

Fellowship—A Gift of God’s Love
By Rose Otis

Thesis: The finest benefits of the Christian life can only be known when Christians are bound together in the fellowship of God’s love.

Primary Bible Text: Colossians 3:14 “And above all these virtues put on love, which ties them all together in perfect unity.”

Opening Song: What a Fellowship, What a Joy Divine, #469 *SDA Hymnal*

Closing Song: Blest Be the Tie That Binds, #350 *SDA Hymnal*
or I’m So Glad I’m a Part of the Family of God

THE STORY OF JONATHON

Jonathon was alone in a city filled with friends. A sinner, discarded by the authorities. Just another paralytic, condemned by his own choices, existing in a living death. No one was willing to call him “friend.”

He had been a fisherman just like many of the others in town, a hard-working, fast-living fisherman. The center of many parties.

Then he noticed the shaking. It began in his hands, making it difficult to control the nets filled with fish. Then it grew worse, uncontrollable. He noticed that his friends kept their distance. Maybe his condition was contagious.

Finally the boat owner asked him not to come back to work. “Jonathon,” the owner said as he handed him his last pay, “I think you had better go see the Rabbi. Maybe he can help. He can at least tell you what’s wrong.”

Jonathon’s visit to the Rabbi was the most painful journey of his life. After a hasty examination, the Rabbi pronounced a death sentence straight from the throne of God. “Jonathon, you have been the life of too many parties. God gave you a pure and healthy body, but you have thrown it to the prostitutes and have picked up one of their diseases. You are a paralytic, cursed by God for your sinful choices. You are unclean! Go! Now!” the Rabbi shouted. “You are rejected and cursed by God, for your own life has cut you off from the people! You are beyond forgiveness!”

Jonathon went, broken and shaking, to a tiny gray hut on a hill beside the sea. His heart begged to laugh with old friends again, to share a meal with his family and to sing a Sabbath hymn in the synagogue. But he was alone, an outcast on the edge of the city filled with old friends.

Then one day, he heard about Jesus. The story came from an itinerant merchant, one who

always seemed to know everything. The old seller of silk purposely talked loud enough for Jonathon to hear and told about a carpenter who turned water into wine and hatred into love. About a miracle-maker. “They say he has the power to forgive sins,” he bellowed.

Jonathon’s rejected heart raced with the power of hope. Maybe, just maybe, God could forgive him. Maybe he could be healed! That hope brought a new energy flooding through his trembling body.

Then one morning an incredible thing happened. Three of his old friends rattled the door of his “unclean” hut. “Jonathon, we’ve missed you! Fishing’s just not the same without your laughter and friendship. We brought you some of last night’s catch.” They baked the fish, and as he ate they talked about boats, fish, girls, families, and about Jesus.

“The fishing had been good.”

“Young Benjamin had found a new way of tying nets.”

“Simon and Andrew had left their boats to follow the carpenter.”

“So had James and John, sons of the old white-haired thunderer.”

It was a good visit. They laughed together and the gray stone hut grew warm with fellowship. He asked them about Jesus. “Has he healed anyone else?”

“Oh yes, many.” And they told of healings—legs, arms, eyes, and sores all made whole again by the touch of Jesus!

“Has He forgiven any?” Jonathon’s voice was soft, yet edged with hope. “One. A leper from a little town in the Galilean hills.”

Jonathon’s heart skipped a beat with the news. Leprosy couldn’t be healed without forgiveness. Maybe it was possible. If God could forgive and heal a leper, maybe He could also forgive a foolish paralytic. Maybe!

They returned often. With fish, bread, love, and friendship. And more stories about Jesus. The food helped his body, but the stories brought life to his soul.

Then one day they came with an old sailcloth, two oars and a length of rope. “Jesus is at Simon’s house today, and we’re taking you to Him!” Their calloused hands placed him softly on the cloth and then tied the oars into a make-shift liter for a friend.

It was a morning filled with emotions. Jonathon was worried that Jesus might not forgive him. His friends were worried about how to get into the house where Jesus was speaking. But all were filled with hope.

They went directly to the front door of Simon’s house, but someone recognized Jonathon and shouted for “the unclean paralytic” to be taken away. They tried another street, only to be turned back again. And again. There seemed to be no way to Jesus. But Jonathon, still energized by hope, suggested the roof. “Remember when we helped Simon repair the tiles on his roof?”

Maybe the tiles are loose again.”

Simon’s wife let them run through the outdoor cooking area and up the stone steps to the roof. The odor of boiling onions and baking bread followed them up to the tiles. Jonathon’s shaking hand pointed to the most likely place. “There! Open it there.”

Strong hands pulled at the tiles like they were nets filled with the finest fish. The roof gave way with a joyful scraping noise. Loose straw sifted down into the room and sunlight fell around Jesus. In a moment the straw was followed by a stretcher bearing Jonathon the Paralytic. You could hear a pin drop.

Simon Peter was there, unhappy that someone had disrupted his special event. The Capernaum Rabbi was there, his lips mouthing the word “unclean.” Pharisees were there, checking to see if Jesus would send the paralytic away as the law required. The crowd was there, listening and watching in amazement. The fishermen were there—James, John, Andrew, and others—wondering why they hadn’t thought to bring Jonathon to Jesus. And his friends were there, peering down through a hole in the roof, each pleading with Jesus to grant Jonathon a new life.

Christ’s voice was like the cooing of a morning dove in the midst of an autumn thunderstorm. “Son, your sins are forgiven.” The words echoed through the room and filled every cell in Jonathon’s mind. “Forgiven! Forgiven! For all of the past! Forgiven! Forgiven! Forgiven at last!”

It was almost too good to be true. Forgiveness, granted by the Healer of bodies and souls. Jonathon looked up and saw Jesus smiling at him. Through the broken roof he could hear his friends shouting for joy!

And the shaking stopped. In a moment Jesus had made an outcast whole. I don’t think there’s a person in this room who wouldn’t want friends like Jonathon’s friends. Friends who never give up on you. Friends who will stand by you when the world has turned its back on you. Friends who will do whatever it takes to bring you to Jesus when you can’t make it back on your own!

FELLOWSHIP TODAY

This morning my topic is fellowship! The story of Jonathon the Paralytic comes from the second chapter of Mark. Our main Scripture, however, is Colossians, chapter 3, verses 12 through 14 (NIV).

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Father forgave you.

“And over all these virtues put on love, which ties them all together in perfect unity.”

There are some wonderful word pictures in these passages that woo us into sweet fellowship with Jesus Christ and with each other. Listen again “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” In other words, take on these Godly traits and immerse yourselves in them until nothing can separate you from God! Not prejudice, not the color of one’s skin, not ideology, not culture or nationality. God would not have anything separate us from Him or from one another.

Daily we must remind ourselves of who we are. Our text tells us that each of us is “God’s chosen, bought with a price, wholly and dearly loved.”

Elder HMS Richards, Sr. said it this way, “Always remember that you are part of God’s royal family!”

The fellowship of friends made the difference of life or death to Jonathon. Alone he was helpless, physically and emotionally drained, and without hope. But when his friends arrived Jonathon dared to hope that he could find Jesus.

We’ve all seen examples of extra--ordinary Christ-like fellowship. I experienced some of the richest fellowship in my lifetime when my husband, Harold, and I worked among our believers in the former Soviet Union. Prior to this, however, I had never thought about the possibility of fellowship with believers living in the Soviet Union. Everything I’d read, everything I’d heard about this nation described invisible barriers that kept people apart. From my childhood I was taught that Americans and Soviets were on opposite ends of the spectrum. Friendship was not an option!

When we first traveled there in the mid-1980s those invisible barriers seemed to not only surround the country, but individuals as well. But what a contrast when we fellowshiped with our spiritual brothers and sisters. It seemed that a hunger for fellowship had intensified among our believers as a result of years of isolation. Now the very sight of brothers and sisters from abroad unleashed a flood of emotion. I remember well the immense satisfaction we enjoyed just sitting in church and looking at one another. Even the language barrier didn’t prevent us from fellowshiping in the truest sense of the word. We were one in the Lord.

I will always remember one weekend in particular. It was the first time that we were allowed to spend the night in a private home. When we arrived everything was in order. As we entered through the front gate, I noticed that even the garden was impeccable and the house just sparkled with cleanliness. The snow-white sheets had been turned back in the main bedroom, and we fell asleep soon after our heads hit the pillows.

The next morning I woke to the sound of a tinkling bell. I slipped out from under the covers and tip-toed across the room to an open window. Through the lace curtains I saw two women. An elderly sister was seated on a small stool in the pasture milking the family cow. The woman of the house stood on the back porch bending from the waist while she prepared a feast in large white pans on the porch floor.

I was not prepared for the flood of emotions that swept over me at that moment. All of a sudden my lifetime of stereotyped opinions vanished like a vapor. Right then I understood what it meant to be one in Christ. To be God's child first transcends ideology, transcends nationality, looks far beyond gender and skin color. Standing there with a cool breeze washing my face I began to comprehend the priceless gift of oneness in Jesus Christ!

These two women and I were "sisters." Children of the living God created to demonstrate His love to a dying world—each in our own way, in our own corner of the world. Our Christian love had slumbered silently in a corner of our hearts through wars, and man-made barriers that encompassed land, and sea, the skyways, and even the post office and telephone lines. But at last the Evil One lost his grip and love began to express itself across the Soviet Union in a way that has cheered the Christian world like nothing else in modern history. It was fellowship just waiting to happen!

"Do bra Ootra, Sistra," (Good morning, Sister) I said, parting the curtains.

"Slava Bogoo, Sistra," my Moldavian sister responded lifting her apron to dry tears that ran like rivers from her eyes. "Slava Bogoo," (glory to God) she repeated.

This was a very moving experience in my spiritual journey. One that I will take with me throughout eternity!

Although this incomparable fellowship with my sister in Moldova happened thousands of miles and many time zones from my home, I would like to suggest to you that you are likely to find similar fellowship close to home. But you must look for it!

Tammy's birth mother had put her up for adoption when she was a newborn. When she turned 21 Tammy began searching for her biological mother. After a year long search, she still hadn't found her birth-mother. What Tammy didn't know was that her mother had been looking for her for twenty years.

According to an Associated Press story, there was one more thing that Tammy didn't know. Her mother was one of her co-workers at a small grocery store where she worked. One day Tammy's mother overheard her talking to another co-worker about her search for her mother. The next day when Tammy laid a copy of her birth certificate on the counter of the grocery store her mother laid an identical copy beside it. Struggling to believe what her eyes told her, for the first time in her life, Tammy realized that the co-worker she had known was actually her mother. With disbelief they fell into each other's arms and wept for joy. They wept both in joy and in sorrow over a sense of loss. The loss of 21 years of a mother/daughter relationship and the kind of love that comes in knowing we belong together.

Our experience may not be as intense as Tammy and her mother's, but every day our lives touch others who, like Jonathon, long to be accepted and supported by Christian friends. They are hungry for Christ-like fellowship. When we are deprived of fellowship there's a hollow spot in our Christian experience.

WE CAN GRIEVE AWAY THE SPIRIT OF FELLOWSHIP

In a video series entitled “Hidden Keys to Loving Relationships” a popular marriage and family lecturer, Dr. Gary Smalley, describes what happens when marriage partners “close their spirit” toward one another. In the video he tells how early in a relationship a couple comes together with an expectancy of oneness, with a longing to be able to speak and not be misunderstood, with a desire for a relationship built on trust. But, if after the wedding vows have been spoken, the marriage partners fail to honor one another’s uniqueness as children of God, if harsh words are spoken, or worse yet if boundaries of fidelity and trust are broken—in Dr. Smalley’s words, the wounded partner begins to “close their spirit” toward their spouse. Dr. Smalley illustrates what happens by using his extended open hand—a hand waiting expectantly to receive good things early in the marriage, but if the relationship begins to deteriorate, the hand or “spirit” begins to close, and the once-open hand becomes a fist!

Sadly, this phenomenon happens in the church family as well. In the fellowship of Christ there is room for the uniqueness of culture. There is room for honored, healthy traditions. There is room for differences of personality and temperament. But there is no room for hatred, for destructive words or behavior, for exclusion, or rejection. Fellowship in Christ goes deeper than ideology, deeper than ethnicity, deeper than skin color, or gender, or social status. It’s a God-given love that is capable of bridging all these differences in a miraculous way to make us one.

THE BARNABUS SOLUTION

The apostle Barnabus found some relationship problems when he first visited the church at Antioch. Acts 11, verses 19-24 tell the story.

The Gospel had been taken to Palestine, Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, but it had been given only to the Jews. Then a group of disciples began telling the Good News to the Greeks in Antioch. They loved it! And they joined the group of believers by accepting Jesus Christ.

But Scripture tells us that the Greeks and Jews didn’t get along too well. Each group thought they were just a little better than the other.

Then Barnabus came. Verse 23 says, “When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.”

Barnabus had the unique ability to see beyond the disagreements, criticism and distaste these Christians had for each other. Instead, he saw the power of God’s grace. He sensed the bond of fellowship that would be theirs if they allowed God’s love to tear down existing barriers and open some fists!

I see him going from member to member encouraging each one to come closer to Christ. And I see miracles begin to happen in Antioch. As Jewish believers focused their attention on Jesus they forgot that those across the aisle were Greeks. And Greek believers, who filled their minds with the words and love of Christ, were more interested in sharing the Gospel than in arguing with their Jewish friends.

Before long miracles began to happen. Fists unfolded and the love of Jesus began to bind them together. The citizens of Antioch began to notice this change in their behavior. They observed that followers of Jesus Christ no longer wounded one another with words and accusations. They noticed that they no longer were jealous or threatened by one another, but rather began to relate as brothers and sisters, as a loving family. And it was for this reason that the other citizens of Antioch began to call these believers “Christians.”

In Antioch, discipleship came before culture. They were Christians first and above all. Being Jews, Greeks, men, women, old, young, rich or poor came far down the list. Christ’s love tied them together as one; as we must be linked together today.

As Seventh-day Adventists, we need the fellowship of the Antioch congregation. We can’t afford to place culture, tribe, or gender before our Christianity. We must live as partners in the worldwide fellowship of our Heavenly Father. We must ask Jesus to help us to look at others as He would and accept the healing power of His love to allow for human differences and choices.

FORGIVENESS AND FELLOWSHIP

In the story of Jonathon, the Scripture says, “And Jesus saw their faith.” Not just the faith of Jonathon, the shaking, shivering, and broken sinner. Jesus also saw and rewarded the faith of those friends who loved him. The friends who visited him in his lonely hut. The friends who told him of the Healer. The friends who wouldn’t give up until they had brought their friend into the very presence of Jesus in his darkest, most needy hour.

Christian fellowship begins when we know that we are sons and daughters of God. We belong. We are loved. And together we rejoice in that love. But Christian fellowship is at its best when we choose to eliminate anything that comes between us and God. When we allow Him to cover us with the gentleness, humility, patience, and love He so generously offers. It’s an amazing process.

- 1- The Spirit of God urges me to come to the Father and confess my sinfulness.
- 2- I respond, fearful yet eager, hoping for the fullness of forgiveness and the power of His grace.
- 3- He give forgiveness. And more. He gives full membership in the fellowship of His family. He accepts me without reservation as His!
 - No limits.
 - No maybes.
 - No “if only’s.”
 - No behavior checks.
 - He accepts me just as He accepts Christ. Open hands. Palms up!

One couple who viewed the Dr. Smalley video series that I referred to earlier in this presentation especially liked the image of the open hand versus the closed fist illustration. Sometime after viewing this series, the wife overheard her husband having a conversation with

their three-year-old daughter.

After scolding his daughter, the husband began to walk away, when suddenly he remembered Dr. Smalley's illustration of the open and closed fist. "Sweetheart, come back here please," he called out. Looking down from his 6' 5" position into the downcast little face he said, "I'm sorry. I can see that Daddy was about to close your little spirit, wasn't he?" She shook her little head up and down. "Sweetheart," he continued, "Your daddy loves you and he never wants to close your little spirit, okay?" "Okay," she said not fully understanding the "open" and "closed spirit" concept, but recognizing that her daddy was telling her, "I love you, little girl, and I never want to say anything that would cause you to doubt my love for you." My brothers and sisters, this is the kind of commitment we need to make to one another in our church families.

AN APPEAL FOR FELLOWSHIP

Today, I want to appeal to you to confess your allegiance. If you would like to join me in saying to our Heavenly Father, and to those around us, that above all else you want to be known as a child of God—then I invite you to stand with me now. While we are standing, let's take a moment to look around us and see the diversified family that we are privileged to be a part of.

When I was a child, some of my close friends and I used to take pleasure in becoming what we called "blood sisters." Some of you may have done something similar and called yourselves "blood brothers." I remember pricking my finger and mixing a tiny bit of my blood together with that of my best friend. And somehow I believed that this ritual engendered a loyalty that superseded the bonds of ordinary friendship.

Today, as we stand together before God, it is because of the blood of Jesus that we can anticipate uncommon loyalty and love among us. It is because of His blood that we can stand forgiven. It is through His blood that we become eligible to be called children of the living God and brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

"And above all, put on love, which binds us all together in perfect unity."

PRAYER

Biographical Information on Sermon Writer:

Rose Otis was the first director of the General Conference Department of Women's Ministries as well as the first woman to serve as a Vice-President of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists. Retired for three years, Rose and her husband Harold live in Middletown, Maryland near their two children and four grandchildren. She enjoys writing, gardening, and water sports.