

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Perth

Sunday, July 19th, 2026

Rev. Gerry Gallant

Fear and Favor: The Paradox of a Healthy Church

Proper 11

Acts 5:12-16

Welcome

Announcements

Call to Worship

Let all the earth keep silence before Him, for the Lord is in His holy dwelling place.

We come not because we are worthy, but because He is holy and has called us by grace.

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name; come before Him with reverence and joy.

We lift our hearts to the One who alone is worthy of all honor and praise.

He is enthroned in majesty; His greatness is beyond our searching out.

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised among His people.

Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.

For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, the sheep of His hand. Let us worship the Lord.

Prayer of Adoration and Invocation

Holy and eternal God, before the mountains were brought forth, and before You had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting You are God. We adore You, for there is none like You in heaven above or on the earth beneath. Your ways are higher than our ways, and Your thoughts than our thoughts. You alone are worthy of all praise, all honor, and all glory.

We confess that we cannot come into Your presence in our own strength or by our own merit. And so we ask You now, by Your Holy Spirit, to draw near to us as we draw near to You. Open our eyes to see Your beauty, open our ears to hear Your Word, and open our hearts to receive what You would give us this day.

Unite us as one body around the Lord Jesus Christ, our only foundation. Still every distracted thought, quiet every anxious heart, and fix our attention wholly on You, that this hour of worship might be pleasing in Your sight and fruitful for Your glory. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit we pray, **Amen.**

Call to Confession

The God we worship is a God of perfect holiness, and He does not deal lightly with sin among His own people. Yet this same God delights not in the death of the wicked, but that they would turn from their ways and live. He has not left us to face our sin alone; He has given us a Savior who bore it in our place. Trusting in His mercy and not in our own righteousness, let us come before Him now and confess our sin together.

Prayer of Confession

Merciful Father,
 we confess that we have often taken Your holiness for granted.
 We have desired the comforts of faith without the cost of obedience.
 We have allowed our hearts to be divided, entertaining pride, harboring grievances, and neglecting the profound unity You call us to share.
 We have been timid in our witness and slow in our compassion for the hurting.
 Forgive us, Lord.
 Cleanse us from our hidden faults and renew a right spirit within us,
 that we may walk in a manner worthy of the calling we have received.
 Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Hear the good news: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
 Thanks be to God.

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name
 Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven
 Give us this day our daily bread
 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors
 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one
 For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory,
 Forever and ever, Amen.**

Hymn #687: “Blessed Assurance Jesus is Mine”

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
 Oh what a foretaste of glory divine!
 Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
 born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.

Refrain:

This is my story; this is my song:
 praising my Saviour all the day long;
 this is my story; this is my song:
 praising my Saviour all the day long.

Perfect submission, perfect delight,
 visions of rapture now burst on my sight;
 angels descending bring from above
 echoes of mercy, whispers of love. (Refrain)

Perfect submission, all is at rest;
 I in my Saviour am happy and blest,
 watching and waiting, looking above,
 filled with his goodness, lost in his love. (Refrain)

Responsive Reading**Psalm 99:1-5**

99 The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble!
 He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!
²**The Lord is great in Zion;**
he is exalted over all the peoples.

³Let them praise your great and awesome name!
 Holy is he!

⁴**The King in his might loves justice.**
You have established equity;
you have executed justice
and righteousness in Jacob.
Exalt the Lord our God;
worship at his footstool!
Holy is he!

Anthem (Music Ministry)

Prayer for Illumination

Scripture

Acts 5:12-16

¹² Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. ¹³ None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴ And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, ¹⁵ so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. ¹⁶ The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

Sermon

Every church ends up being known for something.

Some are known for their building, some for their music and sadly some are known for scandal or infighting. But every so often you come across a church known for something else entirely, a church where it is simply obvious that God is at work. That is exactly the church Luke describes for us in today's passage.

To understand what is happening in the Scripture today, we need to remember what happened a few verses earlier. Ananias and Sapphira had sold a piece of property, kept back part of the proceeds, and lied about it, not merely to the apostles, but to the Holy Spirit himself. They wanted the appearance of sacrificial generosity without the reality of it. God struck them both dead on the spot, and Luke tells us that 'great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.'

You would expect a story like that to cause decline in a church's membership. After all, not many would think that the possibility of being struck dead would cause people to leave, and newcomers to stay far away from a church that is that unpredictable and that severe.

Instead, exactly the opposite happens.

To grasp what is happening here we need to go back to the parable of the vinedresser which is found in the Gospels.

Picture a master gardener working in a vineyard. To someone who knows nothing about pruning, the gardener looks almost cruel, cutting away branches, some of which looked perfectly healthy, until the vine stands bare and wounded.

But the gardener knows something that the onlooker does not: a vine that is never pruned will never bear a full harvest.

That is exactly what God, the Master Gardener, has just done. He has taken his shears to his young church, and what follows is not decline.

That is the paradox the Scripture set before us this morning: a church that is marked by holy fear, and in the same breath, a church that is overflowing with grace, growth, and healing.

Immediately after we are told of the great fear that fell across the church we read,

Acts 5:12

¹² Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico

Notice the phrase 'by the hands of the apostles.' That is a deliberate choice of words. A hand does not take credit for what it does. A hand is simply an instrument, nothing more.

Peter understood this perfectly. Two chapters earlier, after healing the lame beggar at the beautiful gate, he turned to the astonished crowd and asked, 'Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk?' (Acts 3:12)

Paul says something similar about all Gospel ministry in his letter to the Corinthians: 'We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us' (2 Corinthians 4:7)

The apostles were fishermen and a former tax collector, they were ordinary men with real weaknesses and real failures. Christ filled them with his Spirit and used them anyway. God has never needed extraordinary people. He delights in using His people, those who humble themselves place their trust in him.

It is also worth pausing once again on that phrase 'signs and wonders.'

In the Greek, 'sign' is *sēmeion*, a word that points to something beyond itself, like a road sign. If you are driving down the highway and you see a sign that reads 'Perth,' you do not pull over immediately and think that you have arrived. You know that the sign points towards the destination; it is not the destination.

In the same way, Biblical miracles were never meant to be the point. They always pointed to someone greater: Jesus.

That word 'Wonder' is *teras*, a word describing the sense of awe these acts produced in onlookers.

Together, these two words tell us that the miracles in Acts were never spiritual entertainment. They authenticated the apostles' message and turned people's attention toward the risen Lord.

Miracles were not meant to impress people, they were to confirm the truth of the Gospel that was being preached.

The miracle serves the message; it was never meant to replace it, and that distinction is just as important today.

It is easy to become fascinated with the miracle and lose sight of the message it was meant to confirm. Throughout the entire book of Acts, we will see that the miracle always serves the Word of God, never the other way around.

You might be wondering why God concentrated these miracles so heavily around the apostles specifically.

The answer lies in their calling. Paul tells the Ephesians that the church is 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,' (Ephesians 2:20).

A foundation is only built once. You do not re-pour the foundation of a house every generation; you build on top of what is already there.

Some things we read about in the Bible are descriptive, they tell us what happened at a unique moment in redemptive history, and some are prescriptive, patterns meant for every generation.

The miracles clustered around the apostles belong to that first category, they are descriptive, in the same way miracles once clustered around Moses and Joshua, and then again around Elijah and Elisha, and finally around Jesus's earthly ministry.

Hebrews tells us that God bore witness to the apostolic message 'by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will' (Hebrews 2:4).

So, once that foundation of the church was laid and preserved for us in Scripture, the church continues to build on it through the ordinary, faithful preaching of the Word.

That does not mean God has stopped healing, what it means is that we should not expect God to repeat the unrepeatable, foundation-laying ministry of the apostles.

The greatest miracle God performs today is not physical healing; it is bringing spiritually dead sinners to life through the Gospel. There is no greater miracle than that.

Now look at where all of this takes place: Solomon's Portico. This small detail is rich with meaning. As we learned a few weeks ago Solomon's Portico was a massive, covered colonnade running along the eastern edge of the temple complex, rows of towering stone columns supporting a roofline that offered shade from the Judean sun.

The Jewish historian Josephus describes it as one of the grandest structures in the entire temple courts, a place where thousands passed through daily and crowds gathered to debate Scripture.

And now, only a few weeks after the apostles had been hiding behind locked doors in fear, we find them standing boldly in the busiest public square in Jerusalem, proclaiming that Jesus, the one who had been crucified was alive.

What changed to make this happen?

The risen Christ had poured out his Holy Spirit upon them, and the Spirit does not just make timid men brave, he magnifies Christ through them.

Luke adds one more interesting detail: 'they were all together.'

The Greek word behind that phrase is *homothymadon*, and it is one of Luke's favorite words throughout the book of Acts.

It means far more than occupying the same physical space.

It describes people who share one heart, one mind, one purpose; a type of unity that can only be produced by the Holy Spirit himself.

Remember who made up this early church: fishermen and tax collectors; wealthy landowners, day laborers and slaves; devout Pharisees right alongside people who had lived openly sinful lives up until the day that they had been saved by Christ.

They are not divided because of their differences, instead they are bound together by nothing except for the desire to trust and obey Jesus Christ their savior.

They are like an orchestra. A single instrument playing out of tune can ruin an entire symphony, no matter how skilled the other musicians are. But when every instrument plays together under the conductor's direction, the music moves an audience in a way no solo performance ever could. That is what is happening here, a freshly humbled church, is playing in harmony with one another under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Too often in this world we assume that impressive ministry requires impressive programs.

Acts 5 quietly corrects us.

Holiness, unity, faithful preaching, and a love for Christ first and then for one another are the ordinary marks of Christ's church, and in the hands of the Holy Spirit, ordinary marks become extraordinary displays of grace, which is what we see happen.

Acts 5:13-14

¹³ **None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem.**

¹⁴ **And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women**

These two verses appear to contradict one another at first glance.

They say that no one dared to join them, yet more believers than ever were being added.

So, which is it? Did no one join or did they grow?

The answer becomes easier to understand when we remember what had just happened, the story of Ananias and Sapphira's deaths had just spread through the whole city, and everyone now understood that this was not a religious club that you joined casually.

In this group of believers God himself was present, and he does not tolerate hypocrisy in his house.

The Greek word behind 'join' in verse 13 is *kollasthai*, meaning to attach oneself closely too, almost like gluing yourself to something.

What Luke is doing is describing two different groups: those who admired the church from a respectful distance but were unwilling to join because of the cost of discipleship, and those who the Holy Spirit was genuinely converting, those who believed in Christ and gladly gave of themselves to his people.

The fear of God kept the hypocrites at arm's length; and at the same time the grace of God drew true believers in. Both were happening at the same time, and both were healthy.

And once again that word we read as 'fear' deserves our attention, because our culture tends to treat fear as the opposite of love.

The Bible never does. Biblical fear is reverence, a clear-eyed awareness of just how holy God is, and how small we are by comparison.

Fear of God is the foundation of true faith: a heart that truly understands God's holiness will never learn to treat sin lightly.

A fear of God reminds us that we follow the same God before whom Isaiah cried out,

Isaiah 6:5

Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!

And yet this is the grace of the Gospel: this same holy God has thrown open the door to his kingdom for sinners to draw near to him through the blood of his Son.

Love and righteousness, holiness and mercy, they are not opposed to one another in Scripture like they are in our modern world. The Scripture instead teaches us that they belong together, and today's Scripture will not let us separate them.

Verse 14 tells us that 'more than ever believers were added to the Lord'

Notice what the Scripture does not say. It does not say they were added to a congregation or that they signed a membership roll.

It says they were added to the Lord himself.

Church membership matters, and Christian fellowship matters, but neither of those things saves anyone. Salvation is union with Christ, which is why Paul so often reaches for that small but massive phrase 'in Christ.'

The truth is that true believers are first united to Christ, and because they are united to Christ, they are then united to one another in the body of His church.

There is no denomination, or church that can manufacture salvation; Christ alone does. The church is simply the family into which everyone who belongs to Christ is gathered.

And this is the most surprising truth in this section: the church grew immediately after a season of painful discipline, not in spite of it. Luke tells us the opposite happened

Many in the world today; denominations, churches, pastors and believers all assume holiness will drive people away. They keep looking for ways to make the Scripture less offensive to people, and in doing so remove Christ from the church.

Remember the vinedresser, when diseased branches are cut away from a healthy vine, the vine does not wither, it flourishes even more, exactly as Jesus says in John 15: 'Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit' (John 15:2).

Sometimes the Lord disciplines his church precisely because he loves it, not to destroy it, but to strengthen it.

Picture two different hospitals.

The first is spotless: the staff works well together, the doctors are honest, and every piece of equipment is carefully maintained.

The second is a mess: corners are cut, records are inaccurate, infections go unaddressed.

Which hospital would you trust with someone you love?

The same principle applies to a church. No congregation on earth is perfect; every church is made up of sinners saved by grace who are still being sanctified. But when people see honest repentance, real love, and lives genuinely being shaped by Christ, they recognize that something different is happening in that church, not because Christians are better people by nature, but because Christ is changing his people.

That was the real advertisement for the Jerusalem church. It was not p the miracles. It was transformed lives lived out in the open.

Those who followed Christ stood out because they were not like everyone else, they obeyed the Word of God even in the places that society allowed them not to, and it was this faithful obedience because of their love of God first and their love of one another as a result of their first love that was the real miracle.

And that was the miracle that people witnessed in the faithful, and it was the miracle that made even unbelievers believe that something was special about them,

Acts 5:15-16

¹⁵ so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. ¹⁶ The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

Picture the scene. The streets of Jerusalem are lined with cots and mats, sons carrying elderly fathers, parents carrying their sick children, friends carrying friends who could never have made it there on their own, all hoping simply to be in the path of a man's passing shadow.

To be honest this sounds superstitious, and it deserves our attention because it is recorded in the Scriptures.

Take note of what it does not say. It never says Peter's shadow contained any healing power, and it never says Peter instructed anyone to seek him out.

The Scripture simply reports what the desperate crowds were doing. In the ancient world, among both Jews and Gentiles, many people believed a person's shadow carried something of their essence or power, for good or bad.

The Scripture records this cultural detail without endorsing the superstition behind it. The reality though is hidden in this little detail.

The Greek verb connected with 'overshadow' here is *episkiazō*, which is the very same word Luke uses in his Gospel to describe the Holy Spirit 'overshadowing' the Virgin Mary when the Angel Gabriel visits her, the same word used to describe the cloud that overshadowed the disciples on the mountain at the transfiguration.

God's Word is quietly telling us: whatever the crowd believed about shadows, what was happening was the overshadowing presence of God himself doing the work.

God was there and he was using His powers through His people to confirm his servant and his Word.

The power to heal was no more in Peter's shadow than it did in Peter himself.

God simply chose that occasion to demonstrate, publicly and unmistakably, that the apostles' authority came from Christ alone.

This matters, because throughout church history people have twisted passages like this one to justify superstition, relics, charms, and a wide variety of 'miracle' objects which are then sold to desperate people.

The Scripture tells us not to fall for those lies, the Scripture says over and over, again and again, look to Jesus Christ alone.

It is worth noticing how closely this scene echoes the ministry of Jesus himself.

In the Gospels, crowds pressed in around Jesus hoping simply to touch the edge of his robe, 'for power came out from him and healed them all' (Luke 6:19).

And Later in the book of Acts, God will do His work through handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched the apostle Paul.

In every case, whether it was a robe, shadow, or handkerchief, the object itself was never the source of power. It was simply the point where genuine faith reached out toward Christ.

Peter is not competing with Jesus for glory here; he is reflecting him. That was Peter's own conviction two chapters earlier when he said plainly, 'The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob... has glorified his servant Jesus' (Acts 3:13).

Whenever attention turned toward him, Peter redirected it toward Christ, and that remains the calling of every faithful denomination, church, pastor, and believer.

People need to witness the miracle and then see the Savior, even more so in the world today.

This passage also calls for a moment of clarity.

The scripture tells us, 'They were all healed', no exceptions.

That statement highlights just how unique the apostolic season was in redemptive history.

This passage was never meant to be understood that true believers are always healed.

Many believers today have prayed earnestly for healing and have not received it in this life. It was never meant to be used as a weapon against them, as though their suffering proves some lack of faith on their part. The apostolic signs we are reading about here served a specific, unrepeatable purpose: they authenticated the once-for-all foundation of the church.

We should still pray for healing and know that God is fully able to heal today, because he is.

But our confidence should also rest on something deeper. Every physical miracle in the New Testament was ultimately temporary, Lazarus was raised, and years later he died again; the lame man of Acts 3 eventually grew old and passed away like everyone else.

Every physical healing in Scripture is a preview of something still to come. They all point toward the day described in the book of Revelation, the day when Christ

Revelation 21:4

⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

The greatest healing is never just a restored body. It is a soul reconciled to God through the blood of Christ, with the certain hope of a resurrected body still to come. If Christ heals us now, we bless his name. If he carries us through suffering instead, we should bless his name just the same.

None of us can heal the way Peter did. We are not apostles, but we can still carry the wounded to Jesus in every ordinary way available to us, in prayer, acts of compassion, by opening the Scriptures with someone who is hurting, by sitting with someone in grief, by refusing to let a brother or sister carry their burdens alone.

Some Christians act as though gospel proclamation and practical compassion compete with one another, as if a church must choose between preaching truth and caring for hurting people. The early church never made that choice. They proclaimed Christ

crucified and risen, and they also carried cots into the street. Both overflow from the same gospel.

So, what does all this mean for us in our lives?

First, that Christ blesses a church that takes holiness seriously.

Notice the order of events: discipline came first, then the powerful witness, then the growth. The church's holiness was never an obstacle to its evangelism, it was part of its evangelism.

There will always be pressure on a church to soften its standards for fear of driving people away, but Acts 5 shows us the opposite happened in Jerusalem. A holy church is not a harsh, self-righteous church. It is a genuinely humble one, because every person in it knows they stand there only by grace.

We are able to call one another to repentance because we ourselves have repented.

A mark of a healthy congregation, is not sinless perfection, but honest, ongoing repentance.

Second, that Christ blesses a united church.

The unity described here was never built on shared personalities, politics, or preferences. It is built entirely on Christ, the only foundation strong enough to last.

Paul urges believers in Ephesians to be 'eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'

He does not tell us to manufacture a false sense of unity; instead we are to embrace what the Spirit has already created. We are to stay true to God's word and through love, patience, and forgiveness, refuse to let false teachings, gossip or pride divide what Christ has joined together.

Third, that everything about a faithful church points to Christ, never to itself.

It is easy for a church to slowly become known for many things, a personality, a style of music, an impressive program. None of those are wrong, but none of them are the real treasure.

Paul's ambition for the Corinthians is a good ambition for us too: 'I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Corinthians 2:2).

This means that Christ blesses a compassionate church, one where truth and mercy are never pulled apart, where broken people are met with the same grace that met every one of us at the foot of the cross.

Like that lighthouse standing on a rocky shoreline. It does not chase ships out across the water trying to save them. It simply stands where it has been placed, and night after night, through every storm, its light keeps shining. Sailors are not saved because the lighthouse becomes more like the sea around it. They are saved because it remains different from the sea.

That is our calling as a church, not to become like the world in order to reach it, but to shine steadily, faithfully, whatever the weather, until Christ returns.

The church gathered under the columns of Solomon's Portico, holding their sick friends on stretchers, hoping for nothing more than a passing shadow, that same church is one small chapter in a much bigger story.

One day it will become the vast multitude the apostle John was shown in Revelation, crying out together, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'

That is where history is heading. Until that day comes, may it be said of our church not that we were known for our size or our programs, but that we were known for our love for Christ, our pursuit of holiness, our compassion toward the hurting, and our unwavering proclamation of the gospel.

May Christ be honored in each of our lives, his Word faithfully shared, sinners welcomed to the Savior, and God alone receiving all the honor and glory as we walk as the Salt and Light of His word in this dark and broken world.

Let us pray,

O Lord our God,
You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.

We thank You for Your holy Word and for the grace You show us day by day. Grant that what we have heard would not quickly fade from our minds, but would take root in our hearts and bear fruit in our lives. Where we need conviction, convict us. Where we need comfort, comfort us. Where we need wisdom, guide us by Your Spirit.

Teach us to love what is good, to hate what is evil, and to delight in Your will. Strengthen our faith when it is weak, deepen our hope when we are weary, and enlarge our love for You and for one another. Keep us from trusting in ourselves and help us to rest in Your mercy and grace.

As we leave this place, enable us to walk in humility, obedience, and joy, serving You faithfully in the callings You have given us. May our lives bear witness to Your goodness, and may all that we do bring honor to Your name.

Keep us steadfast until that day when our faith becomes sight and we dwell forever in Your presence, where all our longing will be satisfied in the glory of Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Adapted from Augustine of Hippo

Invitation to Offering

Offering Prayer

Closing Hymn #685: "How Firm a Foundation" (V 1,2,5)

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
is laid for your faith in God's excellent word!
What more can God say than to you hath been said,
to you that for refuge to Jesus have fled?

'Fear not, I am with thee; oh be not dismayed!
For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee and cause thee to stand
upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.

'The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose
I will not, I will not, desert to his foes;
that soul, though all hell should endeavour to shake,
I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake!'

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious Father,
we thank You for gathering us again under the sound of Your Word.
Thank You for Your patience with us, for Your discipline when we wander, and for Your grace that never grows weary of calling us home.

Loving Father,
make us a holy people, not proud, but humbled by grace;
make us a united people, bound together not by our preferences but by our shared love for Christ;
make us a compassionate people, quick to carry the burdens of the hurting and slow to turn away from the broken.

We remember before You those among us who are sick, who grieve, who are weary, who are uncertain, or who feel far from You this day.
Draw near to them.
Be their strength when they have none of their own, their comfort when words fail, and their hope when circumstances offer none.

And now, Lord, as we move from this place of worship into a time of fellowship together, we ask Your blessing over it.
Bless our conversations, that they would be marked by kindness and genuine interest in one another.
Bless our tables and the food we share.
Bless the friendships being formed and deepened, and the newcomers among us who may not yet feel they belong.
Let this time strengthen the bonds You have already knit between us, so that our fellowship in this room becomes one more reflection of the unity You have given Your church.
We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, **Amen.**

Benediction

Walk in humility, love one another earnestly, and let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. And may the Lord bless you and keep you; may He make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; may He lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace, now and always. **Amen.**