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11 o'clock am

Community Church of Issaquah  
Issaquah, WA

## ***“CHURCH: Unincorporated Area”***

John 10:1-18

*Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.*

*Whoever enters by me will come in and go out and find safe pasture.*

I have to confess, everybody. I've been living a lie. I have told you all that I am from Lake Oswego, Oregon. But the truth is: I actually grew up not in Lake Oswego, but in unincorporated Clackamas County.

Now my mailing address was Lake Oswego. And I went to Lake Oswego public schools. And if you look at a map, my house was surrounded by Lake Oswego on all four sides.

To an outsider who didn't look closely, we lived in Lake Oswego. But those who lived on Tanager Drive knew: we were an unincorporated area.

Living in an unincorporated area meant that we got to bend the rules a little bit. Were you allowed to have chickens in “high-class” Lake Oswego? Nooo way. But in unincorporated Clackamas Co.,

nobody cared! Was any town ordinance going to stop you from painting your house neon pink? Not in unincorporated Clackamas County! I mean, there was the fact that your neighbors might stop speaking to you, but you could do it if you wanted to.

In an unincorporated area you don't live by the same rules. You have a higher authority—in this case the county—that has different standards for community life.

These past two weeks, we've been looking at what the church is. The church is the companions of God—the people who share intimacy with God. And the church is a hospital for sinners, a place of forgiveness and mercy. But the church also has a bit of a maverick streak in it. The church exists in a space that does quite adhere to the rules of the world. The church is an unincorporated area.

A few months ago I got to ride down to Rainbow Lodge with Dick Birdsall. As we were driving he mentioned to me that he was friends

with the famous Baptist preacher Will Campbell. *Of course* Dick is friends with Will Campbell—why should I be surprised that Dick Birdsall just happens to be friends with one of the most famous Baptist preachers ever 😊. I say all that to say, you may all have heard the story I’m about to tell because Dick said Will came out and visited us a few times back in the day—which is amazing. But I need to tell this story today even if you’ve heard it because this is exactly the kind of unincorporated, free, kingdom of God area that the church is called to be.

In November of 1942, two couples got to reading the book of Acts and decided to move to Sumter County, Georgia. They wanted to live like the early church they were reading about.

Now if I were inspired by Acts, I’m not sure I’d have chosen Sumter County, Georgia in the 1940s as the place to start. See in the book of Acts, all sorts of people from all different countries and backgrounds are getting together to worship the Lord. And they don’t just worship God, they also *eat together*. And live *life together*. And share their *possessions* with one another.

Now imagine: trying to do that in the segregated South. That’s a bold move. To dare to have black people and white people eat at the same table? To dare to invite black people and white people to study the Bible together? To recognized that the lives and thoughts and bodies of black people matter in Jim Crow Georgia? **Bold.**

The Holy Spirit *had* to have been at work for those two couples to try something so stupid.

Even the name they chose for this place was gutsy: “Koinonia Farm.” *Koinonia* is the Greek word used in the Bible that means fellowship, the communion and intimacy we are called to have in Christ. It’s the fellowship that declares there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, but all are one in Christ Jesus.

*Koinonia* is what the church is. *Koinonia*, fellowship, participation in a common life, mutual sharing *is the church*.

The church isn’t a corporation. The church isn’t pointing to a group of office buildings that houses the denominational headquarters or pulling out of sheaf of papers that declares we’re a 501(c)(3). The

church is relationship. Better said, it's the web of relationships connected through Jesus Christ in whom there is no hate only love.

It's the web of relationships that doesn't always fit the world's framework. See, the world says either you're this or you're that. Either you're a Democrat. Or you're a Republican. Either you're a boy. Or you're a girl. Either you're legal. Or you're illegal. And whatever you are, if you're this or if you're that, you can't trust the side you don't belong to.

But the church is slippery. The church isn't under the jurisdiction of the world. The church is the people who declare, "We are under new management. We are not going to be incorporated into whatever you want us to be. Because we declare that **Jesus** is Lord. **Jesus** sets the rules. **Jesus** is the only one who can tell us who we are."

When the church abides in Jesus, when Jesus is our shepherd, we go in and we go out of what the world expects from us. We aren't constrained by the definitions that the world puts on us.

Just think of Koinonia Farm down there in Sumter County. The world

had said, "You are white, and you are black. And you can't be friends." Yet the Holy Spirit of Jesus had said differently. Instead of being conformed to the pattern of this world, this little group of people chose to be transformed by the renewing of their minds in Christ Jesus. They choose life dancing at the edges of society's boundaries, instead of the deadly safety of a life lived inside the world's walls. They chose to go in and go out of the constraints that the world placed on them.

Out they would go to town to their different churches—all still segregated by skin color. And then in to Koinonia to harvest the season's crop side by side. Out they would go to sponsor black students into white schools. And then in to the farm to offer shelter to those needing a place to stay.

This is what the Bible calls the mustard seed which when it is planted, grows into the largest tree and the birds nest in its branches. This is what the Bible calls the pearl hidden in a field, worth giving up everything else for. This is what is called *the kingdom of heaven*.

Now the thing about the mustard seed and the thing about the pearl of great price and the thing about the kingdom of heaven is that they're small. They could get lost easily in the all of that going in and going out.

In the late 1960s, just that started to happen at Koinonia Farm. Never that big in the first place, the farm began to dwindle. The stress of living the Gospel in Ku Klux Klan territory had led many people to leave, and there were talks of the farm closing down.

Just two families were left when that little mustard seed once again sprouted and grew. See, without so many people to farm anymore, there was all this land lying about. So the remaining two families looked around at their community and saw that there were people nearby who didn't have enough money to have a decent place to live. And so on Koinonia Farm they started building decent, affordable houses. And then building more decent, affordable houses. And more houses and more houses and more houses to the point that they gave their housing project a new name—a name that we all know: Habitat for Humanity.

Koinonia Farm exists to this day, still trying to be faithful to that common, shared life that those two couples way back in 1940 read back in the book of Acts. But now Habitat exists too. The kingdom of God divides only to multiply again.

It's the mystery and the promise of living life in Christ. Even if we die we will live again. Even if all our dreams fall apart. Even if we end one stage. Or even if we start a new one. If Jesus is our shepherd, we will go in and out and find safe pasture.

Safe pasture. The kind of lush, green pasture you can't find when you're stuck within the world's way of living. The kind of pasture grows out in unincorporated areas. The kind of pasture that makes you want to lie down and roll in it for the pure joy of being alive and God being good.

This is heaven on earth. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, Lord, on earth as it is in heaven. Divine shepherd lead us sheep.

I don't know about you, but when I hear the story of Koinonia Farm, I think, "Wow. God can do amazing things." But I also feel a little intimidated. Like gosh, look at my life I'm not doing anything that big.

But you know, even that word “big.” Was the mustard seed big? Was the pearl big? Is the kingdom of God something that at first glance looks big?

It’s the little things of the earth that can slip around the borders of the world. It’s a mustard seed that can escape the world’s attempts to control, to lock down, and to conform.

You all are my friends now. We have that *koinonia* that existed down in Sumter County, Georgia. I mean, the world isn’t set up so that 29 year-olds and 85-year-olds become friends. That might be a little thing. But in Christ it is the strength of the Gospel—the strength of a bond strong enough to overcome the world.

You know, there was also a little thing we did a few years ago that actually isn’t quite so little. We hosted the tent encampment. We ate with people who the world doesn’t want us to eat with. We shared life with those the world doesn’t necessarily want us to share life with. That is what it looking like to live in the wilds of God’s unincorporated area. It means fellowship. Communion. Koinonia.

The itty bitty seeds that sprouts up to life eternal.

This is what it is to be the church. To be the ekklesia, the *called out* of the world—to be called out of the city limits to do something that you couldn’t do bound by society’s constraints.

In and out of the world we go. In and out of the world’s expectations on us. In and out of the rules that aren’t God’s rules. In and out, led by the Shepherd. And wherever we go we find safe pasture.

We cannot ignore so great a salvation. So let us live as we are. Sheep of a shepherd not of this world. A people willing to dance on the edges so that all may live. The church. Unincorporated and free.