

**Sermon – Personal Space**  
**Sunday April 21, 2024**

For decades, we've seen the steady rise of loneliness in our world. Last year, sixty percent of adults reported feeling lonely. That's a 7 percent jump from the year before.

But do you know what the loneliest demographic is? It's not the seniors; it's the young adults. Three quarters of young adults report feeling lonely. Young adults also have 70% less social interactions than they did two decades ago.

This led the U.S. Surgeon General's office last year to declare that America has a loneliness epidemic.

How many of you feel lonely? How many of you wish you had stronger relationships? How many of you wish you had deeper connections?

Studies show that loneliness is having a devastating effect on our health. If you're lonely:

- The risk of having heart disease increases by 30%.
- The risk of dementia increases by 50%.
- The risk of mental health distress increases by 60%.
- The risk of dying prematurely is equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Loneliness is literally killing us.

Now when you hear these statistics, it's easy to dismiss them and say, These are just American statistics. Things aren't that bad in Canada – or are they?

A global study was done last year that surveyed people in 142 countries. They found that people all over the world - not just Americans, feel significantly lonely. This led the World Health Organization to warn that unless we make significant relational connections, loneliness will soon become a global epidemic.

So how do you develop the life-giving relationships you need to thrive? How do you escape the loneliness that's all around us?

We're in a series these days called *RELATIONAL SPACES: Where Jesus Shapes us in God's Love*.

Cornerstone's Mission Statement is Making space for Jesus to shape people together in God's love. What this means is that Cornerstone exists to make disciples of Jesus.

A disciple is someone who follows Jesus as their Master. Someone who models their life – their thoughts, words and actions on the life of Jesus with the help of the Holy Spirit. And discipleship is all about... relationships.

Someone once asked Jesus: Out of all the commandments, which one is the most important? Do you remember what Jesus said?

**The most important one... is... love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. (Mark 12:29-30)**

In other words, it's all about relationships. The goal of discipleship is relationships – to be shaped in God's love so that we can love God and love others well.

But here's the thing: **Relationships aren't just the goal of discipleship, they're also the context for discipleship.** It's where Jesus forms his disciples.

We see this throughout the gospels - Jesus using four relational spaces to make disciples. In this series, we're looking at these spaces.

- Jesus uses the Public Space - a space of one hundred to thousands of people. An example of this space is Jesus teaching to the large the crowds.
- Jesus uses the Social Space - a space of 20-70 people. An example of this is Jesus going to parties and social gatherings.
- Jesus uses the Personal Space - a space of 4-12 people. An example of this is his small group with his 12 disciples.
- And Jesus uses the Transparent Space - a space of 2-4 people. An example of this is Jesus spending time with his three closest disciples – Peter, James and John.

Jesus didn't just use one of these spaces, he used all of them. So in the same way, we also use all four spaces to make disciples.

- We use the Public Space - our Sunday worship gatherings and large-scale community events.
- We use the Social Space - our mid-sized group gatherings, Recreation Programs and Open Table Thursday dinners.
- We use the Personal Space - our small groups.
- And we use the Transparent Space - close Christian friendships, accountability groups and Christian counselling.

Which of these spaces do you need? All of them. Because each space helps you grow in ways the other spaces just can't do as effectively.

But does this mean you need to be in all four spaces all the time? No. In each season, certain spaces will be more relevant for you than others. There may be one or two spaces that you need to focus on right now.

Today the relational space we're looking at is the Personal Space. We'll be talking about What does discipleship look like in a small group? How does a small group help you to grow in your discipleship?

Over the past few years, Cornerstone has grown a lot. Lots of people are coming to our Sunday Services. Lots of people are coming out to our Open Table Thursday dinners.

Last year at one of our Thursday dinners, some folks ended up sitting together. They were mostly new and didn't know many people. So they came to make new friends.

They hit it off with the people at their table so well that the next week, they sat together again. This went on for several weeks until one day, they said, Why don't we form a small group together?

So here are people who've come out to our Worship services – our Public Space. Who've come out to our Thursday night dinners – our Social Space. Why would they want to join a Small Group? What is it in this Personal Space they're looking for?

They're looking for deeper relationships.

Pastor Rick Warren says, **“What the world needs more than anything else in our society today is the antidote to loneliness and where are they going to get it? Small groups.” (Rick Warren)**

What is a small group? A small group typically consists of 8-12 people. This is an ideal size for building deeper relationships. It's like a family gathering or a get-together with friends. The dynamics are more conducive to sharing and relational closeness.

A small group is more personal than a worship service or an OTT dinner. It's small enough that you can meet at someone's home, share your stories and even have meals together.

Outside of small group meetings, you can go out for dinners, do outings and even travel together. A small group is a place where you can know and be known.

That's why small groups are ideal for building relationships. These relationships are so important especially as our church continues to grow. Because small groups help make a big church feel small. It can be easy – especially if you're new, to feel lost in the crowd. Because the truth is, in a big church, you can't know everyone. But when you're in a small group you can know some people and others can know you as well.

Does that mean that small groups are just about relationships?

Relationships is definitely one of the goals but it's not the end goal. Yes, small groups are a place to know others, have fun and do life together... But small groups don't exist just for the sake of relationships, small groups exist for the sake of discipleship.

In fact, each of the four relational spaces is designed to help you develop the right kind of relationships you need to take the next step in your spiritual journey towards Jesus. So how do small groups help you do that? I'd like to share two ways.

First, **Small groups are where you learn how to follow Jesus in community.**

In our culture, we want to follow Jesus on our own. It's just me and God. I'll just stay home and watch a sermon online. I'll just read a Christian book by myself. I'll just do my personal devotions on my own.

Now listen up, because this attitude is exactly why our world is so lonely and sick...

You were created for relationships. You weren't created to be self-sufficient. You were created in the image of a relational God and God says, It's not good for you to be alone – you need relationships.

The Apostle Paul puts it like this.

**Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body... and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. (1 Corinthians 12:12-14)**

Yes, you need to have a personal relationship with Jesus. Yes, you need to do your personal spiritual disciplines. But here's the thing: you can't be healthy and growing in your vertical relationship with God unless you're also growing in your horizontal relationships with others.

You were created for relationships. You need others to help you grow – just as they need you to help them grow. Like a body, it's a reciprocal relationship.

Just think, if all you needed was a good sermon, Jesus would have spent all his time preaching. But he doesn't do that. What does he do instead?

**As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him. (Mark 1:16-18)**

When Jesus begins his ministry, what's one of the first things he does? He calls twelve people to himself - to learn together, to do life together. What's Jesus doing? He's starting a small group. In this small group, the twelve:

- Learn from Jesus how to live in God's kingdom.
- Process their questions and share their lives with each other.
- Reach out to their community together.
- Hang out and just have fun.

Jesus doesn't spend his best time and energy preaching to the crowds. Where does Jesus spend his best time and energy? With his small group.

Jim Putman who's written many books on discipleship says, **"I believe in and focus on small groups because that is the primary way that Jesus made disciples."** (Jim Putman)

The New Testament contains over 50 One Another commands. These include commands like

- Love one another (John 13:34)
- Encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- Pray for one another (James 5:16)
- Build up one another (Romans 14:19)

But how could you even do these things if you're not in a small group? It's hard to do that on a Sunday morning. It's hard to do that in a social setting. So where's the ideal place to practice these one another commands? In a small group.

A small group meeting typically consists of an icebreaker, a Bible study, prayer and sharing and discussion. So when you gather with your small group, when you open his word, when you discuss it and share about your lives, when you pray, when you encourage each other – you're not just doing these things on your own – you're doing these things with Jesus. Because Jesus is right there in your small group with you.

**For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them. (Matthew 18:20)**

Do you realize what this means? Ordinary small group moments are the places where Jesus shapes people in his love.

One individual got baptized last year and decided he needed to join a small group. So he did and he met other Christians and he learned how to follow Jesus from them. He learned how to pray, how to read the Bible and how to put God first.

But he wasn't the only one who was blessed - because the group members were just as blessed by him. They were encouraged by his passion, his obedience and his desire to follow Jesus. And when his baptism day came, guess who was there to celebrate with him? His small group.

Another small group had just completed a study on relationships. Through this study, they felt God challenging them to reach out to new people. This was terrifying because many of them were introverts – just like me. So understandably they were hesitant.

But because they sensed God was in this, they prayed and they kept each other accountable. As a result, several of them reached out to new people. They got to know them, they shared about their small group. And over time, they invited them to join their group. As a result, this small group has welcomed three new couples into their group over the past few months.

Our small group met last Sunday. We shared about ways we've been experiencing God's goodness. One group member shared about how our Bible study on Psalm 23 has sustained her in a challenging season. Through doing this study together, God's been reminding her that Jesus is her Good Shepherd. That she can trust him to guide her and provide for her.

How do small groups help us grow in our discipleship? Small groups are where you learn to follow Jesus in community.

Second, **Small groups are where you receive support when you face challenges in life.**

Because let's face it, life can be hard.

- You get sick, laid off or lose a loved one.
- You get anxious, discouraged or depressed.
- You have problems with school, relationships and finances.

When you face challenges in life, who will be there to support you? When you're in a small group, you're not alone - your group will be there.

Two are better than one,  
because they have a good return for their labor:  
If either of them falls down,  
one can help the other up.  
But pity anyone who falls  
and has no one to help them up.

(Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)

How does a small group support its members? One church uses 3Ps.

The first P is **Presence**. Sometimes someone will go through something and you just don't know what to do or say. But maybe you don't need to do or say anything. Sometimes the best thing you can do is just be there.

When my wife's grandmother passed away, it was a sad time. But I'll never forget that as we were getting ready for the funeral, we looked up and saw our whole small group walk in. Every one of them had come. They didn't have to say anything or do anything. Just their presence meant the world to us.

One small group member was starting cancer treatment. It was Christmas time and the holidays were going to be hard. But one afternoon, the doorbell rang and when he went to open the door, he saw his small group standing outside singing Christmas carols.

Being present to someone in their time of need is a powerful way to support others.

The second P is **Practical Support**.

One small group member lost a job he had held for twenty years. So his small group coached him on writing his resume and did mock job interviews to help him with his confidence.

One small group member who was going through a crisis didn't have a place to stay. So another member opened up their home until they could get back on their feet.

Small groups have delivered meals, given rides, helped with childcare and assisted with tasks around the house.

Providing practical support is a great way to show care and help take away some of the load.

The third P is **Prayer**. The Bible tells us to pray on all occasions. You can pray *for* people and *with* people. You can pray:

- When they're sick
- When they're going through a crisis
- When they have a hard decision to make.

Prayer makes a difference and reminds people they're not alone.

Presence, Practical Support and Prayer are ways small groups provide support when someone's going through a hard time.

You and I weren't created to be alone, we were created for relationships. If you're not currently in a small group, I encourage you to consider joining one.

Here at Cornerstone, Group Launch is our main way of joining a small group. It's a 90-minute event where you'll learn more about small groups and have fun getting to know the people who will be in your group.

On top of that, we'll also take care of your children and give you a free lunch! Our next Group Launch is on May 26, so if you're interested, check out the information on the screen.

We've been talking about small groups. Small groups are where you learn how to follow Jesus in community. Small groups are where you receive support when you face challenges in life. We've heard stories about the amazing things that are happening in small groups.

So it might be easy right now to think, Small groups are amazing! Once I'm in a group, I'll be set. Everything will be great and we'll never have problems... Right?

Right now all the people who are in groups are chuckling. Because you know that even though small groups are amazing, even though small groups are essential, even though small groups are places to develop incredible relationships – you know that small groups can also... be messy.

The Bible doesn't even try to hide this. In the New Testament, there are disagreements and conflict, difficult people and annoying personalities. Isn't that encouraging? The people in the Bible are just like us!

Because the truth is, relationships are messy. Why? Pastor Tim Keller says, Relationships are messy because people are messy.

That's why many of the One Another commands actually show us how to respond.

- Be patient with one another (Ephesians 4:2)
- Bear with one another (Colossians 3:13)
- Forgive one another (Colossians 3:13)
- Admonish one another (Colossians 3:16)

When relationships get messy, it's easy to get frustrated and annoyed. It's easy to want to give up and shut down. It's easy to want to walk away. But I want to challenge you.

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." (Heather Zempel, *Community is Messy*)

Are relationships messy? Yes. But are they worth it? You bet! Because relationships are about learning together and having fun together. But it's about more than that.

Relationships are the goal of discipleship – we're created for relationships, we're created to love God and love others.

But relationships are also the context for discipleship. It's *how* we grow in love. You don't grow in love by listening to a sermon. You don't grow in love by doing a Bible study. You grow in love when you're in relationships, when you're practicing the One Anothers, when you're working through messy situations.

Relationships are the goal of discipleship and the context for discipleship. They're the spaces where Jesus forms us in his love.

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

Let's pray.