
FOR CHRIST'S SAKE

Not knowing *everything* is not the same thing as not knowing *anything*.

We all know far more than we often acknowledge, but don't speak the truth ... but part of that truth is we don't know everything.

And we often talk and act like we know everything about some areas of life, when we might be better off saying we don't know everything.

At times like that ... oh that we could listen more than speak, seek more to understand than to be understood.

Words often fall short of explaining our "knowing." Augustine, when asked about the explanation of the definition of "time," said this:

If no one asks of me, I know; if I wish to explain to him who asks, I know not.

Not knowing *everything* is not the same thing as not knowing *anything*.

So where are we in this story when Paul is writing to Philemon? Well, we don't know everything, but that's not the same thing as not knowing anything. So with grains of salt appropriately in mind and in hand, I offer this explanation of the story.

Philemon is a wealthy homeowner from Colossae, and Onesimus is his runaway slave. You can read more about him and "slavery" for Christ in the book of Colossians.

Colossae is in Turkey about 120 miles away from Ephesus, which is the likely place of Paul's imprisonment as he writes this letter. (Some scholars think Paul is in Rome writing this letter, but that seems highly unlikely to me. Rome is 1,311 miles away from Colossae and it seems it would be difficult, if not impossible, for a runaway slave to travel to Rome.)

The letter to Philemon is an interesting appeal from Paul (who calls himself a "prisoner of Christ Jesus") to Philemon (whom he calls "our beloved fellow worker"). Who is the "our" in Paul's letter? Paul mentions Timothy to be sure. He ends the letter sending greetings

from Epaphras (who also is in prison with Paul) and Mark (the first gospel writer, probably writing his gospel about the same time Paul is writing this letter). He also mentions Aristarchus, Demas and Luke (another gospel writer and the author of the book of Acts).

Paul wants Philemon to receive Onesimus back, not as a bondservant but as a beloved brother, just the way Paul refers to Philemon ... as a beloved brother. Paul wants Onesimus to be regarded as an equal, not from the former human perspective. In what we might call "real life," Onesimus is Philemon's slave, his property ... and we assume he has wronged Philemon by theft perhaps, but most certainly by running away.

There is an interesting "play on words" when Paul says of Onesimus: "*Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.*" The Greek translation of the name Onesimus is "useful" ... so the man as a slave named Onesimus was not useful, but the slave to Christ named Onesimus is now useful, despite his no longer being of any economic benefit to Philemon.

And as an aside, lest you think Paul was a poor, itinerant preacher with no wealth or assets or means, a clue for a different interpretation exists in verses 18-19: "*If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it....*"

He finishes the letter asking Philemon to prepare a guest room for him, as he hopes to be released from prison and be able to join them back at Colossae. I also think this is Paul's way of saying, "Do what I ask, please ... I will be there to see how well you have responded to my request."

For some reason, as I was preparing this message, "numbers" kept coming into my head and heart. So I will touch on a few numbers, and come back to them later.

By the numbers:

13 – Capilla Circle

54 – Charter Members

200+ – Approximate number of Members lost 2001-2015

We have been members of this church for twenty years. Fifteen years ago, in early April of 2000, Kathy and I learned we were pregnant with our fourth child. With a baby due in December, there would be a 7-year, 9-year and 11-year spread between this new baby and our three other children. After the initial shock of this development wore off, we were all so excited about this addition to our family. Kathy and I had been members of this congregation for about five years at this point. Our membership was listed at 246 members.

As the pregnancy progressed, there were a few developing complications. Kathy had to have abdominal surgery during the pregnancy, which was scary. After recovering from that surgery, she began to go into preterm labor several times. Ultimately, she was assigned full bed rest, with which she “mostly” complied. ☺ I was working 60-70 hours a week and trying to be a good dad and husband, and we were trying to be faithful members of a congregation that was important to us. And that congregation of other faithful members ... an *ecclesia*, a body joined together through and because of the love of God through Christ ... showed up to help.

The trouble with “naming names” is you will always “leave out” folks who were important, but in the spirit of gratitude and wanting to acknowledge and express that gratitude, I will take the risk and “name names.”

The Corona del Mar “rally crew” started with Kathi Ramming telling Kathy, “We can absolutely raise this new baby ... we will do it together.”

And Kathi Ramming and Nona McConville and Nola Casserly and Barbara Anderson and others ... what I called the “Waldorf Connection” ... began their assistance in earnest. (Many of our children attended the Waldorf School together, which has a “unique” pedagogy that bonded many of us and we found “community together” at this church.)

The Mowell family, Kevin and Beth and children Sierra, Whitney and Tyler, began to come by very frequently ... primarily Beth, but all at varying times ... to help in whatever way they could (the Mowells moved to the East Coast a few years later).

Kathy was part of the Myrrh Maids women’s Bible study group (that, by the way, has now been meeting continuously for over twenty years) and they got the ball rolling big time. They started the “dinner train,” and every evening when I arrived home from work I was greeted by

three beautiful children who were 6, 8 and 10 and a lovely wife who was going a bit stir-crazy but trying oh so hard to be still ... and each night a new feast would have been delivered and I could get dinner on the table, help monitor homework, read the bedtime stories and get them tucked into bed and, if I needed to, get back to finishing some work. This went on for many weeks. And if all that were not enough, this congregation, who knew and loved us, were praying for Kathy's health and well-being and the safe delivery of this unknown child.

And on December 12, 2000, Kendall Elizabeth Kipp came into the world at 3:28am ... bright-eyed and healthy ... and as we would soon find out, happy also! I think she was about 21" long. Today at age 14, soon to be 15, she is 76" long (6'4").

When it was time to have Kendall baptized, we did so right here in this sanctuary during a worship service. The role of Godparents in the life of a child is often outlined something like this:

Christian Responsibilities of a Godparent

1. Pray for your Godchild regularly
2. Set an example of Christian living
3. Help him or her to grow in the faith of God
4. Give every encouragement to follow Christ and fight against evil

And so, Kendall was baptized into the Christian faith with 246 members of this church ... this *ecclesia*, this gathering of God's people ... as her Godparents. In our minds and hearts, Kendall *was* a child of this church ... of this faith family. We could think of no greater joy for her spiritual development.

So now, with that joy in mind, I want to look back at how we got here, at least in terms of this church, this faith family.

By the numbers: 13

The first number I list is 13. This is the number of women who formed the "Capilla Circle" in 1942 (*capilla* means "chapel" in Spanish). These women formed a Sunday School class to teach children about God, Jesus and Christianity. In Paul Reynolds' 1994 historical overview of "OUR CHURCH," he writes about Frances Cox trying to get folks interested in starting a church and says: "A popular point of view was that Corona del Mar was not a 'church town.'"

According to Pew demographic research, that is still the case today. But I digress. For those of you who are here in the sanctuary today and the hundreds of thousands watching online (just kidding), you defy the “popular point of view” ... and for that, I am glad.

Do you know what our by-laws have to say about this history?

Section 2.4 History: Our Heritage. ... The call to gather this Congregation came in 1942 to a group of women who started with a one-room Sunday School. The founders focused on providing Christian Education to children, with the understanding that this was the best way for our Church to grow into existence.

By the numbers: 54

The next number is 54. This is the number of charter members of this church. From the efforts of the Capilla Circle of 13 teaching Christian Education to children, a church was born ... an *ecclesia* ... a gathering of God's people ... bound together. Shall we go to the by-laws again? I think so ...

Section 1.3 Purpose. The purpose of this Church shall be to bind together followers of Jesus Christ for the purpose of sharing in the worship of God and in making God's will dominant in the lives of all its member, individually and collectively, especially as that will is set forth in the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Do we believe that? I hope so. Do we live that? Do we *want* to live that? If so, we better know it and claim it ... or it's all a sham.

I am so grateful for the 54 souls listed as charter members. We all are bound to them in ways difficult to describe. But if we remember it, we *know* it.

By the numbers: 200+

In every church community, there are members coming in and members leaving. And if we are a community united in and through Christ, we rejoice with each new member becoming part of our body. And if we are a community united in and through Christ, we mourn and lament each member being removed from our body.

If someone leaves our church because of needing to relocate or because of death, we are sad of course, but we can easily recognize the need to leave in the case of relocation, or the inevitability of leaving in the case of death.

When someone leaves us because of a call to a different community of faith ... that is, they leave because of a faithful and excited response to a call by the Spirit ... we carry both sorrow and joy in tension, but hopefully we carry mostly a rejoicing spirit for them and with them.

The hardest loss of all, if we are “bound together,” is when someone leaves because they are hurt or angry or can no longer be Spirit-filled within the congregation that is called Corona del Mar Community Church, Congregational. Those are each “little deaths” that hurt over and over again. And for each of those, I mourn. Mourn means “to remember.” And so I mourn.

From the time of Kendall's baptism in 2001 through May of 2015, there have been 200+ members who have left this congregation. Many have moved away and many have passed away. Some have gone to seminary and some have found other faith families they lead or worship with ... and that is an honorable calling, and for them I rejoice.

For some, they left because they no longer felt the love-bond they once felt. And for those losses, I am pained. If they were human-to-human love-bonds only ... well, it's no surprise those go the way our best efforts and best intentions *always* go: “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” (Romans 3:23) Human love-bonds are wonderful, but in and of themselves ... and if not entered into because of and in response to God's love ... well, they will always disappoint.

Or as James says when talking about “taming the tongue”: “*we all stumble in many ways.*” (James 3:2) Of course, the two operative words being ALL and MANY ... *all* stumble ... *many* ways.

The love-bonds that endure are the bonds that happen because of and in response to the love of God ... the love we know because we know Christ. Those are the connections that we can revisit and form over and over again, despite disappointment, hurt and hard-heartedness.

As a preface to Jesus telling his disciples the parable of the “unmerciful servant” (Matthew 18:23-35), Peter asks Jesus: *“Lord, how often am I to forgive my brother (or sister) if they go on wronging me? As many as seven times?”* And Jesus replies, *“I do not say seven times, but seventy times seven.”* Which is another way of saying: as often as needed ... forever and ever.

For those who left hurt or angry or confused or disappointed and were unable or unwilling to be bonded to this faith family, I mourn. Perhaps they are all fine ... I hope that is the case. But for me, and I think for this faith family ... for those who are still here in this community ... I mourn.

This quarter, in one of my classes at Fuller Theological Seminary, we spent a few weeks on the topic of “lament,” which is another word for “mourn.” And I came to see how much, as a society, we tend to push away lament ... for it is oh so uncomfortable. But the greater awareness I came to is this: as a society, we may have our individual laments and mourning, but we have almost no avenue for communal or community-wide lament.

In this class, one of our exercises was to get into groups of three and write our own collective Psalm of Lament on any topic we chose. The “suggestions” were for things like “world hunger” or “refugee displacement.” But I kept coming back to the pain and sorrow I felt for all the losses of relationships at our church. And so, in the “triad” of which I was a part, we began our lament from that perspective and I would like to share our lament with you.

A Lament for Relationships

Oh Lord where are you in the loss, loss of friends, the loss of foes?
Our lips speak words that are untrue in the world and untrue in our hearts.

We speak vanity. We lack knowledge.

Our hearts are deceptive. We grope and cannot find harmony.

Gossip in whispers, fury without sound.

Skeletons buried, unwilling to be retrieved.

Buried beneath the dirt of time.

Hurts and harsh words unresolved.

We lack the courage, the wisdom to excavate.

We grope in the dark of vague understanding
forgetting to shine the light where you would have us shine.

In darkness, we cannot find the words of confession.

We cannot find the peace of reconciliation.

Lord, we turn to you to bring your *ruach* to us,
to knit our bones together once again.

Give light that we see your way.

Give strength that we may be your people.

Give life. Resurrect us. Oh, Lord our God.

Brad Hightower, Harry Kipp, Gavin Lamming

T.S. Eliot wrote, in his poem "Little Gidding":

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

To mourn means “to remember.” And so I remember, with pain and sorrow and lament ... but I also remember with joy and gratitude for all they offered of themselves and all they offered in the love of Christ.

For I would not be who I am today without each of those lives, and we would not be the faith community we are without each of those lives ... all the way back to the Capilla Circle.

This is an exciting time in the life of this church. New love-bonds are forming. Groups have formed that are creating and renewing Spirit connections. I pray that the “bridges” Kathy talked about during our children’s moment [included here on the last page] are ever present in our Spirit as a community.

Today is November 22nd. Does this date mean anything to you? It does to me and it does to a lot of others, but perhaps not to everyone. So I want to touch on some of the things this date means to me. I know some of the stories of these numbers ... I am sure there are many more of which I do not know. I hope you will share them with me and others who love you.

For Chris Wattson ... we mourn with you and share your pain on the anniversary of your son Brent’s birth and for your loss of him. We also celebrate the life he lived and the joy he brought.

For Kay Conley, my mother-in-law ... in honor of the birth of a woman of faith and grace and compassion and honor, not to mention the mother of my wife and the grandmother of our four children, we are blessed because you were born this day.

On this day in 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated. For all the range of human expression in his Presidency, we mourn a time cut short and celebrate the life shared.

And on this same date in 1963, Clive Staples Lewis ... C.S. Lewis, one of the great Christian apologists of the twentieth century ... passed away. His contributions in “culture-making” and “Christian thought” shaping were enormous in his day and continue to expand our “understanding.”

Last week, I was in a class examining and discussing the many theories about “Atonement” ... that is, how the death and resurrection of Jesus reconciles us to God. Many of these theories are from

theological perspectives to which I cannot subscribe. But at the end of the lecture, our professor, Dr. Nate Feldmeth, offered this quote from C.S. Lewis regarding Atonement (from *Mere Christianity*):

We are told that Christ was killed for us, that His death has washed out our sins, and that by dying He disabled death itself. That is the formula. That is Christianity. That is what has to be believed. Any theories we build up as to how Christ's death did all this are, in my view, quite secondary: mere plans or diagrams to be left alone if they do not help us, and, even if they do help us, not to be confused with the thing itself.

Not knowing *everything* is not the same thing as not knowing *anything*.

So why did *Jesus* say he came? "*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*" (John 10:10)

And what of our runaway slave Onesimus? Well, he becomes a bishop of Ephesus and is the one who called for a "gathering up" of Paul's writings. Without him, we might easily have no "Pauline corpus." It would be hard to think of what we call our New Testament without any writings from Paul. We would be less informed, indeed.

And why did Paul's letter to Philemon keep coming back to me each time I contemplated and prayed about the message I would prepare for today? Well, some coincidences are interesting to be sure. Last night, as I was reading a little more about Onesimus, I learned that in the Eastern Orthodox church, there is a "feast day" honoring Onesimus ... and that day is November 22nd.

So the slave who became a brother in Christ and became a bishop in Ephesus is being honored today in churches half a world away. That touches me, and I am grateful that Paul built the bridge to encourage Philemon to welcome back his runaway slave as a "brother in Christ" ... for Christ's sake.

Let us pray ... once again the words of Eugene Peterson heard in our invocation this morning ...

Pastoral Prayer

Eternal Lord, we thank you for this wonderful world you've given us that you've loved.

We want to learn how to love it the way you love it. Help us to understand what we're doing; not let other people determine what we are going to do. Give us an agenda.

We want to see each one of the souls in our congregation as a holy life; a life of miracle and mystery and we want to be your people; your men and women who take care of ourselves in such a way that we have the energy and clarity and the focus to be bringers of the gospel of light; not to condemn the world ... to enter into a reconciling life of prayer and relationship and witness.

– Eugene Peterson
*Closing Prayer to Pastors
at the 2012 New Life Conference*

And so we pray together now, as Jesus taught us ... *“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.”*

From the Children's Moment, with Kathy Kipp

Once upon a time, there were two brothers. Their father had a large farm, and when he became too old to work, he called his sons to him and said, "I am too old to work anymore, and I am going to divide my farm and give each of you one-half of my farm. I know that you will always work together and will be good friends."

When the brothers first started farming on their plots that were attached to each other, they were the best of friends and would share everything together. Then one day there was an argument between the two brothers and they stopped talking for many years. Not a word was spoken for many years between the two brothers.

One day, one of the brothers was at his house and a carpenter came to the door and asked him, "Do you have any work I can do?" The brother thought for a moment and then said, "I would like you to build a fence on my property. I'd like to build it down there by the stream that separates my farm from my brother's farm. I don't want to see him anymore, and I'd like you to build a high fence there. Now, I'm going into town and I'll be back this evening."

And when he came back that evening, he was shocked to see that the carpenter had not followed his instructions. Instead of building a high fence there, he had built a bridge over the stream. The man walked down to look at the bridge and, as he did, his brother walked toward him from the other side. And his brother said, "After all the terrible things I've done over the years, I can't believe that you would build a bridge and welcome me back."

He reached out to his brother and gave him a huge, big hug. The other brother then walked back up to his house to talk to the carpenter. "Can you stay," he asked the carpenter? The carpenter said, "I have so much more work to do. I'm sorry, I cannot stay. I have to go, for I have many other bridges to build."