

RHYTHMS OF GRACE: COMMUNITY

I remember one of the first arguments Eli and I ever had as a married couple. Actually, it was less of an argument, and more of a difference of opinion. And actually, to be honest, it was a difference of opinion that Eli wasn't even aware of. And it started, with of all things, pancakes.

We were having pancakes for dinner one evening in the first year of our marriage - which by the way, isn't breakfast for dinner the best thing ever? - so I sat down to eat this delicious dinner of pancakes, with I'm sure all the right fixings - bacon and fried eggs and syrup - and Eli and I hold hands and pray together, probably something wonderfully spiritual, you know this young, godly husband that I am, and as we finish praying I go to pick up my silverware to start eating my pancakes, and something was missing. A knife.

Well, a little annoyed, I sort of impatiently got up and got myself a knife from the drawer, but this seemed to keep on happening at meal times. I'd sit down for french toast, chicken salad, even baked potatoes, and there was no knife on the table. Well, I started to stew a bit about this. You see, in my mind it just wasn't right that there wouldn't be knives on the table, not to mention that it seemed Eli wasn't thinking about me, her husband, who liked to eat with a knife. But it just never crossed Eli's mind to put knives out for food that could be more conveniently cut with the side of a fork.

The Sansburn family, however, grew up with knives. EVERY meal. It could be JELLO salad and mashed potatoes for dinner and there would be knives on the right side of every place setting at the table. And so growing up in this family, my sister and I just knew that when the table was set, knives were included. It wasn't something we were necessarily even taught explicitly, it was more something we caught. Something that was just formed in us, almost unconsciously, through the table practices of our family and the eating habits of the people who sat around that table.

Well, needless to say in the past 12 years I've been slowly re-formed by the habits of a new family, and I now eat my pancakes with just a fork.

Well, you don't even need that story to recognize in yourself that you have been deeply and almost unconsciously shaped and formed (for good and bad) by the the people and practices of the family you grew up in.

Well - in the same way we are going to see this morning that life in the church, life in God's family, - in its people and its practices - shapes and forms us deeply as followers of Jesus.

We're wrapping up, this morning, this series that we've been in over the last four weeks called *Rhythms of Grace*. And in a lot of ways in this series, we've been building out a theology of transformation. We've been trying to work toward this understanding of how God changes us to look more like Jesus.

Now to get to the heart of understanding transformation, we have to get to the heart of our problem as humans. And we did that several weeks ago in the first sermon in this series. And really briefly, what we saw is that our core issue is not just that we think the wrong things, and not just that we do the wrong things, it's that we love the wrong things. Our affections, our loves, our wants, our desires, our worship - is fundamentally disordered.

So transformation or spiritual growth then, isn't just a cognitive exercise, it's not just about gaining more knowledge. Now it's not less than that, but it is more. There's a reordering we need in what we love. Transformation has to happen at the level of our hearts. And our hearts can't be changed from the top down, just through learning more information, they have been changed from the bottom up in a more subversive way, from the level of our habits.

You see, our habits, our rhythms of life - which include our routines, our practices, really all of these pieces that make up our life from our waking to our sleeping and everything in between - these rhythms aren't just things we do - they actually do something to us.

It was Winston Churchill who said about culture and society that "we shape our buildings, and afterward they shape us." And what he meant is that we design and build the houses we live in and the offices we work at and the stores we shop at, but in the end it's the location and form and function of these buildings that actually shape us as a society and a culture.

And the same is true of us as individuals. We are this active party in shaping and forming the routine and rhythms of our life. We make our schedule and determine what practices are going to occupy the hours and minutes and seconds of our days individually, and as families, but in the end it is these very rhythms and routines that, over time, end up shaping us as people, either in reforming and reorienting us toward God's grace in the gospel, or malforming and misshaping us away from God.

And what we've wanted to do through this series, and through our summer reading in David Mathis' book *Habits of Grace* is not just to kind of walk through the spiritual buffet line of Christian practices and see what we want to add to our already full plate - no! Just adding more stuff for us to do as Christians isn't the answer. We really take a step back and intentionally take stock of our lives. And we're doing that because we want to be transformed right? We don't

want to be content with being stuck in our Christian lives. If loving God is our highest desire, we want him to change us so that we love him more.

So we're ask ourselves the question - what is shaping me? How am I intentionally forming my life in a way that puts God's shaping mechanism, the gospel of his grace through Jesus, in front of my heart and my mind in the everyday, ordinary rhythms of life?

And we've seen in a big picture way, sort of from 40,000 feet, how God's Word and Prayer are integral means of grace that God uses in this process of transformation. Hearing God's voice through his Word and having his ear in prayer actually do this work of re-ordering the loves in our heart that are disordered, and they re-orient us to the true north of God's grace.

But the question you might have as we talk about all of this is - "Well Ben, if living a life saturated with these gospel rhythms of word and prayer is so key to growth in Christlikeness, shouldn't the Christian just escape to the mountains or the desert, to some monastery in the middle of nowhere, where they are able to practice these rhythms without distraction? Wouldn't separating ourselves from rhythms of our culture that misshapes us, and committing to this full-time integration of spiritual practices in our life, be the ultimate path toward spiritual transformation?"

This morning we're going to see that the answer to those questions is no, because the community of the church is, in many ways, the primary place and the pinnacle means of God's reformatory grace working in your life.

Christian community, especially as you experience in a local group of believers called a church, reorients and reorders what you love. And it does this in seemingly ordinary ways through its people and practices.

And what we're going to do this morning is really just unpack that statement in its three parts. We're going to see that the community of the church 1.) reorients and reorders what you love 2.) it does this in seemingly ordinary ways, and 3.) it does this through its people and its practices.

1. The Christian community of the church reorients and reorders what you love.

Why don't you grab your Bibles and turn with me to Ps. 73.

Psalm 73 is, initially anyway, this spiritually shallow lament of the loss of the American Dream. I mean, technically it's not the American Dream, we can call it the "human" dream - but the Psalmist is dealing with his life not looking the way he wants it to. He's grieving what he

sees and interprets as an injustice in the way God is dispensing his gifts in the world. What do I mean?

Well, let's start reading together at v. 2 - "But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

So the Psalmist is looking around him and he is seeing the prosperity of others, many of them people that don't love God, don't have any interest in God, in fact, live lives in rebellion to God, and he is frustrated. These people "have no pangs until death" v. 4, "their bodies are fat and sleek, they are not in trouble as others are, they're not stricken like the rest of mankind."

OK, so do you see that he's looking around him and doing this calculated comparison of what he's got, what his life looks like, and what other have and what their lives look like, and the math is obviously not adding up. He feels like he's coming up short.

In a ton of ways, what we've been talking about as our core issue as humans is manifesting in this man. There is a disorder to his loves right? His affections, his loves, his wants, his desires, his worship, is directed at the wrong thing. He's getting sucked into a false story about life. He's bought into the advertising slogans around him - you need this, you deserve it, you're entitled to it.

And in the process he's forgotten the goodness of God toward him. Look at v. 13: "All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence." He's saying - what's the use of following this God. It hasn't done me any good any way.

We hate to admit it, but this is us right? Our cultural rhythms are a vortex that suck us into this kind of self-focused, consumeristic entitlement. I mean, think about your average tv ad. Your average commercial is not trying to intellectually convince you of the truth of its message. That's too obvious, right? We'd see through that right away.

Instead, it's presenting a story of what makes up the good life that you need to have. And we go through life absolutely inundated with these images and stories and proposals of the good life in just our normal ordinary rhythms don't we? Whether we turn on the TV, or log in to Pinterest, or scroll through Facebook we are almost unconsciously having our loves shaped by versions of the good life that have nothing to do with God, and then evaluating if we're experiencing them. And so what we love, what we worship, ends up so easily oriented toward the wrong thing. Do you recognize this in yourself?

And the Psalmist says that all of this wore him out. v. 16: "But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task." Instead of the life and vitality promised in the rat race for bigger, better, more, he found himself spent.

But then something happened. He felt burned by this pursuit of the American Dream, the house, the car, and the career, and the comfortable life - "until," v. 17, " he went into the sanctuary of God."

The sanctuary was the temple. It was the place God's people gathered together to worship him and speak to him and hear from him. And suddenly, when the Psalmist arrives among God's people, in God's place, his heart gets recalibrated, it gets reoriented to toward the true version of the good life. His loves start getting reshaped and reformed in a godward direction. Because look at what he then says after he's been in the sanctuary - v. 21:

"When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, (another translation says "when my heart was wounded", he means "when my heart was disordered, when I was loving the wrong things) I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you." He recognizes the disorder of what was going on in his heart. and something changes in his perspective.

v. 23: Read.

Do you see the reordering that is going on in his heart? There is something happening in the sanctuary, in the gathering of God's community, that changes his perspective, that redirects him to the truth and goodness and value and worth and centrality of God himself.

And this is what Christian community does for you, brothers and sisters. You can so easily become hypnotized by the allurements and stories of the good life peddled around us. But something about going into the sanctuary breaks that spell. There is something about what happens in this community, that happens when we gather together every Sunday around the Word and around the Table that charms our hearts with a deeper magic. There is something going on here that uncovers the facades of the world and exposes the rot underneath them. Even our best spiritual efforts are shot through with a myopic self-sufficiency and self-focus. Christian community lifts us out of the fog of self and the vapor of the stuff of this world and turns our eyes up to see the glory of Jesus. The community of the church re-orientes and reorders our hearts to the true story of the gospel.

And this is a rhythm of grace that you need shaping you, really counter forming you, week after week after week.

But 9:30 comes awfully early on Sunday morning doesn't it? I mean, how many of you, it's ok to admit it, were like, "you know, it's Labor Day weekend, what feels like the last Sunday of summer, Bedside Baptist sounds a little better than Summit Christian Fellowship this morning."

You get out of bed, and if you're a young family like us with four kids, especially if they are four girls, and you're trying to get breakfast ready, and get dresses on, and get hair not looking like a rat's nest, and have your kids at least leave the house with matching shoes on their feet, or shoes at all. And you get in the car and inevitably you and your spouse get going and five minutes in end up on classic argument #5 that always seems to happen on the way to church. And you walk into church and all of it just feels like managed chaos. It doesn't feel like there's much reordering of loves going on.

And it's not just those of you with kids. Others of you I know what I'm talking about. You know you should go to church. That's just what Christians do right? And you don't want God to miss you on his heavenly attendance roll. But to be honest, when you think about it, the music is just average, the preaching isn't much better, you might be better off just staying home and listening to a John Piper sermon and your favorite worship album.

And yet, here's the claim that I am making. There is something going on in us here whether we "feel" it or not. God is doing something in us that isn't limited by our inability to focus or spiritual dullness to see and feel it happening.

Let's back up for a second, and see what the church is. You see, the church doesn't just exist because Christians felt like they wanted to be friends with other Christians so they created a space to hang out together. The church, brothers and sisters, is the absolute center of God's cosmic redemptive purposes. The entire Bible is about God's preparing for, and rescuing and purifying a beautiful bride for his beloved Son. And that bride is the church. This is the driving purpose of God's redemption - to set apart a people to worship him and bring him glory.

And so the telos, the end goal of the Christian life is more than just your own personal quiet time with Jesus. What does the end of God's story of redemption look like? What is it's climactic goal? Look in Revelation - it is the worship of Jesus, the Lamb of God, by a redeemed people from every tribe and tongue and nation. The goal of all of God's cosmic purposes is the church worshipping his name and dwelling with him forever in a New Creation.

Paul presses the cosmic significance of the Church on us in Ephesians 3. Listen to what he says: *read vv. 8-11*

So what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God? It is that through the church his wisdom might be put on display, his greatness, his glory might be magnified and proclaimed and lifted up - to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This is unbelievable! It means that in our existence as the church, and especially when we gather here on Sunday mornings, through us God is displaying His infinite wisdom to the angels and to the demons and to every being in the cosmos.

And yet it all feels ridiculously ordinary doesn't it? There is something revolutionary in the cosmos and in ourselves going on here, and yet you are going to feel the ordinariness of it. There will be Sundays that you show up and it feels like worlds are shifting in you and there will be Sundays you show up and you wonder why you came. There will be times you are absolutely sick of seeing the people in your community group.

Beyond even the mediocrity of the music and the preaching, you will feel the mediocrity of the people here. Within the church you will experience conflict, the closer you get to people you'll see their idiosyncrasies and feel their rough edges. But in the broken, messy, needy, weak, seemingly ordinary community of the church something beautiful and extraordinary is going on. Something supernatural is happening.

God loves to work through the unexpected. He delights to use ordinary means to accomplish his supernatural purposes. In the world's eyes what we're doing here is so foolish in a lot of ways. You do what? You get together and you sing really average songs and listen to really average speakers and then eat bread dipped in juice together? When someone believes in Jesus and is joined to the church, you do what? You dunk them under water? Hmmm... Looking through natural eyes, all of this is so insignificant, isn't it? But God doesn't see the way we do.

There's a scene in the Hobbit where Gandalf, the grey wizard who has rested his hope for the success of this dangerous expedition on the shoulders of a tiny, unimpressive Hobbit, Bilbo Baggins. Gandalf gets asked by an Elf princess this question: "Why the halfling?" Why the Bilbo? Why did you choose this very ordinary looking creature for this purpose?

Gandalf, in his wizardly way, responds this way: "I don't know," he says, "Saruman (another wizard in the story) believes that it is only great power that can hold evil in check. But that is not what I have found. I've found it is the small things, everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keeps the darkness at bay."

Brothers and sisters, don't look down the ordinariness of the church, don't despise how normal it feels, embrace it. Because - It is in these ordinary rhythms of Word and worship and Table and fellowship that God dispenses his extraordinary grace.

So, the church is this means God uses to reorient and reorder what we love. And he does it (secondly) in these seemingly ordinary ways, (thirdly) he does it through the church's people and its practices.

Let me give you a couple of categories for the rhythm of life in God's community. What we do here on Sunday mornings is gather together to have our hearts reordered by certain practices. When we leave this building we scatter into our neighborhoods and our workplaces and our families, but we don't stop being the church. We continue together as a *people* still being transformed and with a mission to bring that transformation wherever we go. So this rhythm of gathering and scattering, gathering and scattering, this is an essential rhythm of the life of the church. And God uses both of these, the people scattered and existing in organic relationship together, and the practices of the church as we gather, God uses both of these to do this work of reorienting and reordering our disordered hearts.

Turn with me to the book of Hebrews, Chapter 3. Hebrews has these twin passages in chapter 3 and chapter 10 that really stress the importance of both of these aspects - gathering and scattering, the people of the church and the practices of the church - in the means God uses to shape us. Heb. 3:12. Let's read together. *Read Heb. 3:12.* (In other words, take care that your loves don't get utterly out of order and you end up being misshapen and malformed away from God.) v. 13.

So do you see the prescription for reordering our disordered hearts? It is the daily encouragement and exhortation of the people of God together as they are scattered in the world. Church - look around you - the author of Hebrews is saying that your spiritual transformation, the reordering of your disordered loves, isn't an individual endeavor, it's a community project. We are in this together and we need each other. None of us are going to make it through on our own. Your endurance in the faith and the endurance of the person sitting beside you requires the other people in this church.

Among other things, here is one things this means. It means that our commitment to one another is this: You are not going to run headlong after sin and self without the rest of us

running after you. In fact, we will throw our bodies in front of you before you throw away your hope in Christ. Can we be a community that cares about each other in that way?

Real, authentic, deeply caring community does that. We care enough about each other to say hard things for each other's good.

In my Christian life there hasn't been any means of grace that has shaped me as a person more than the relationship of people in God's community. I can look back and list a long string of people with whom deeply Christ-centered relationship has been an integral part of my own spiritual transformation. You will not grow by yourself. There are times when you will struggle to believe the truth, when you are stuck in the fog of sin, and you need the firmness of truth in a brother or sister to cut through the clouds and bring light. God has given the people of the church to each other for our mutual good and growth.

If you are here and you're not experiencing that type of organic community as you scatter during the week, sometimes you need some systems in place to get you going. At Summit, our community groups are the place where we intentionally cultivate community as a means of grace in each other's lives. *Say something about how to get plugged in.*

So God uses the scattering of his people in intimate, organic, gospel-centered relationship to reorder our hearts, but he also uses our practices as we gather.

Turn over with me to Hebrews chapter 10 where we read already this morning. And let's read from v. 23: Read

So do you see that gathering together for corporate worship is a habit, it's a rhythm that you have to cultivate intentionally in your life. Some are in the habit of not showing up, of showing up when it's convenient, but it's crucial that you are a part of the church when it gathers because there is something going on here for your life and vitality and encouragement.

What happens when we gather together through singing and prayer and Scripture and preaching and the Table is meant to be a sensory, visceral, embodied reminder of the true story of the world. In song and word and action we are trying to point to what God has done, is doing and will do through the person and work of Jesus Christ. We're retelling the gospel story.

We aim for that in the way we structure the progression of our service. Whoever is leading worship doesn't just pick songs that sound good, they're looking for songs that progressively fit into the telling of the gospel. From the glory and bigness of God in Creation, to repentance for the garbage and mess we've made of our own lives since the Fall, to the great Redemption found through Jesus death and resurrection, to the Restoration of this world that is

yet to come. We want to remind each other of the gospel through everything we say and sing and do.

Because so much of our disorder comes from believing and living in the wrong story about God and ourselves, our practices are meant to turn us back, to reorient us, to the truest story of life. This is what that table is about. This tangible practice like the rest of what we do here, isn't meant *only* to aim at our heads and pour more knowledge into our brains, it's targeting our hearts. The tasting and touching and seeing and hearing, this tactile experience works under the hood on areas of our hearts in ways we often don't even notice are out of order, and sometimes don't even know we need.

And over time as we're saturated in these practices we change without even knowing it. Suddenly, when we sit down at the table and there's no knife, we know something is out of order. What I mean is that the practices and people of the community of the church, just like a family, start to shape and form us unconsciously but leave us indelibly changed.

The community of the church is God's pinnacle means of grace in your life ultimately because it's preparing you for eternity. Look at the end of Heb. 10:25 - "encourage one another daily," the author says, "and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

The day he's talking about is the day of Christ's return. It's the day when all our disordered loves will finally and fully be reordered, when all the dysfunction and brokenness and mess in ourselves and in this world will at last be made right, it's when God will come to dwell with his people forever. It's when you and I will experience in the full gathering of the people of God all that we experience here in part as members of God's redeemed community.

So our life together as the church, Summit, is ultimately preparing us for and pointing us towards that coming reality. All that we do is leaning into that. And so all that we do in our gathering and our scattering is a pre-enactment of life in a new creation. Our life together is a preview of coming attractions. In this community of the church, we hear and see and smell and touch and taste the delicious appetizers of Jesus' kingdom in expectation of the glorious banquet that is coming.