

I LOVE MY CHURCH COMMUNITY

[Slide 1]

I'm sure you're wondering why there is a fence on the stage today. We'll get to that in just a minute. I want to start with a story. Some of you know that Chris and I spent a few years living in Mississippi. Our girls were both born as southern belles. But, as they reached their toddler years, we decided to move back home to be closer to family. Of course, we didn't make it back to this area on the first try. We had to move a few times – 3 to be exact.

During those 3 moves, we looked at a lot of houses! In combination, I'm sure there were 100 or more. I remember one in particular. We pulled up in front of this gorgeous house. The lawn was well manicured, the flowers were beautiful, and the façade of the house was eye-catching. We walked in the front door, to see a clean, uncluttered, spotless entryway and living area. I was in awe over the flooring, furniture, and beautiful windows found in the front of the house. It looked like a picture out of Country Living Magazine. This house was a dream.

The atmosphere suddenly changed as we exited the backdoor and saw the backyard. It was fenced in with a tall privacy fence. It didn't take long to figure out that a daycare was operated in the backyard and basement of this house. All signs of the daycare were hidden behind the fence and couldn't be seen from the street, or even the front door. The backyard was a playground filled with sand boxes, slides, ride-on toys, squirt guns, and hid a shed full of garden equipment. The fence was the separation between the two spaces. It was the barrier between what the owner wanted people to see and what they didn't want people to see.

[Slide 2]

This Week, we are continuing our series *I Love My Church* and this concept is going to play a big part in what we'll see today as one of God's plans for the church: He wants us to live **connected** lives. He wants us to live our lives **connected** with Him and **connected** with one another. God wants us to know true community. What do fences have to do with that? That's what we're going to talk about.

Let's look at Hebrews 10:19-25. Today I've chosen to read from the Message Bible. I love the boldness and realism of this version.

[Slide 3]

¹⁹⁻²¹ So, friends, we can now—without hesitation—walk right up to God, into “the Holy Place.” Jesus has cleared the way by the blood of

his sacrifice, acting as our priest before God. The “curtain” into God’s presence is his body.

[Slide 4]

22-25 So let’s do it—full of belief, confident that we’re presentable inside and out. Let’s keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going. He always keeps his word.

[Slide 5]

Let’s see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshipping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big Day approaching.

Before we examine this scripture, [Slide 6] let’s picture our lives as a yard. If a lot of us were honest, we’d admit that we like a good fence. Our front yard consists of the things we want people to see – the pretty flowers, a welcome mat at the front door, nicely mowed grass, and cleanly cut shrubs. It’s our outward appearance.

But the backyard... that’s different. That’s the real us, and we tend to keep the “real” part of our lives secret. In fact, we build fences because we’re not sure we want others to know what’s really going on. We don’t want others to see the parts of our lives that aren’t so perfect. We hide the beaten path where the dogs run every day. And we certainly don’t want you to step in the dog bombs hidden in the weeds and uncut grass. Our backyards are private.

As we discuss our major points today, you may want to open your bulletin to the notes section and write a few things down. If we intend to love our church the way God wants us to, then we have to listen to the first part of today’s scripture. [Slide 7] If we intend to love our church the way God wants us to, then we have to understand that: **Jesus crashed the fence.**

The first part of our Hebrews passage tells us:

19-21 ... we can now... walk right up to God, into “the Holy Place.” Jesus has cleared the way by the blood of his sacrifice... The “curtain” into God’s presence is his body. (Verses 19-21, msg)

Friends, the good news in this scripture is simple and bold. *Jesus Christ destroyed the fence that separates us from God.* Before we even talk about the fence that we put between us and people, we have to realize the barrier that exists between God and us.

[Slide 8]

The imagery of this fence or "curtain" is found in the sacred Tabernacle of Israel. Within the Holy Place of the tabernacle, there was an inner room called the *Holy of Holies*. Judging from its name, we can see that it was a sacred room, a place no ordinary person could enter. It was God's dwelling place. A thick curtain separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the tabernacle. This curtain, known as the "veil," was made of fine linen woven with royal colors. Figures of cherubim (angels) were embroidered on the fabric and found around the room. These Cherubim were in the presence of God to demonstrate His almighty power and majesty. They also guarded the throne of God.

The word "veil" in Hebrew means a screen, divider or separator that hides. What was this curtain hiding? Essentially, it was shielding a holy God from sinful man. Whoever entered into the Holy of Holies was entering the very presence of God. Even the high priest, God's chosen mediator with His people, could only pass through the veil and enter this sacred dwelling once a year, on a specific day called the Day of Atonement.

[Slide 9]

Here is where the Good News comes in: When Jesus died the curtain in the Jerusalem temple was torn in half. *The fence crashed!* The Holy of Holies, or Heaven, was exposed. *God's presence became accessible to ALL – Including YOU and ME!* Only God could have carried out such an amazing task. This curtain was about 60 ft. high, 30 ft. wide and 4 in. thick. The veil was too high and too thick to have been torn by man. The fact that the veil tore from the top down shows that it was done at the hand of God, not man. We now know that Jesus' death brought atonement for our sins and made us right before God.

Hebrews 6:19-20 tells us that, "We can now boldly enter into God's presence, the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf."

Knowing that we are born building fences – the first fence being the one that hides our sin – This news is amazing! We must admit our wrongs and ask for forgiveness, then have faith that Jesus died for us – for you – and for me. With this understanding, we can now stand in the presence of God. *Jesus crashed that fence!*

[Slide 10]

The second idea this scripture teaches is that **we have to allow others into our yard.** How often do we come to this building on Sunday morning, sing songs, smile, and say good morning without really getting to know each other? We eat together, play with the children, and serve others, but leave

knowing nothing about what makes another person tick. We come to be blessed, but we often forget to bless those sitting beside us.

God doesn't want any fences in his community. Just as Jesus crashed the fence between us and God, we must crash the fence between us and others – *between YOU and ME!*

Remember what Gary said last week: If we are going to truly experience loving our church, then that means *intentionally* loving our church. This is more than loving our building – OR – loving our programs. If we *intentionally* love our *church*, we must love each other.

So how do we get rid of our fences? It's hard to truly know *how* to love each other. Thank goodness Paul gives us the answer! *He says, "Do not forsake assembling together."* Paul was talking about something bigger than coming to church every Sunday. He's talking about an every-day-assembling. He's talking about life together. He's talking about living in community.

Community means authenticity—the sharing of ourselves with others. Community means standing in someone's yard and allowing them to stand in yours. We need to stand in each other's dirty, stinky, unkempt yards with all the toys strewn everywhere... the weeds not pulled... and the shed that desperately needs repainting.

[Slide 11]

Do you remember Wilson from the television show *Home Improvement* with Tim Allen? Wilson lived next door to Tim's family. During the entire run of the show, Wilson's face was hidden behind a fence... or a column in his dining room... or a leaf blower at the hardware store. (You get the picture...) The Taylors lived next door to Wilson for years, yet they never saw his face.

Sometimes it's like that within our church family. We sit in the pews with each other. We serve on committees together. We may even enjoy Bible study with one another, but we never see someone's whole face. We only get a glimpse of them from behind our fences. We can't fully be there to lift each other up when we don't know what's actually bringing the other down. We have to get into the yard to fully know someone.

The end of today's scripture says we must be encouraging of one another. We must spur each other on. Sunday morning service doesn't give us the opportunity to open our hearts for one another. We must be in the trenches with one another to allow someone into our backyard. To truly love your church, you have to love people *in* your church. This doesn't mean that everyone transforms into super social extroverts. What it means is that we don't live in isolation.

[Slide 12]

So how do we become connected to each other? The answer is SMALL GROUPS... such as Sunday school, the UMW, Bible studies, or one of our student ministry programs. If you've not found your home, there may be an opportunity for you in our new Sunday night adventure, the G.A.P. We hope to expand the evening to include groups and opportunities for all ages. Small groups are vital to the life of our church. If you're really unsure of what's available, join us next Sunday for our family potluck and mission fair. Look around the tables... see what groups are there. See what may interest you. Talk to those involved. Then, make a plan and check it out. Connectivity is vital to the life of our church. We were not created to serve God strictly by ourselves.

[Slide 13]

This brings me to my third point: (Add this to your bulletin) to love our church, **we must enjoy the company.** Enjoying and loving each other may seem like a given, right? Isn't that what church family is all about? Are we really doing a good job with this?

Today's scripture in Hebrews says, "**Let us see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshipping together as some do but spurring each other on...**" (verse 24-25).

I just heard some major key words: Encouraging love... helping out... spurring each other on. The word "spur" is defined as a device with a small spike or spiked wheel that is worn on a rider's heel and used for urging a horse forward. Or, it is a thing that prompts or encourages someone.

Community is finding ways to encourage or spur one another to seek toward love and good deeds—it is beyond church programming and sermons. We need to see beyond the walls and fences that have been built and offer to help paint the shed or pull the weeds or babysit the kids. Community is bringing a meal in a time of crisis. It's having those "go-to" numbers in your cell phone when you run out of gas 15 minutes from home. Community is knowing who to call when you need a ride to the doctor's office. It's inviting someone over for dinner. It's teaming up when we have a church service project. It's coming together on a Saturday morning to participate in a Jericho Walk. According to Hebrews... it's enjoying one another and helping each other to enjoy serving Jesus in the time we have left to serve. However, these things don't happen automatically. They happen when we decide to make them happen.

I can't end today without offering a few helpful hints as we journey toward building community in our church:

[Slide 14]

- **First, we must *Have healthy expectations*. Remember, it is unrealistic to expect to be best friends with everyone – but a healthy expectation is knowing that you can become family with most, you can build great friendships with many, and develop deep bonding relationships with a few. Keep a healthy goal in mind. And, with that being said, we must also...**

[Slide 15]

- ***Realize baby steps are okay***. Let's be clear. Living without fences doesn't mean that you are going to let every single person into your backyard. That's not the goal in any sense. But, start by hanging out in the front yard, then move on to the living room. Then the picnic in the backyard will come naturally. It will take time and that's okay.

[Slide 16]

- ***Lastly, take some ownership***. We all need to try this. I can't just expect you to do it, while I make no effort. We all need to work at it. On a scale between 1 and 10, with 1 being the lowest and 10 the highest, how much effort are you putting into connecting with others? What would you need to do to raise your number in the next few weeks? Come up with a plan!

As we leave this morning, intentionally love your church. Know Jesus has crashed the fence. We *CAN* stand immediately in the presence of God – barrier free. Allow someone into your yard and enjoy the company. Get to know someone a little better this week. Think about your plan to become more connected within our church family.

The Bible is God's story of him pursuing a loving relationship with us. Let's follow his example and pursue a living, loving relationship with Him and with each other.

Please pray with me. "Dear father, we find comfort in your Son, Jesus. It is Jesus that has given us the freedom to stand in your presence. Help us to stand in the presence of one other through the spirit of true community. Help us to genuinely say, I love my church! Amen."

[Slide 17]