

Sermon – Supportive Relationships Sunday September 25, 2022

In 2018, then British Prime Minister Theresa May said that the greatest public health challenge of our time is loneliness. That year, she created a Loneliness Commission. She also created a government post that had never existed before – Minister of Loneliness.

Because loneliness is literally killing us.

One research study tracked the lives of 7,000 people over nine years. What they found was that the most isolated people were three times more likely to die than those with strong relational connections.

People with bad health habits, such as smoking, obesity or alcohol *but* had strong social ties lived significantly longer than people who had great health habits but were isolated. In other words, according to Pastor John Ortberg, it is better to eat Twinkies with good friends than to eat broccoli alone.

In October of 2020, a study looked at the risks of social isolation during the pandemic. It concluded that the coronavirus pandemic was causing a loneliness epidemic.

- 30 percent of people reported not interacting with someone outside their family or work for between one to three months.
- People generally reported feeling negative emotions like frustration, sadness and tiredness
- 50 percent of people who felt isolated lacked motivation, 41 percent were more anxious and 37 percent were more depressed.

So when it comes to having meaningful and life-giving relationships, how are you doing?

- Do you find it easier to stay at home online than to be with other people?
- Do you try managing on your own instead of turning to others for support?
- Can you name a few friends that you can count on?

How do you overcome the obstacles that are keeping you from enjoying the life-giving relationships you need?

We're in a series these days called *Marks of a Thriving Church*. We're looking at how the early church was devoted to Jesus, to one another as well as to several core practices. These practices helped them grow deeper in their faith and in their effectiveness at spreading the good news of Jesus.

Each week we're looking at one of these practices to learn how we can flourish as God intends us to, both individually and as a church.

Last week Pastor Steve talked about Biblical Immersion. Today we're going to talk about Supportive Fellowship.

Our Bible passage for this series is Acts 2:42-47.

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

The early church was devoted to fellowship. What is fellowship?

This word isn't a word we use very often. We might talk about a Christian fellowship at school or a fellowship hall in a church. We might talk about Tolkien's classic, *Fellowship of the Ring*. (Any Lord of the Rings fans here?)

But the original Greek word for *fellowship* is the word *koinonia*. Koinonia refers to shared life, joint participation and life together.

These aren't natural concepts for us to grasp. We live in an individualistic society that emphasizes individual needs. We value personal rights and freedom. Even in relationships we focus on personal preferences.

This happens even in the church. People say things like:

How can I grow in my personal relationship with God?

How can the church serve me and help me in my personal growth?

We hear it in our worship songs too. Have you noticed how much more the first person singular pronoun "I" is used instead of the communal "we"?

Our culture is concerned about ME but the early church was concerned about WE. The early church wasn't devoted to pursuing Jesus on their own. They were devoted to fellowship; to pursuing Jesus together.

Notice what verse 44 says, **All the believers were *together* (v. 44)**. This word *together* is an important word. It appears three times in the passage.

Because fellowship is togetherness; it's doing life together.

In fact, the book of Acts records how God not only transformed individual Christians through their togetherness. But through the witness of the church's togetherness, God radically changed the world!

That transforming power is still available to you and me today... but we only experience it in community.

What I want to do today is talk about community. We're going to look at:

- What it is.
- Why it's essential.
- How you can get plugged in.

First, **What is community?**

In biblical times, people lived day to day for their survival. What made it more challenging was that Christians were also persecuted for their faith. Non-Christians would often refuse to trade or do business with them making it even harder to survive.

So how did these Christians make it?

Verse 44 says, **All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. (Acts 2:44-45)**

Community is formed around what we have in common. Think about your friends and social circles. You're likely together because of what you have in common: a common life stage, a common interest, common political views.

But the Christian community in Acts was based on more than just common personal interests. **Biblical community is centred around our common desire to follow Jesus and live like him.**

We live in a different culture than the early Christians. People don't need you to sell your possessions for them to survive. But there is a principle here and the principle is this: **God's people take care of each other.**

When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, it created a new kind of community. The New Testament describes this community in different ways, but one powerful word used to describe it is: family.

From now on you are not strangers and people who are not citizens. You are citizens together with those who belong to God. You belong in God's family. (Ephesians 2:19, NLT)

God's family is where you're never alone.

God's family is where your stuff isn't just yours, but it's yours to share and give away.

God's family is where you learn to love others and work through problems together.

The church isn't perfect, but we strive to be a family.

When someone goes through a crisis and people deliver meals, help with errands and lend a listening ear.

When someone is discouraged and people rally to provide encouragement, support and prayers.

When someone is going down the wrong path and people say “I care for you too much to watch you self-destruct.” Then they courageously speak the truth in love.

The early Christians learned to do life together as a family. How did they do that?

Verse 46 says, **Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts... (Acts 2:46)**

In other words, the early Christians met regularly for worship – just like how we’re doing now.

But their gatherings didn’t end there. Verse 46 goes on to say...

They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. (Acts 2:46-47)

These verses tell us something important. The early church did more than meet regularly on Sundays – as important as that is. Because in addition to Sunday worship, they also met in-between services. They met in homes to share meals and do life together.

In other words, the early Christians met regularly in groups. (We’ll be talking about that later.) But what you need to know right now is, if you’re serious about growing in your faith, you need to be in a group. You need community.

So, **Why is community essential?**

One reason is that **we were made for community**. You simply can’t be who you were meant to be without community.

Philosopher Blaise Pascal said that **At the centre of every heart is a God-shaped vacuum that no created thing can fill. (Blaise Pascal)**

We often understand this to mean that as long as I have God, I don’t need anyone else. I’ll attend church, listen to sermons, read my Bible and pray and that’s enough.

This thinking isn’t biblical.

Back in Genesis 2, God has just created Adam. This is before the Fall. Adam has never sinned. Adam talks with God, walks with God and hears from God. Adam is in a perfect relationship with God. But there’s a problem... Adam is alone.

Up to this point, God has looked at his creation and said, *it is good*. But now when he looks at man... lonely and all by himself, what does God say?

It is not good for the man to be alone.

It’s true that you and I have a God-shaped vacuum that no created thing can fill. But hear this: it’s also equally true that **You and I have a people-shaped vacuum that even God can’t fill.**

You and I were made for community.

We were made in the image of a God who exists as a community of three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We were made in the image of a God who is at the core relational.

In other words, we were made to be in relationship with God and with other people.

Another reason community is essential is that **we need community to live out our faith**. The truth is, you can't follow Jesus without community.

One Bible commentator says that **“According to the Bible, the entire Christian life, including spiritual growth, battling sin and serving God are *intended to be done in community.*”**

Do you realize that most of the instructions in the New Testament are written in the plural? We miss this because the English language doesn't distinguish between the plural “you” and the singular “you”.

So we read these commands through our individualistic filter and think that spiritual growth is about me and God.

But just look at the commands in the Bible. There are over 50 one another commands.

Speak truth to one another, pray for one another, encourage one another, build up one another, bear with one another, forgive one another, serve one another, bear one another's burdens...

It doesn't matter how much you pray or read the Bible, how do you put these commands into practice if you're not in community?

How many of you have you ever barbecued with charcoal? After you've started the fire, what happens when you put the charcoal pieces close together? Do they get hotter or colder? They get hotter. But what happens when you separate them and move them apart? Do they get hotter or colder? They get colder.

The same is true of you and me. When we're isolated and scattered, our spiritual fire cools down. We lose our spiritual passion.

But what happens when we're in community? We get fired up for Jesus. We get filled up with God's love and we want to share this love with others.

When we're in community, we hold more of God together than we do when we're alone.

There's a saying in AA. We can get drunk on our own, but we only get sober together. In other words, we can sin by ourselves, but we only heal and grow in community.

That's why small groups are vital to your growth. When you're in community, you experience more of God than you would on your own.

In the first year of the pandemic, we started more groups than we did in any other year in our history.

One woman who joined a small group was going through a divorce. She wondered how the group would respond. But instead of judgment, she found acceptance and a safe place to be real. She experienced love, grace and understanding.

When she was in need, group member gave rides, helped with her move and dropped off food. Last year she got baptized. And at her group was there to cheer her on. They gave her flowers, a Bible and a handwritten plaque with Bible verses and promises.

This woman doesn't have family in town, but she recently said to me, "my small group has become my family."

Someone else in our church was diagnosed with esophageal cancer two years ago. It was challenging going through chemo, losing his hair and not knowing what would happen to his family. But he wasn't alone. He was in a small group.

The group was there to pray and encourage him. They dropped off meals and brought care packages. One day around Christmas when he was at his lowest, the doorbell rang. He opened the door and there standing on his porch was his whole small group. They sang Christmas carols to him, brought gifts and hung out.

Today, the cancer is gone. And as he reflects on his journey, he recently told me, "if it wasn't for my small group, I wouldn't be where I am today."

You and I are created for community. We need other people to grow.

So the question is, are you in a group? Are there people who support you in your spiritual walk? Are there people you're encouraging and supporting?

If not, **How can you get plugged into community?**

At Cornerstone, there are many ways to get connected. We have classes, workshops, support groups, Open Table Thursday dinners. These are great ways to meet people and experience growth and healing.

But when it comes to doing community together, small groups are the way to go.

Small groups typically consist of 6-10 people who meet regularly to share, support each other and grow together through Bible study, prayer and serving.

At Cornerstone, we launch new groups through an event called Group Launch. At Group Launch, you'll learn more about groups, meet the people who will be in your group and have fun together. You'll get a 7-week Starter Group study designed to help your group share their stories with each other and learn about biblical community.

After the 7 weeks, you can decide whether you'd like to continue as a group.

Our next Group Launch is later in October. If you'd like more information or want to sign-up, check out our webpage.

Group Launch

Online groups – Wednesday Oct 19

In-person groups – Sunday Oct 23 (includes lunch)

www.cornerstonechurch.ca/smallgroups

[Note: Include QR code as well]

There's also another way you can start a group. If you already know some people you could be in a group with, we can help you start a group. On our small group page, simply click the button Start a Group with some friends. We'll get in touch and connect you with resources, leadership tips and a curriculum.

Start a Group With Some Friends

www.cornerstonechurch.ca/smallgroups

So whether you sign up for Group Launch or you Start a Group with some friends, we hope lots of you will get connected in a group this Fall!

You'll hear many small group mottos in the church world: We're better together. Groups are the lifeblood of the church. Circles are better than rows.

But here's one you probably haven't heard before: Community is messy.

Whenever we talk about community, we often focus on the good things and overlook the challenges. Because just like any family, there will be frustrations, disappointments and challenges.

What do we do when community gets messy?

In the book of Acts, the early Christians were devoted to fellowship. In other words, they were committed to working things out.

In her book *Community is Messy*, Pastor Heather Zempel writes:

“walking through relational mess forces us to grow in our obedience of the “one another” commands... These commands move us past small talk and the illusion of friendship to the messiness of biblical community... [because] mess means that change is happening...if we engage it correctly.”

Is community messy? Yes. But is it worth it? You bet! Because through the mess, Jesus is shaping us together in his love. A love that forgives, extends grace and sees the best in others.

Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34-35)