

# The All-Together Gathering

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[0:00] Hey, Table Church, my name is Anthony Parrott, and I'm the lead pastor here. And my surroundings are different. There's no more bookcases behind me or the brick wall outside my house.

They're like in a place that we sometimes call church. And it's weird and it's interesting. And it reminds me of how much I miss this and how much I know you all miss this, this whole online church thing.

Like it's a gift and it's a blessing and we're so glad that we get to do it. And yet, like it's not the same thing. And so we keep praying and begging God for the end of the pandemic so that we can get together again and see our friends and our family and give hugs and handshakes and high fives and all that.

I could do without the handshakes, but whatever. Like we pray for the end of all this so we can get something back. And yet we're still in the midst of it all. This is what we've got.

So we're going to do the best with what we've got. I'm grateful for our worship team. I'm grateful for our worship director, Jordan. I'm grateful for a church that keeps showing up week after week.

[1:03] You all there in the chat and watching on the YouTubes and the interwebs and all of that. I'm grateful for you because it's been a tumultuous time. And yet we and my family, we felt loved.

We felt supported. And we have felt at least a little bit like we're part of something bigger than ourselves. So thank you for that. We're in the middle of a little series called Why We Gather.

Because if you remember back to the Halcyon days of like March, we used to physically gather together in crowds of like dozens or hundreds. And we would do stuff together. We would do like group karaoke.

And we would listen to somebody talk about the Bible for like 20, 30 or 40 minutes. And why did we do that? That's the question we're kind of exploring these couple weeks of why did we gather?

And if you see me looking around, like not just at the camera, it's because there are actual real life people here. So I'm not just pretending like it's true. There are actual people. Why did we get together and do these kind of bizarre things like group karaoke and submit ourselves to like a 40 minute lecture on a 2000 year old book?

[2:08] So that's what we've been talking about. Last week, Becky did an excellent job of introducing us to this concept of proxemics. Proxemics is the sociological term of there are different spaces where we get and do different things.

So if you're in a crowd, if you're in a big public space with, you know, dozens or hundreds of people, you act a certain way and you get a certain amount of energy out of that space. When somebody asks, how are you?

When you're in a crowd, you would be seen as a little bit weird or bizarre if you gave like a, let me tell you my life story and how everything has changed kind of answer in that kind of space. Then we have smaller spaces like in the home and our close friends and our intimate, our transparent relationships.

And if somebody asks like, hey, how are you doing? You would be seen as weird if you just be like, I'm good. Thanks. See ya. Also weird. Proxemics is the idea of like we do and we get different things in different social spaces.

And this applies to what we do as the church, as Jesus followers, as Christians, because we have big public spaces where at least we used to gather.

[3:13] And we also have smaller spaces like small groups and dinner parties and community groups where we also used to gather. Why did we do that? So this week we're focusing on the big public all together gathering.

Next week we'll talk about the smaller, more personal, transparent gathering in the home. So why do we gather? Why do we do this big all together gathering?

Two big reasons. Number one, we gather to build up. On the slide, if you could see it, there's a little Lego. And this language comes from the book of 1 Corinthians chapter 14, where we'll be spending a little bit of time today.

We gather to build up, specifically to build up our fellow believers, our fellow Jesus followers, our fellow Christians in the good news of God's love.

1 Corinthians 14 says this, verse 26. It says, What shall we say then, friends, when you come together? Each of you has a hymn or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.

[ 4 : 19 ] And why do we do this is what Paul is writing to a church. Paul says, Everything must be done so that the church must be built up. In the Greek, the word is the word for edify.

It makes you think of like a big cathedral or a tall skyscraper, an edifice. It's the idea that when we gather together, everybody gets involved. Everybody has something to offer so that something constructive happens, something good happens, something positive happens, so that we're left better than the way we came.

So we feel more encouraged, more built up, more recognizing God's love than when we first walked in through the doors. And I love what Paul says.

He says that each of you are meant to get involved, that the altogether gathering is never meant to be a spectator sport, which is like, there's this irony of here we are, like I'll be watching this in a couple days, sitting on my couch, scrolling on a phone, watching myself preach.

And I know you're scrolling on a phone too. It's okay. It's fine. But like, we have now been forced to experience church purely a spectator sport. And I think there is something like, I've been reading some statistics about the numbers, the thousands of people who have dropped out.

[ 5 : 35 ] Because like online church, it's great. Don't get me wrong. We've put a lot of money and time and effort into making this all work. And yet we recognize like, we're just kind of sitting here, aren't we? It reminds us that this isn't the way it's meant to be.

Everyone's supposed to be involved. There's supposed to be like flesh and blood and bones involved in this. And when it's just a screen and a lot of distraction, we recognize like, couldn't this be better?

Couldn't we be doing something else? And so we're reminded of why we gathered in the first place. Now, when we gather, it's meant, something's meant to happen.

We recognize the presence, the Spirit of God in the space and in the space between us. We recognize that God is already up to something good. And when a church gathers, when a church gets together, it is meant to be a place where we communicate, where we preach, where we talk about, where we share, where we encourage God's love.

I love this prayer that, again, Paul writes to one of his churches. He says this in Ephesians chapter 3. He says, I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power together with all the Lord's holy people.

[ 6 : 48 ] What kind of power? We love to talk about power. What kind of power does Paul hope we have? To grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. And to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that you can be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

You can feel Paul kind of stumbling over his words because he's so excited about this idea of, why do we gather? We gather so we can begin to grasp God's love.

And that was the main intention of Paul's ministry. It was the main intention of Jesus's ministry.

John chapter 3 says that the Son of God did not come into the world to condemn the world, but rather to show that God loved the world, that Jesus gave himself to show the world that.

So we can say that if you come to one of our church gatherings, or if you're experiencing this online, if you come to one of these and you are not leaving more rooted and established in love, we're doing it wrong.

And if you go to any church, any gathering of Christians, and you don't find yourself more rooted and established in love, they're doing it wrong. And I don't mean like a flimsy Hallmark movie kind of love.

[ 8 : 01 ] Hallmark movies are fine. We watch a bunch of them in December. It's fine. But like, listen to these words, rooted and established. This is like sturdy, like drop your anchor, rough and tumble love.

Love that gets into shenanigans for the sake of like fighting against injustice and evil and wrong. Love that stands up for what's right. Love that sticks by somebody in the toughest times of their life. It's that kind of love that we want to be built up and rooted and established in. And so that's why we gather. That's why Paul says in 1 Corinthians, when you get together, each of you has something to share so that we can know something true about God.

So number one, we gather to build up, to build up our fellow believers, our fellow Christians. And the second reason that we gather is that we want to point everyone towards God's love, presence, and goodness.

We want to point everyone, even those who don't yet believe, even those who are maybe are seeking God, seeking some sort of divine presence, but they're not so sure about this whole Jesus thing. We still want to point them to God's goodness and God's love.

[ 9 : 10 ] Now in the early church, there were clearly those that were gathering because they already did believe. They already had put their faith in the story of Jesus and the good news, the gospel of Jesus.

And there were those who would show up on a Sunday gathering, somewhere in a home or like in a courtyard or in a public space. They would show up too and they were seeking God, but they weren't so sure about this whole story about Jesus who was God in the flesh and he died on a cross and he was resurrected.

They weren't so sure about the whole thing yet. And they were so compelled by the kind of communities that Christians were building, communities of inclusion, communities of belonging, communities of fellowship and sharing.

Those people who were still seeking, who weren't so sure, they would show up too because they wanted to find out more. And so Paul and the church planners in that first century, they expected these gatherings to be helpful, not just to those who already believed, but to those who didn't yet believe.

They expected those gatherings to have meaning and purpose for those who weren't so sure about this whole Jesus thing yet. This is what 1 Corinthians 14, verse 23 and 24 says.

[ 10 : 23 ] It says, so the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, which we can get in a whole big, long discussion about what speaking in tongues means, but basically take it as this.

If everybody starts speaking in a language you can't understand and then inquirers, seekers, unbelievers come in, won't they just say you're out of your ever loving mind?

Paul goes on. He might not have said the ever loving part, that was me. But anyway, he goes on, he says, but if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everybody is prophesying, telling the truth, telling the reality of what God is like and what God is up to in the world, if a seeker comes in while that's happening, they are going to be convicted of their sin and brought under judgment and then they will fall down and say, God is surely in this place.

That's what the early church, that's what the church planters saw happening when non-believers came to church, showed up on a Sunday, that they would see, oh my God, God is here.

Holy cow, there is something holy present. Oh my goodness, what is happening? That was the expectation. So we gather to build up and we gather the point towards God's presence and we exclude no one.

[ 11 : 49 ] And so again, if someone comes, if a God seeker walks in to one of these gatherings and then walks away from one of these gatherings without a greater sense of God's love, we're doing it wrong.

Now, I'm not trying to sugarcoat what scripture just said in the verses that we just read. You'll note that it says that God seekers are going to feel convicted, that they're going to feel that their secrets are laid bare.

But remember, this is not wishy-washy love. This is a love that has consequences, a love that when it sees oppression and injustice and harm and evil and wrong, it's a love that says, not here you won't.

If a belief in God's love never leads to a sense of conviction, then we owe it to ourselves to ask, well, what kind of love is this? Now, listen, listen. The work of a conviction comes solely from the Holy Spirit.

It is not my job. It is not your job to make someone else feel convicted, guilty of their sin. That is something that only God's Spirit working inside of someone can do.

[12:58] It's not us. In conviction, that work of the Holy Spirit, how does it happen? It happens when God's people begin to live the reality of how big and broad and good God's love is.

And then when we, as non-believers, see the beauty of what God is up to, that he is a reconciling, including kind of God, when we look at that, we, of course, should feel a sense of conviction of recognizing, who have I left out?

Who have I put to shame? Who have I said no thank you to? I don't want to know you. I don't want to have anything to do with you. That should bring us a sense of conviction. Again, it's not my job. It's not your job. Our job is to testify, to give testimony to, to speak to what God is up to, the good things that God is doing.

Now, we gather for these two reasons. We gather to build and we gather to point. We gather to build up those who already believe. We gather to point to God's presence, God's action, to those who don't yet believe.

[14:06] And then there are four ways, if you're taking notes, you can put down four little bullet points, four ways that we typically do that in a gathering, in a church gathering.

And we're actually going to dive deeper into every single one of these next month in a separate series. But I want to talk about them tonight, this morning, whatever time, what time is an illusion. I want to talk about them right now just for a little bit. Number one, we do this through baptism. Now, baptism, it's something that doesn't typically happen on like a weekly basis, at least in this church and in most churches.

But baptism was one of these like core foundational things that happens when someone says, there is something bigger than me going on here.

And I want there to be some sort of physical representation of what God has done in my life. And baptism is a way, it's a way of symbolizing when we go down into the water that we are dead to our sin, to the things that like hold us back, to the things that are holding us down, to the things that are tying us down to the ways we used to be.

[15:14] That's what baptism represents, a death to that. And then we are raised out of the water that represents our resurrection, a new life that like our eternal eternity starts today.

And baptism is also a way of saying, I'm part of a new family. Jesus himself used this language again in John chapter 3, the idea of being born again, being born of the water and of the spirit. And so when we are baptized, it's saying, I have been born into a new family. What sociologists call a fictive kinship relationship, which is a really nerdy way of saying like, you all, we're in this together now.

Ephesians 1 says this, long before God laid down earth's foundation, God had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love to be made whole and holy by God's love.

Long, long ago, God decided to adopt us into God's family through Jesus Christ. So when we gather as a church, sometimes we baptize people because we want to be part of a new family.

[16:22] We want to recognize that we are dead to our former way of life when we are alive to the way of life that's only possible through Jesus. Number two, we celebrate something called Eucharist, which we're going to do in a little bit.

You might call it communion, the Lord's table, the Lord's supper. Eucharist, it's a Greek word, eucharisto. It means to give thanks, that we recognize that God's goodness is so darn good that we want to give thanks for it.

And so we have this invitation to dine with the divine, to meet with God, God's self, at a table, and to eat good food with our new family.

We'll talk more about that in just a little bit. And the third thing we do when we gather is we immerse ourselves in God's word, the Bible, scripture.

It's what we're talking about right now. It's why we have sermons or messages or talks or whatever your tradition has called them. But we look at this story and the story of stories of people throughout the ages who've experienced the divine presence and their lives have changed because of it.

[17:38] And I'll tell you what, some of those stories are messed up. Some of those people met with God and they misheard and they did some wacky things. Some of those people, they were really, really, really young in their faith and they screwed up big time.

And some of those stories, they're beautiful and revelatory and they tell us something true about what God is like. And when we immerse ourselves in scripture, we're saying that we've been written into that story, into a shared story.

We're baptized, we're brought into a new family, we take Eucharist communion and we are now meeting at a big, wide open table and now with scripture, we are being written into God's story. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright uses the analogy of how scripture is like a Shakespearean play. And most Shakespearean plays had five acts and scripture, the Bible, Genesis through Revelation is the first four acts and now our job, you and me, our job is to improvise act five. To see everything that's happened before and say, okay, if that's how God acts with his people and that's how the best of God's people behave, then how are we going to move into the future knowing what we know about Jesus and about God?

[ 18 : 56 ] And so God's not done with us yet. The story's not over. And that's why we look at scripture, not so that we can just be beholden to the past, but so that we can move into the future knowing that God has good things in store and that we are part of a shared story of centuries and generations of fellow believers, fellow God fearers, fellow people who are being saved by God's divine favor and mercy and grace.

And the fourth thing that we do when we gather is we pray because this is the truth. God is never locked behind a closed door.

God is not hiding from us. God doesn't need us to like cast a special ritual. He doesn't need a professional with a degree to like, you know, somehow mitigate God's anger and wrath before you. No, prayer is when we all gather and we all get to experience God's presence because God is not behind a locked door. And so we pray through worship and singing and song and through liturgy and litany and all of these things.

This is why we gather because something special happens and we can gather in the same place and lift up our voices. As a matter of fact, when like the drums kick in and we all start singing the same song, it's true.

[ 20 : 16 ] They've done studies on this. We could all put like, sync our Fitbits up and our hearts would start beating at the same rhythm. So there's something unifying happening when we gather, when we sing, when we pray because we believe that God's presence is here and he is moving in our midst.

Prayer is how we talk to our creator, to our God. And it's not God behind a locked door. It's not a magician behind a curtain. It's about God's presence being with all people.

Hebrews 10 says this, Friends, we can now, without hesitation, walk right up to God into the very holy place. Jesus has cleared the way by the blood of his sacrifice, acting as our priest before God. So let's do it full of belief, confident that we are presentable inside and out. Let's keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going. He always keeps his word.

Now listen, listen, listen. This is verse 24. It says, let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshiping together as some do, but spurring each other on.

[ 21 : 28 ] And there it is. There is that message right there. Let us see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshiping together as some do, but spurring each other on.

Is this whole thing ideal? Of course not. We know that. We feel that. Some of us, we're blessed and encouraged because we've been able to connect with our church in ways that we never have before.

I know that some of you are watching from across many, many state lines or international lines. We praise God for the blessing of that, but we also recognize, like, this is not the way it's meant to be. And it's wearisome, and we don't want to hop on another Zoom call, and we don't want to hop on another online experience that we know eventually will probably just disappoint. So why do we do this?

Because we're yearning and we're longing for the better thing. And we don't give up on the thing we have now because it's what we've got today. And God willing, it's going to get better.

[ 22 : 33 ] God willing, we will gather again. God willing, we will fill this space. We will fill Columbia Heights. We will fill many more spaces in the future. And we look forward to that day with hope, and we start practicing for that day right now.

Because otherwise, we'd get rusty, and we'd forget why we gather. And we'd forget what we're missing out on. And we'd forget all the beautiful relationships that we have through God to all of you all.

And so until then, let's see how inventive we can be. how inventive we can be at encouraging each other, at loving one another, at helping each other out.

Because this, it's important, but it's not all there is. This is key and crucial, and I have dedicated my life to these kinds of gatherings. But it's not all there is.

And so my encouragement, my invitation, and my challenge for you this week is to find new ways, or maybe old ways. Write a letter, send a card, send an Uber, Uber Eats, something, anything, to reach out to a friend, a loved one, and say, how can I love you?

[ 23 : 48 ] How can I encourage you? How can I help out? Let's spur each other on as we look forward to the day when we can gather again, trusting that God will keep his promises.

voices. Can I help? Have a little bit. Can I help them?