

**Uncommon Fellowship: 2. #Bless**  
**Luke 24:13-16**  
**August 27, 2017**  
**Pastor Steve Richards**

Last Monday at about noon, Amanda and I passed this pair of glasses back and forth as we looked up and attempted to see through the clouds some evidence of the solar eclipse. I had initially decided not to look. The moon would only cover about 80% of the sun from where we live, and it was cloudy. So, I began mowing the lawn, but then I noticed our neighbor across the street standing in his driveway looking through a cereal box. He walked over, interrupted my mowing and showed me the photos he had taken through the cereal box, following directions about how to safely view the eclipse. So I hurried inside to find Amanda already on our back deck – “here,” she said “You can see the eclipse.” And I could, as if someone had taken a bite out of the sun.

All over the country, people stopped what they were doing and looked up. Some traveled great distances to stand in awe of this two and half minute display of nature. Our youngest daughter joined 70,000 people in a field in Oregon. Did you see it? It was cloudy but if you were patient between the clouds – it was there. It’s as if God had found a way to unite us in spite of all the differences that seem to be pulling us apart. For a few minutes, we all gazed heavenward or maybe you turned to the Internet or television which had stopped broadcasting division and conflict and loud, angry voices. For a few minutes, a kind of hush traveled from coast to coast. I wonder if God wasn’t smiling. Maybe God was showing us something greater than an eclipse. Maybe God was showing it’s possible to get our attention and pull an entire nation together when we all look up.

And I wonder if that isn’t what God wants the church to be – a gathering of people so unusual that we get people’s attention – not by what we say, but who assembles here and what we are doing in the world. Do you know about a murmuration? It’s a phenomenon when hundreds and sometimes thousands of starlings fly in swooping, intricately coordinated patterns through the sky. Take a look. [video] It’s beautiful, but how do they do it? How do so many starlings manage to fly in such an amazingly coordinated way? Only a few years ago, a researcher named George Young discovered how they do it. Starlings pay attention to a fixed number of their neighbors in the flock – seven to be exact. It turns out that interacting with six or seven neighbors optimizes the balance between group cohesiveness and individual effort. Three things are happening: awareness of neighbors, a common purpose, and collective movement. The birds are part of a dynamic system in which the parts come together in uncommon fellowship – and a murmuration results.

Once upon a time, birds taught us to fly. What if they also taught us murmuration. There are more Christians in this world than any other time in history, but there’s also more homeless, more hungry, more pain, more violence and division. Have we unleashed our full potential – imagine if we were a murmuration, imagine if the world stopped to see how the Christians were interacting with each other and saw the impact on the world. Last Sunday, I suggested we were established by God to be an uncommon fellowship. Uncommon – that is, unusual, unconventional. Fellowship – that is, a gathering of people that outwardly do not seem to have anything in common but inwardly are connected by one common idea – the person of Jesus. John Wesley, the founder of this Methodist movement, said: “Though we cannot think alike, may we not all love alike?” There is so much that can pull us apart. We can find all kinds of reasons not to associate with others, include others – even other Christians – and consequently, much of

the world has decided there is nothing at all uncommon about us. We are just as divided as the rest of the world.

So, we come to this story from Luke 24. It is the day of resurrection. Two people, Cleopas and another, possibly his wife, are walking to Emmaus, a few miles from Jerusalem. They had become followers of Jesus, watching and listening they came to the conclusion that Jesus was a prophet and yet more than a prophet. God's power had been present with him in his miracles and his teaching, and they had no doubt this was the man of God's choosing. He was the one to redeem Israel – to set them free from Roman oppressors. They longed to be free. That's why the crucifixion was so devastating. It wasn't just that Jesus had been the bearer of their hopes and he was now dead and gone. But if this could happen to Jesus, was there any reason to hope, any reason to have a dream, and frankly, any purpose to life itself. And so, they are headed back to Emmaus. Heads down, shoulders bent, the weight of their lives bearing down on them and now no escape – no hope of being free. When seemingly from out of nowhere, a stranger comes alongside. Luke tells us this stranger is Jesus. This is a resurrection appearance but Cleopas and his companion don't recognize that it is Jesus. Even if he looked familiar, looked like Jesus – they knew dead people stay dead. Luke said: **Jesus himself came up and walked along with them.**

I think we are called to do the same – to be the stranger who comes alongside, who is seen for who we are not by our outward appearance, not because we wear a label that says "Christian", but we are seen by our readiness to listen and show compassion. The world doesn't need more labels, more words, more judgement, I think what's needed are more people who will come alongside. Jesus comes alongside and asks, "**What are you discussing together as you walk along?**" He already knew. He didn't tell them what he knew – not at first, but he listened to them.

There is something about walking alongside. Jesus and his disciples walked everywhere. There were no other way. It was while walking that Jesus noticed Zacchaeus in the tree. And he said, "Zacchaeus, come down. I'm going to your house today." Walking with him, Jesus saw what others did not see. Others saw a "small man" who collected taxes but in the process bullied and threatened and stole from them. And Jesus saw a man who was wounded and stuck in a place he didn't want to be – a man ready to change. But it takes time to see that. It takes a readiness to come alongside. It takes a willingness to see beyond outward appearances. It means getting close to the needs of the world. That's what Jesus did. He walked alongside. He didn't set up shop, put up a sign, establish office hours and say, "I'm open for business." He walked and listened and came alongside.

He walked to places and people that no good, righteous, religious person would go. No good, righteous, religious person would walk through Samaria. Everyone knew that having contact with Samaritans was wrong. "You don't even set foot in Samaria for fear you might see a Samaritan, you might be tainted by a Samaritan – just by associating with one. Guilt by association." But Jesus walked straight through the center of Samaria and then stopped at a well and waited to do what no Jewish man ever did. He spoke to a Samaritan woman. He came alongside. He listened to her story, recognized her need and offered living water. It got people's attention – there's something uncommon – it's not what religious people do. And sometimes, I wonder if that's not an indication that we have become an uncommon fellowship – challenging conventional notions of what the church is and is not. We are more like a murmuration than an organization.

When did the two people walking to Emmaus recognize that it was Jesus who came alongside? Not until evening when they invited this stranger into their home. Luke said: **When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him...** And they knew that God's love for them was greater than anything – even death. That they would never walk alone.

It was almost two years ago that we invited a team to make an assessment of this church's ministry and to help us look into the future to see the kind of church that God wants us to be. Will we have an inward focus or an outward focus? As part of the process, secret worshippers were enlisted to come, experience a Sunday morning, and provide a review. Some of these secret worshippers knew about churches and others did not. One thing they were asked to do was stop at area businesses and ask for directions to the church, and what they discovered was that even though the persons they asked could see this building from their business they didn't know we were here. That wasn't their fault. We'd been waiting for them when what we needed to be doing was coming alongside. That began a new effort to move beyond our walls and come alongside businesses and people in this community. How could we bless others? How could we become a blessing to others? Today there are two groups of people who are growing in number – growing in number at a time when the church is not – and the two groups are [slide] DONES and NONES. Nones are persons with no religious affiliation. When asked about their religious preference, they say "None." And Dones are persons who used to go to church, maybe even leaders in a church but now they have checked out and gone home. They are done. [camera]

We cannot set up shop and wait for people to find us – some will, but most are no longer interested. So, once a month we now come alongside an area restaurant. We show up to bless to be present, to show others who we are and how we want to affirm and love. We treat the employees well. We write notes of appreciation. We are willing to establish relationships which is something you can't make happen – it takes time, it takes walking alongside. We've also taken service opportunities into the community, inviting others to serve and coming alongside them as they do. We welcomed the people of the Northwest Islamic Center into our building and entered their building and got acquainted with real people. A year ago, we blessed the Plymouth Police Department at a time when police departments around the country were under stress. We've prayed through neighborhoods. We've reached out to the mayor of Plymouth. We've committed ourselves to sponsoring a refugee family through a program funded by the federal government. At a time when there is a growing suspicious of immigrants, we are saying that we are not afraid and we are ready to walk alongside. And this morning, we want to bless our schools. I want to invite you to bless the staff of Oakwood Elementary School. Let's hear from Sarabeth deNeui, principal of Oakwood. [video]

We chose Oakwood because we can see the building from here. I hope you received a card when you entered. Would you take a moment this week to pray for the staff person who is listed and then send a card of encouragement and gratitude for what he or she is doing. Then identify yourself as part of Messiah Church. And we are also inviting you to come alongside the students. There is a gap in this community between those who have and those who don't, between children who are achieving and those who are not. The school needs persons who would commit to a half hour a week to come into the school and listen to children read. If you could give a half hour a week to walk alongside a child – sign up and we will be in contact with you.

I was at a breakfast last week where Dr. Jill Johnson of the Wayzata School district told this story. A few children were playing when they fell into a deep hole and could not get out. They began shouting for help and persons would pass, hear their cries for help and then went in

search of someone to help. But then there was one person (maybe one of you) who heard their cries for help and jumped down in the hole with them. “Why did you do that?” one child asked. “Now you are stuck down here with us.” And you replied, “It’s because I’ve been here before, and I know the way out.”

When we all do this, we become a murmuration – an uncommon fellowship – coming alongside as Jesus would.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for Week of August 28, 2017**

**Weekly Prayer:** Holy God, we are people of hope and resurrection, but we are often unsure of how your power impacts the difficulties and suffering we face. Renew us again, O Christ. Come alongside us and speak words of grace and truth to us. Open our eyes to your constant presence and send us back into the world to come alongside others with hope and love through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

### **Monday, August 28**

#### **Scripture: Acts 2:41-43, 46-47 and Acts 5:12-14**

Those who accepted Peter's message were baptized. God brought about three thousand people into the community on that day. The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles.

Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.

The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. They would come together regularly at Solomon's Porch. No one from outside the church dared to join them, even though the people spoke highly of them. Indeed, more and more believers in the Lord, large numbers of both men and women, were added to the church.

**Observation:** In one day, the early Christian community in Jerusalem went from about 120 members (Acts 1:15) to 3,120 members! What made that first Christian church so appealing? They certainly had an awesome truth to proclaim (“the apostles’ teaching”), a strong connection with God (“prayer”), and caring hearts (“demonstrated God’s goodness”). But it’s easy to skip over one aspect of their spiritual life so meaningful Luke named it twice. They “shared meals” (verse 42) and “shared food with gladness and simplicity” (verse 46). They came alongside to bless one another.

**Application:** One commentary suggests, “Life together in the early church is described as breaking of bread and prayers. In order for people to be galvanized into oneness in Christ, it takes time to be together to listen to each other, care, and be for each other.” In what ways has relating to others more deeply than you can in a couple of minutes after worship helped you to grow spiritually?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I’m tempted to think, “It’s just a meal.” Remind me of all the times you reached people’s hearts as you ate with them, and help me to value that more highly. Amen.

## Tuesday, August 29

### **Scripture: Romans 12:9-18**

Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. Don't hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you're in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. Contribute to the needs of God's people, and welcome strangers into your home. Bless people who harass you—bless and don't curse them. Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying. Consider everyone as equal, and don't think that you're better than anyone else. Instead, associate with people who have no status. Don't think that you're so smart. Don't pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions, but show respect for what everyone else believes is good. If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people.

**Observation:** The apostle Paul provided a portrait of what a Christian life should look like in this passage. Paul had never been to Rome (Romans 15:22-24), but he was aware from friends who had been there that Jewish and Gentile Christians had tensions about parts of the faith, even as they faced Roman enemies all around them. Paul offered advice on how best to interact with each other, and with people hostile to Christian faith.

**Application:** How can we best live out the love of others that Paul described in this passage? How can we live at peace with all people today, at a time when many political and social voices try to polarize us, and set us against one another? How have you fallen short of Paul's counsel? How have you lived up to the wisdom he offered?

**Prayer:** God, open me to your Word. Bless my enemies. Humble me in all aspects of my life. Give me your wisdom and love, so that I may follow your commands to love others and live in peace with them. Amen.

## Wednesday, August 30

### **Scripture: Hebrews 10:22-25**

Therefore, let's draw near with a genuine heart with the certainty that our faith gives us, since our hearts are sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies are washed with pure water. Let's hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, because the one who made the promises is reliable. And let us consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds. Don't stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near.

**Observation:** As Acts 2 reported, the very first Christians in Jerusalem formed a congregation that met regularly, shared life, and supported one another. As the gospel spread, Christians in other places also formed congregations, often more than one in each city. They knew they were part of something bigger than just their local congregation. But they also knew that they belonged, grew and served together in those local churches.

**Application:** Think about the depth and quality of the connection you have with other people in your church. Is anyone on your "2 a.m. call list" if you faced a serious problem? Are you on anyone else's list? That kind of connection never happens overnight; building trust takes time and shared experiences. How can you let the Holy Spirit deepen your friendships now, so that you are there to uphold one another through any of life's storms?

**Prayer:** Lord God, thank you for connecting me to your family. Help me to “spark” love and good deeds in others, and to be receptive to your sparks as they arrive in my life. Amen.

### **Thursday, August 31**

**Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-18, 26-27 and Galatians 5:26-6:2**

Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many. We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink. Certainly the body isn't one part but many. If the foot says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not a hand," does that mean it's not part of the body? If the ear says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not an eye," does that mean it's not part of the body? If the whole body were an eye, what would happen to the hearing? And if the whole body were an ear, what would happen to the sense of smell? But as it is, God has placed each one of the parts in the body just like he wanted.

If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it. You are the body of Christ and parts of each other.

Let's not become arrogant, make each other angry, or be jealous of each other. Brothers and sisters, if a person is caught doing something wrong, you who are spiritual should restore someone like this with a spirit of gentleness. Watch out for yourselves so you won't be tempted too. Carry each other's burdens and so you will fulfill the law of Christ.

**Observation:** The apostle Paul reminded his readers in Corinth that their varied gifts were not tools to outdo others in a quest for power or glory. Connected in Christ, they needed to depend on and support one another. To the Galatian Christians, he wrote that part of their God-given mission was to “carry each other’s burdens.”

**Application:** John Wesley built the Methodist movement by inviting people into a kind of life he called “watching over one another in love.” Are there people in your life with whom you have the kind of trust, candor and mutual support Galatians 6:1-2 describe? What concrete choices can make this a reality in the relationships you value most?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, so often the world around me says, openly or subtly, “It’s every man (and woman) for him/herself.” You call me to a very different approach to life. Give me the heart to live out your calling. Amen.

### **Friday, September 1**

**Scripture: Romans 14:13-19**

So stop judging each other. Instead, this is what you should decide: never put a stumbling block or obstacle in the way of your brother or sister. I know and I'm convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is wrong to eat in itself. But if someone thinks something is wrong to eat, it becomes wrong for that person. If your brother or sister is upset by your food, you are no longer walking in love. Don't let your food destroy someone for whom Christ died. And don't let something you consider to be good be criticized as wrong. God's kingdom isn't about eating food and drinking but about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever serves Christ this way pleases God and gets human approval. So let's strive for the things that bring peace and the things that build each other up.

**Observation:** Paul wrote to Roman Christians about disputes over food choices, urging “the strong” to care about and encourage “the weak,” rather than mocking or discouraging them. They didn’t always agree on how best to live their faith. We can differ on the details, Paul said. The central command is to love. Life in God’s Kingdom is about “about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

**Application:** Paul wrote that as Christians focus their spiritual walk on “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit,” they are able to stop sniping at one another. How easy or hard do you find it to lay aside a value system built on “being right” to live a life that seeks to lift up others? What helps you see whatever good things you have as gifts meant to bless others, not just to cling to for your own sake?

**Prayer:** Lord God, only you are wise enough to judge the thoughts and intentions of each person’s heart. Help me release the urge to judge others, and instead to seek to live with all people in your peace and love. Amen.

## **Saturday, September 2**

### **Scripture: 1 John 4:7-12**

Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us.

**Observation:** As John wrote about how Christians treat one another, he likely thought about himself and Jesus’ other disciples. They jockeyed for position, and got angry with one another at times (Mark 10:35-45). Over time, Jesus re-shaped their thoughts and actions. John knew that loving others with Christ’s love doesn’t spring from a naturally warm human disposition. It goes much deeper than just being “nice.” This kind of active love comes from the heart of the God of the universe. God loves us—that is the reason that we love.

**Application:** Have you heard the expression: “To live above with saints we love—ah, that will be glory! To live below with saints we know—well, that’s another story.” But John said that, in Christ, we are able to grow beyond that. Which people, inside or beyond the church, do you find it hardest to love? Read and pray through this passage, plugging in their names and faces. Ask God to help you live out God’s love even toward them.

**Prayer:** Dear God, you ARE love—what an amazing, mind-stretching truth. You know that it’s not quite as natural for me to love. Please keep loving me as I stretch and grow in my ability to reflect your love to others. Amen.