Sermon – When Belonging Gets Messy
Sunday August 23, 2026

Introduction

Have you ever been disappointed by someone?

You make a new friend. At first, you have so much in common. You have great conversations, you have fun together, and you think, *This person really gets me!*

But then, you start seeing another side of them. They're not as reliable as you thought. They have opinions you disagree with. And suddenly, the friendship isn't what you expected.

Or maybe you join a small group or a church. At first, it's great. People are welcoming, people are warm and you think, *I think I've found my people!*

But then, you start noticing things. Someone disappoints you. You disagree with a decision. You feel overlooked. And suddenly, this community isn't what you expected.

Now what's the problem? In these moments, our instinct is to think the problem is the other people! They're not mature enough, sensitive enough or wise enough.

So what do you do? You look for new friends, a new small group, a new church. And for awhile, things seem to go well. But eventually you run into the same problem again.

Why? Because there is no perfect community. Someone once said, *If you find the perfect church, don't join it—because the moment you do, it won't be perfect anymore.*

It's funny, but there's a lot of truth to that. And the Bible is extremely honest about this. The early church disagreed, argued, complained, struggled to forgive, and sometimes even parted ways.

Because the truth is: **Community is messy!**

And here's where it gets uncomfortable. Because it's not just other people who are messy. It's you and it's me as well. We're all a big mess!

Why? Because deep down, we all have a tendency to put ourselves first. The Bible calls this sin. I naturally think about my needs, my preferences, my desire to be understood.

None of these desires are wrong. God created us with needs and a desire for connection. But the problem is that we take these desires and turn them into rights – rights we feel entitled to protect.

- I deserve to be happy.
- I deserve to be treated this way.
- I shouldn't have to put up with this.

So when someone doesn't live up to your expectations – what do you do?

- You protect yourself.
- You pull back.
- You keep score.
- You start thinking, *If they're not going to look out for me, I'm not going to look out for them.*

And this is the problem: **Our tendency to protect our rights actually destroys the community and belonging we desire.**

Because imagine a community:

- Where everyone is protecting their own rights.
- Where everyone is focused on their needs.
- Where everyone is looking out for their interests.

What do you think happens to a community like this?

- People become more concerned about what they can *get* from the community than what they can *give* to it.
- People are more concerned about *protecting* themselves, than *caring* for one another.

And that's the irony: the more we're focused on getting own needs met, the less anyone will experience the belonging we all long for.

Because **Belonging isn't about finding the perfect people who will never let you down. It's about becoming the kind of person who loves imperfect people even when they're messy.**

So what do we do when belonging gets messy?

Sermon Series

We're in a series called *On the Way Together.* And that's exactly the question Paul addresses in our passage today.

In Philippians 2, Paul is writing to a church he loves. And yet even in this church, there's conflict. Two women named Euodia and Syntyche are struggling to get along.

And yet Paul doesn't tell them to go find a better church. Paul doesn't tell them to insist on their rights. What does Paul tell them to do? He tells them to embrace a radically different way of living in community.

So what does that look like? Today we're going to look at three movements:

- From self-focus to others-focus.
- From being served to being a servant.
- From self-protection to trusting God.

The First Movement: From Self-Focus to Others-Focus

Notice that before Paul tells the Philippians how to treat one another, he reminds them who they are.

Verse 1: **Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. (Philippians 2:1-2)**

Paul begins this chapter with belonging. Why? Because when your belonging is secure in Jesus, it changes how you relate to others.

But if your belonging depends on people, you'll constantly need them to affirm you, understand you, and meet your needs. And when they don't, you get angry.

But when your deepest belonging is secure in Jesus, that's when you're free. You stop asking, "What can I get?" and instead ask, "What can I give?"

Paul goes on: **Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves. (Philippians 2:3)**

What does Paul identify here as one of the great threats to community? Selfish ambition. You see, our natural tendency is to put ourselves first. We ask:

- What do I need?
- How do I feel?
- What do I deserve?

But Paul says: **Not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. (Philippians 2:4)**

In other words, It's not all about you!

[Turn to your neighbour and say: It's not all about you!]

Our culture constantly teaches us to ask, *What can I get from this relationship?* But Paul teaches us to ask a different question: *What can I give in this relationship?*

And that shift requires something we don't naturally do: look at the relationship from the other side.

So when someone disappoints you, instead of immediately assuming the worst, pause and ask: *What's their side? What's their story? How might they be experiencing this? What might they be thinking?*

This doesn't mean you excuse their behaviour or pretend that you're not hurt. It's simply means: There's someone on the other side of this conflict and they have a story too.

So let me ask you this: Where have you become so focused on what someone has done to you that you've stopped considering what they might be going through?

That's the first movement: From self-focus to others-focus.

The Second Movement: From Being Served to Being a Servant

Verse 5 says: **In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2:5)**

Notice here that Paul doesn't just give them a principle. He gives them a person: Jesus. And what does he say Jesus is like?

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage… (Philippians 2:6)

Think about that. Jesus was God so he had every right. He had:

- The right to glory.
- The right to honour.
- The right to be served.

And yet does he use those rights for his own advantage? No. **He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant… (Philippians 2:7)**

The word for "servant" here is actually the word slave. In other words, Jesus moved from the highest place imaginable to the lowest—not because he had to, but because he chose to give himself for us.

And this is where it gets hard for us. Because when someone hurts us or disappoints us, our instinct is to protect our rights:

- I have a right to be treated better.
- I have a right to be heard.
- I have a right to be respected.

And sometimes we do have that right. But Jesus shows us something important. **There's a difference between having a right and insisting on that right.**

Personal Story

I grew up in an Asian family where respect for your parents was extremely important. My parents sacrificed a lot for us, and they expected us to honour that.

So we didn't talk back to our parents because if we did… somebody's gonna get a hurtin!

Now I'm a parent of teenagers. And I want to say that I really do think both my girls are amazing. But every once in a while, they'll say something disrespectful.

And I find myself thinking, *Wait a minute. Do you know how much I've done for you? I've sacrificed for you. I've provided for you. I have a right to be treated with respect!*

And often I'll hold pretty tightly to that right. I'll insist on an apology. I'll remind them how good they have it. Sometimes I'll raise my voice.

And of course, after such great parenting, they immediately realize the error of their ways, sincerely apologize and everything's great!

Right? Wrong. Because almost every time, the harder I hold on to my right, the worse things get. Can any of you relate?

Now, I'm a firm believer in boundaries and discipline. But God has been teaching me something else? That sometimes I need to lay down my right to be treated in the way I think I deserve, and choose instead to love my kids in the way they need.

Because having a right and insisting on that right are two different things.

We see that in Jesus don't we? Jesus had every right to be honoured. But he didn't cling to that right. He chose instead to serve.

Jesus served people who insulted him, rejected him and even killed him. He gave his life for his enemies.

And that's the same mindset Paul calls us to embrace.

So what rights are you holding onto right now that Jesus is inviting you to lay down?

- Maybe it's the right to be right.
- Maybe the right to be understood.
- Maybe the right to an apology.

Jesus had every right to be honoured, and yet he chose instead to serve.

This is the second movement: From being served to being a servant.

Now this raises an important question. Because what if I put others first and they don't do the same for me? That brings us to…

The Third Movement: From Self-Protection to Trusting God

Because when relationships get messy, our instinct is to protect ourselves from getting hurt. So…

- We pull back.
- We put up walls.
- We keep people at a distance.

Sometimes this is wise. There are situations where you need healthy boundaries. But sometimes what looks like self-protection is actually us trying to be in control.

Because we think, *If I can just manage this relationship, I'll make sure I never get hurt again.*

But here's the problem. You can't control people and situations.

Following Jesus means learning to trust God with the things you can't control. And that's where Paul points us to Jesus.

Verse 8 says: **He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:8)**

Jesus knew he would be insulted, humiliated, betrayed and even killed. And yet does he try to protect himself? No. Instead he entrusts himself to the Father.

- **Self-protection says, "I need to make sure I'm okay."**
- **Trusting God says, "God, I trust you to take care of me."**

This doesn't mean you let people walk all over you. It just means you don't have to be in control to be okay.

- You can take the first step without knowing how they'll respond.
- You can forgive without knowing whether the other person will change.
- You can love without knowing if you'll be loved back.

So let go of control and trust God to take care of you.

Look what happens to Jesus: **Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name. (Philippians 2:9)**

Jesus entrusts himself to God. And God vindicates him.

Now trusting God doesn't mean every difficult relationship will be restored. Sometimes people won't change. Sometimes they won't apologize. Sometimes you'll get hurt.

But **You don't have to control the outcome because you can trust the God who does.**

So what are you trying to control right now? What is God is inviting you to trust him with?

- Maybe it's your reputation.
- Maybe it's being right.
- Maybe it's an outcome you really want.

What would it look like to say: God, I can't control what this person does or how they respond. But I can control what I do. And I choose to love. And I will trust you with the rest.

That's the third movement: From self-protection to trusting God.

Conclusion

Community is messy. Where are you experiencing that right now?

- Maybe it's in a conflict.
- Maybe it's a misunderstanding.
- Maybe someone has hurt you.

Maybe you're holding on to how you've been wronged. You're thinking about what you deserve. And you're trying to protect yourself.

Jesus knew what it was like to be misunderstood, rejected and betrayed. And he had every right to protect his rights. And yet what did he do?

- He moved toward us.
- He served us.
- He gave himself for us.

Not because we deserved it. But because this is what love looks like.

So maybe the question isn't: *How can I get these people to treat me better?* But it's: *How can I become more like Jesus in this relationship?*

Because belonging isn't about finding the perfect people who will never let you down. It's about becoming the kind of person who can love imperfect people even when it get messy.

God doesn't just want to make you better at relationships. He wants to make you more like Jesus.

And in the same way, God isn't just changing us just to have better relationships. He wants to create a different kind of community through us.

A community people look at that makes them think: *There's something different about these people. They love each other even when it's hard. They serve each another. They forgive each other. They make room for people who are different from them."*

You see, God is leading us to become a hub of connection and belonging. He's shaping us to be a signpost of the kind of community where people truly belong.

Because when people experience a community like that, they get a glimpse of Jesus. And ultimately, Jesus is the one our hearts are longing for. He is the one who alone can give us the deepest belonging we truly need.

So when we learn to love imperfect people like Jesus, we're not just building better relationships. We're showing the world who God is and we're inviting them into his family.

Let's pray.