

Sermon – Keep Meeting Together
Sunday November 8, 2020

Like many of you, our original summer plans got cancelled. So what did we do? We planned camping trips all around Ontario.

Now, my wife Joanne hates camping! She only does it because she promised to when we were dating. (Yes, that's what love will do to you!) But she hates the mosquitoes. She hates how things get dirty. She hates the "bathroom" situation.

But she was the first to say how much she loved our trips. We swam in a clear pool at the bottom of Bridle Veil Falls. We hiked down a trail towards a sheer cliff where we saw pictographs that were 400 years old. We took a canoe out to a rocky island for a short day trip. We camped in a dark sky preserve and watched the meteorite shower.

Of course, I loved all those moments as well. But one of my highlights from our trips was teaching my girls how to build a campfire. There were so many great lessons. Learning how to gather twigs and tree bark for kindling. Learning how to add wood to build the fire. Learning that when the wood gets hot, they become embers – glowing hot pieces of coal.

One night as we were sitting around the campfire, the girls asked me why I was poking the embers. And that was when we had another lesson. I said, Do you see these embers? When they're close together what happens to them? They get really hot.

But if you remove one from the fire, what happens then? It loses its heat and cools off. That's because embers are designed so that when they're close together, they get really hot. They feed off each other and make the fire hotter. But when one is removed from the fire, it cools off and loses its heat.

That day, my girls learned an important lesson about building fires. But there's a lesson in there for us about community. Over the past few weeks, we've been talking about community. How just like those embers, you and I are designed to stick together. When we feed off each other the fire gets hot. But when we isolate ourselves, we cool off and lose the fire.

We're wrapping up our series, The "WE" Factor. You and I were created for community. By God's design, we feed off each other and need each other. That's why biblical community isn't optional, it's not an "add-on." Biblical community is *essential* for growing in your faith.

As the Group Life Pastor, I'm passionate about this! I love it when new people join a group and make new friends. I love it when people find a place to belong and grow with others. I love it when groups walk together through life's ups and downs. I love it when people find the support they need to take their next step for Jesus.

What's one thing you love about community? Type it in the chat?

Biblical community is exhilarating and inspiring. But it's also hard. I've been in groups that felt stuck. (Heck, I've led groups that have felt stuck!) I've had my share of difficult conversations.

I've been disappointed in people. I've wanted to run from community. At times, I've even wondered if it was worth it. And remember, I'm the Group Life Pastor!

What's one thing you find hard about community? Type it in the chat.

Maybe you can relate.

Maybe you watch these worship services on your own and have no connections with other Christians.

Maybe you're in a small group but you want to quit.

Maybe you once believed in community but somewhere along the way, you got hurt and disappointed and you've decided that you're not going to let that happen again.

What do you do when you want to grow but you don't want community?

What I want to do today is look at a passage from Hebrews 10. And I want to give you three practices for when you're tempted to stay away from community.

First, some context. The writer of Hebrews has been using a lot of Old Testament imagery. He's been talking about drawing near to God and entering his presence. But up until now, the problem has been that we can't enter his presence. Why? Because God is a holy God. And our sin prevents us from drawing near to him.

But God's presence is what comforts us. It's what gives us strength. It's what takes away our selfishness and transforms us.

So how do we draw near to God? We can draw near to God only by the death and sacrifice of his Son, Jesus. And now, through his blood, we can come right into God's presence. We can draw near to Him. We can be transformed.

So how do we experience more of God's presence? How do we experience more of his transforming power?

Hebrews 10:24-25.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The writer of Hebrews is describing how God has designed Christian community. Just like embers need to feed off each other to stay hot, you and I need to be in community to grow. And he gives us three disciplines for doing this.

The first discipline is to **Keep Meeting Together**.

The writer of Hebrews says,

let us... not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing... (v. 24-25)

The Greek word here for “meeting” is the word *episynagoge*. This is the word from which we get synagogue. It means congregation or assembly.

Now we need to make a distinction. A congregation is different from an aggregation. An aggregation is a collection of people who happen to be at the same place at the same time but who otherwise have no other connection to each other. An aggregation is merely the sum total of its parts.

But a congregation is different. A congregation is a gathering of people whose lives touch and intersect. A congregation is always more than the sum of its parts. There’s synergy, life and power.

So here’s a question. Are we called to be an aggregation or a congregation? We’re called to be a congregation. We’re not called to be a group that just happens to watch the same service online. We’re not called to be a group that merely associates ourselves with Cornerstone Church.

We’re called to live *in community* with each other. Doing life together. Being in relationship with each other.

That’s why the image the Bible often uses is the body. You and I make up different parts of this body. We all play an important role. We all need each other to be healthy.

That’s why watching the services is a good thing, but it’s not enough. That’s why reading the Bible and praying on your own are good things, but they’re not enough. All these things are important practices. But when you do them on your own, you’re not growing the way God has designed it.

Because biblical community is the primary context for life transformation. It’s when you gather around other embers and feed off each other that the fire gets hot.

If you’re a Christian and most of your faith is private, if you have no connections to other Christians, then you don’t truly understand the Christian faith.

John Wesley says that the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.

You see, the Christian faith can’t be practiced in private. Think about it. Most of the commands in the New Testament are things you can’t do on your own. In fact there are over 50 one another commands you can only do in community.

For example:

- Accept one another (Rom 15:7)
- Be devoted to one another (Rom 12:10)
- Bear with one another (Eph 4:2)

You simply can’t obey God if you’re not in community.

That’s why if you’re not in a group, you need to get in one.

About a month ago, we ran Group Launch. Group Launch is our connection event that helps people get plugged into a group. We had an amazing response! Over 40 people got connected and we launched 5 new groups. Our next Group Launch is in January.

But what if you can't wait that long? Well, there's good news. We have a new way of starting up groups. We call it, the Start a Group With Some Friends Strategy. Basically, we encourage you to talk to some of your friends and invite them to form a group with you. Then go onto our webpage [cornerstonechurch.ca/smallgroups] and sign-up to start a group together.

We'll give you everything you need including the curriculum, training and coaching. All you need to do is find some other people to form a group with and sign-up.

The first discipline of Christian community is to Keep meeting together.

The second discipline of Christian community is to **Be that Someone**.

let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds (v. 24)

I know I'm going to sound like an English teacher, but what's the main verb in this sentence? I'll give you a hint. It's not spurring one another on. The main verb is to *consider*.

What does that mean? To consider means to stop and think. To think about how you can fan the flame of faith for someone else. To think about how you can help someone to grow.

But is that how we tend to think? Probably not. When you look at a photograph, who's the first person you look for? Yourself. The same is often true in our relationships. We tend to look out for ourself. **We tend to think about our relationships in terms of what we can get from others, rather than what we can give to others.**

Isn't that true? If you saw two people, one who had a great sense of humour and someone you had a lot in common with and someone else who was a little socially awkward and needy who would you approach? Probably the first person...

Why? Because we think we'll get more out of that relationship. We don't want to work that hard. We want to give that much.

The point isn't that you can't be friends with people you like. The point is that biblical community requires you to recognize that it's not all about you.

Type in the chat: It's not all about me.

People often join a small group because they're looking for that Someone. Someone who will care for them, listen to them and encourage them. But here's a question, Who's that Someone going to be? I often talk to new small groups about this. I'll challenge every group member and say, **You be that Someone**. You be that Someone who will care, you be that Someone who will listen, you be that Someone who will encourage.

In biblical community God calls all of us to **be that Someone**.

Type that into the chat: I will Be that Someone.

The person who does this more than anyone else I know is my wife Joanne. She stays up late making food for people. When she goes shopping, she buys things people will like. She writes notes to people. She organizes parties for friends and colleagues. And when she comes home from work, she plans out her route so that she can drop off all the food, gifts and notes she's prepared for all these people.

Why does she do all this? Is it to add more to her already busy schedule? Of course not. It's because she's thinking: How can I be a blessing to someone? How can I encourage someone? How can I be that Someone for someone else?

How would your relationships change if instead of asking, What can I get from this person, you asked, What can I give to them? What if instead of just wanting Someone to meet your needs, you decided I'm going to be that Someone for someone else?

But maybe you're wondering, if I'm that Someone for someone else, who's going to be that Someone for me? Well, here's the beauty of Christian community. God calls all of us to be that Someone. Which means that if all of us are being that Someone, not only will you be that Someone for others, others will be that Someone for you.

This leads to the third discipline of Christian community which is **Practice the One Anothers**.

Andy Stanley says that the primary activity of the church is to one another one another. We've talked about how the New Testament is full of one another commands and we've looked at some examples.

In this passage, we see two more. The first one is **spur one another on**.

Most Bibles translate it like this, *provoke* one another.

The Greek word literally means to irritate. We're called to irritate each other. Now how many of you know someone with that spiritual gift?

The idea is tough love. You don't spur one another on to put them down. You do it so they can grow in *love and good deeds*.

In other words, you do it to build up their character, their faith, their ministry. But you always... always do it in love.

Paul puts it like this,

speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. (Eph 4:15)

Because here's the thing. You and I want to grow. But here's the problem: we all have blind spots. By definition, we can't see them. They're sinful habits and patterns that keep us from growing. And we've become so good at denial that we don't even know they exist.

That's why if you want to grow as a follower of Jesus, you need others to spur you on. You need to spur others on as well.

This doesn't mean walking up to someone and listing off all their faults. You need to pray about your motives. You need to be sensitive. You need to have a certain level of relationship.

One way I often approach this is, I'll say, Can I share a thought with you? And if that person gives me permission, I'll share an observation or a pattern that I've noticed. I won't make any judgments or assumptions. I'll just share that observation and go from there.

And do you have anyone in your life spurring you on? Do you have the courage to give someone permission to speak truth into your life?

One sign of a healthy Christian community is that we're spurring one another on toward love and good deeds.

Another sign is that we're **encouraging one another**.

The word encourage appears 105 times in the New Testament. That's a lot. It tells us how important encouragement is. To encourage someone literally means to come alongside them, to put yourself in their shoes.

Author Gary Chapman wrote a book called The 5 Love Languages. The idea is that we all give and receive love differently. The 5 Love Languages are:

Words of affirmation
Quality Time
Physical Touch
Gifts
Acts of Service

Depending on your primary love language, you might encourage someone by:

- Writing them a note or a card
- Talking with them on the phone
- Meeting up with them for a coffee
- Giving a meaningful gift
- Helping out with a practical need

What are ways that you can encourage someone this week? I know I've been so encouraged this season by people who've prayed for me, sent thoughtful messages, dropped off gifts and delicious treats. Knowing how loved and supported I am has encouraged me so much especially when things have been hard.

And these are hard times. People are struggling with their relationships, their work, their finances, their faith. People are struggling with their pain and their mental health.

Who's someone you can think of right now who could use some encouragement this week? What's something you can do to brighten up their day?

Wouldn't it be amazing if all of us encouraged just one person this week? Imagine the impact in our community, in our church? Imagine what God could do if all of us said, I'm going to be that Someone.

Christian community will always have its challenges. This pandemic makes it even harder.

So how do we keep meeting together during a pandemic?

Well, I'm so thankful for technology. Technology has allowed us to stream our weekly worship services. It's allowed our groups to meet virtually.

But for many of us, it's just not the same. It can feel awkward and less engaging. There's even a term, Zoom fatigue that describes how exhausting video meetings can be.

On top of that, it's also getting colder now. Which means planning even small outdoor gatherings will be harder to do.

So what's the answer? I don't know.

But I do know that we need to think creatively about how to keep meeting.

This past Thanksgiving, we had to cancel our family dinner. But I still made our 16 lb turkey with all the fixings. I still made a New York style cheesecake. We just delivered it in takeout containers to family members and had our very first Zoom Thanksgiving Dinner! Was it as good as if we had met in person? No, but we still needed it.

The Apostle Paul encouraged many Christians in his lifetime. At times, the only technology available to him were a quill and a scroll of papyrus. Were reading his letters as good as if he were there in person with them? No, but the churches still needed it.

Rather than tapping out because of Zoom fatigue or other reasons, let's find creative ways to keep meeting together for the sake of our mutual encouragement.

- Plan safe ways to meet in person in accordance with public guidelines.
- Stay active with WhatsApp, text or email.
- Pick up the phone and talk with someone. (Remember when we used to do that?)
- Write a letter for someone and drop it in the mailbox. People love getting personal mail.

The danger of isolation is that without community, our faith will grow cold. So...

let us consider [let us reflect, let us think creatively] how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.