Stevens County. And we're trusting that the Lord is going to mortar those people, those stones together, and that they are going to be a habitation for his very presence there. And it'll be a blessing for his people here. It'll be a blessing for people in Stevens County. If you are being sent out, my encouragement to you is be open to being mortared together with those people. Don't hang back and don't hedge. God intends to make you a dynamic dwelling place for his own presence in Stevens County. And if you're part of the sending group and you start seeing the gaps in our wall and you're going to see them. Be willing to be mortared in, be willing to be part of the rebuilding. Understand that God is calling you to jump in, to potentially start rubbing shoulders with someone that you don't know very well or that you might become a friend with.

What do we do with this? If we tend to isolate, but we're called to be the dwelling of God on earth, which seems so optimistic and pie in the sky. Practically, what do we do? Last point here. Keep meeting together, at a minimum.

Keep meeting together.

This gets us to the Hebrews passage. That passage comes at the end of the letter, which was written to Jewish background Christians, primarily encouraging them. Don't go back to Judaism. He lays out the case for how Christ fulfills every paradigm and every promise of the Old Testament. And then he tells them, draw near to God, hold fast to your confession of the gospel. And then he says,

and let us consider how to stir one another up to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

The practical way to draw near to God and hold fast your confession is to keep showing up. And when you show up, expect that this is going to be a place where there is stirring that happens. The word stirring there is actually the word for provoke. So what this means is that there is a good way to provoke someone. We're probably all familiar with the bad way to provoke someone. But this is to be a place where we actually provoke one another toward love and toward good deeds. We are to be a little salty, a little sharp in our community.

Let me say it a different way. We are not the lion's club. It's fine to go to the lion's club. My grandfather was a lion for a hundred years, it seems. That's a great thing to do. But that's not

what the church is. We're not a social club. We're not a group of people trying to be nice to each other.

We are called to actually know each other well enough to step in and love one another, even if it requires some sharpness at times, a little bit of provocation, a little bit of getting into each other's business at times even. The implication is that if we're isolated from God's people, we will always choose the path of least resistance. There will be no provocation. There will be no stirring. And that means there will not be much love for other people or the pursuit of good works. Isolated Christians don't get stirred up in this way.

And that's why he tells them, don't neglect meeting together. He's at least talking about their regular worship when they meet together. Some get in the habit of not coming. And for many reasons in their day, there was persecution. And so they might say, well, I'm not going to gather with the church because the powers that be will get my name and they'll come after me and my family. And so out of fear, they wouldn't they wouldn't show up. Busyness is the universal reason. Too much going on. No time for others. It's oh, I know who I know who attends there and I hate them. I don't want to see them again. So I'm not going to go and be part of that gathering. Thousands of reasons why people neglect meeting together. But the author here says, no, do it, regularly. The Jewish people met in the synagogue at least weekly. He uses the synagogue word here because it's Jewish background Christians. He's encouraging them, keep meeting and do it because we need to encourage one another he says, as you see the day drawing near. Life is discouraging and we need encouragement. Life, it gets dark. It gets dark in our insides. And we need people to remind us that there is actual light. It feels like Jesus will never return. The world will keep on exactly like it is. I'll keep sinning and everything will keep falling apart. And we need to come together so that we actually hear. No, the day is drawing near. There is a finish line. And you need to get your eyes on it. We don't come together just so that we can be nice to each other. We draw together so that we can be reminded that that there is a God, and that he has a plan, and that we can trust him.

Keep meeting together. That's the place to be practical as we plant a church. Show up.

Providence Pres., show up. CPC, show up. Don't stop meeting together. Keep coming. Don't give up the habit. Unless you want to stop growing spiritually or you want to stop loving other people. Perhaps you want to become more discouraged. Possibly you want to just stay in the dark with not much hope of the light. Well, the best way to make sure that all those things happen is do not come to weekly worship at the church. You will guarantee to get all of those things.

But if you want to be in the place where the action is, if you want to be in the place where you can have people remind you that there's light when all you can see is darkness, if you want to be in the place where a word from the Lord illuminated by the spirit can actually take your heart, which is downcast and lift it up. If you want to be in a place where you can actually grow in friendships, if you want to be in a place where you can try to remember what's true when all week you've heard crazy and ridiculous. Don't give up the habit of meeting together. Keep showing up.

One thing that I would say to us all as I wrap up here is, Providence Pres. folks, you have knit together with a lot of your folks over the past months as you all have met. And then you're going to launch and something is going to happen that you may have thought about it, but you're going to feel this. New people are going to show up and you're going to have this strange internal sense of, but they might hurt what we have. What if they change what we're trying to do? And you might have the desire to keep them at arm's length. Don't do it. Don't do it. Let them in. Remember what it was like to be an outsider. Remember what it was like to be brought in and go get them. Bring them in.

CPC people, there will be new folks that show up here. And the question for us is, will we continue to be a welcoming community where we remain open to friendships? Or will we try to circle the wagons and protect what we've got? Keep showing up. Keep meeting together. Keep welcoming new friendships.

Brothers and sisters, the fabric is going to be ripped and we're going to give this good thing away. Don't close your heart. Don't isolate. Even if you feel like it. Remember that God is building a dwelling for himself among his people. Keep showing up. This is where God delights over his people. Knits us to himself and knits our hearts together.

Let's commit to reforge the ties of friendship in the communion of the saints because God made us and has redeemed us to be together. Let's pray.

Lord, you know us. That's why your word always rings so true. I pray for Christ Presbyterian Church and Providence Presbyterian Church as we go through the next couple of months and as we willingly sacrifice friendships, as we rip the fabric of our community relationally. Father, we want to do this for the sake of your kingdom, for your glory, so that there is a new expression, a new building made of living stones in Stevens County. We need you to knit those people and all new ones who come together, a dwelling for yourself. We need you here at CPC. Knit us together. Let us be a place of your dwelling, living stones mortared together. Lord, as we try to be the church, would you get glory as we worship you? Would you renew us and give us the community that we need? Would you protect us from the age old lie of the enemy that we should go off on our own and do our own thing? Lord, don't let it happen. Let us stay, as sheep stay in the flock. Good shepherd, we ask you to help us. Amen