

BETTER TOGETHER
Community: The Power of Presence
Acts 2

In the beginning, God created Adam. And he placed Adam there in the perfect garden with animals to shepherd and plants to cultivate and wonders to enjoy . . . ALONE. And God saw that it was NOT GOOD for him to be alone. *Adam saw it, too!* So, God created Eve, and then several million other people through them and their children, so that they could all experience COMMUNITY. And it was GOOD. *[It comes with some COMPLICATIONS, but we will talk about that later.]* This morning, I want us to talk about the vital NECESSITY of community for our emotional and spiritual HEALTH. God knew this. This is why . . .

GOD CREATED COMMUNITY FOR US.

When God created Adam and Eve, he JOINED them together and they became ONE. This oneness was a physical and spiritual connection. *Their oneness complemented both of them, and it led to a fulfillment and a shared sense of purpose.* **It also led to a very LARGE FAMILY!** Many centuries later, God sent his Son to redeem humanity. Jesus called those that he redeemed, the CHURCH. And he gave them a command that was an echo of the first creation: Be ONE. This oneness was NOT physical, but it was SPIRITUAL and emotional. And ETERNAL. **And it was the call for those that were redeemed to JOIN TOGETHER in a COMMON BOND for a COMMON PURPOSE.** And it is GOOD. *It also led to the MULTIPLICATION of FAMILY MEMBERS by daily conversions.* The Church experienced this in a miraculous way when the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost. **Acts 2:41-47 NIV**

41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. **42 They devoted themselves** to the apostles' teaching and to **fellowship**, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. **43** Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. **44 All the believers were together** and had everything in common. **45** They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. **46 Every day they continued to meet together** in the temple courts. **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. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Life comes at you fast! The early church discovered community with new believers quickly after Pentecost. **[THOUSANDS in one day! Imagine!]** They did not really have time to “vet” one another! They were all thrust together by the Holy Spirit when they accepted Jesus as their Savior. They were SUDDENLY a FAMILY! Their new relationship was one of purpose and movement. This type of community served them well as life began to “happen to them.” **Did you notice the number of times that Acts 2 mentions that they were TOGETHER?** There was not a casual, once-a-week relationship. It was a DAILY family. God created their community, and God called them to be one. But . . .

WE MUST CHOOSE TO PURSUE COMMUNITY.

The NEWNESS of biblical community served them well for quite some time. Their new-found faith and family was a source of strength for them, and a source of wonder for the city of Jerusalem. **But they would have to LEARN how to live in community when life started getting challenging!** There came a time when community was not something that just HAPPENED to them; it was something that they had to PURSUE. In many ways, this is just like MARRIAGE. You have to WORK at making community work! **KOINONIA = Fellowship, Intimacy, Joint Participation, Partnership!** I often counsel couples in marriage the same way that I counsel members in community.

***We must be PRESENT to experience community. Hebrews 10:24-25 NLT**

²⁴ Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. ²⁵ And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.

You will not learn to love one another and experience great victories together unless you stay CLOSE together. It is not rocket science. **Our relationship in the church is a combined work of the Holy Spirit and our mutual cooperation as we live life together.** We have to learn about one another's personalities and needs and passions. **You cannot GROW together if you do not GET together. [Cold snaps and Covid!]**

I know that this sounds so simple, but it seems to evade many people in the church. One hour on Sunday is not enough time to get to know God, and neither is it enough time to get to know your brothers and sisters in Christ! **Christ always changes the way that his followers spend their time, and that he always directs us to spend much more time with other believers.** If you are doing this, then I applaud you! Remember, the early church members literally spent time with each other DAILY as they grew in their faith. Christian COMMUNITY is essential to our maturity, but community is NOT something that can be FORCED upon anyone. **Each member of the family must CHOOSE to enter into community with the other members of the family.** Have you done this? **Are you purposefully getting together with other believers so that they can RUB OFF on you? Are you being DELIBERATE about developing CHRIST-CENTERED FRIENDSHIPS?**

I can only INVEST in those people that I get to spend TIME with. Who are you spending time with in your life, and how is that affecting your spiritual life? I think that most of us only choose to spend time with the people that we enjoy the most. That might be FUN, but if it is our primary gauge for friendship, then I am afraid that it will not be very FRUITFUL. The great thing is, you will probably have more fun with your Christian friends than with any other group in your life, but you will also be CHALLENGED, ENCOURAGED, and STRENGTHENED in your walk with Christ. This is one reason why I plead with people to GET TOGETHER IN GROUP with one another. It is a GREAT START for those who do not know where to start! You may not think that group is for you, but I ask you to GIVE IT A GENUINE CHANCE. You might be surprised at what you experience.

***We must be willing to ADAPT and CHANGE!**

Consider how the early church immediately changed their lifestyles to accommodate this huge, new community. We must choose to do the same. It is noteworthy that they had NO BUILDINGS to meet in other than the TEMPLE and their individual HOMES. This was how they did life together. **The original small groups were in their homes.**

I LOVE how God led us to develop SMALL GROUPS here at CH. **[Shepherd Groups]** They are not magic dust, but they are MAGICAL. Because of small groups here, I have relationships with people that I absolutely adore. We love life with our small group members. I am actually ADDICTED to our small groups.

***We must show grace to one another as we grow. Colossians 3:12-14 NIV**

12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Grace was pictured beautifully to me this week in our SNOWSTORM!

In our small groups, we not only discuss the Word of God, we talk about how it is affecting our lives. We also get HONEST about where we are struggling and even failing. **This means that we must GET REAL to experience true community.** **James 5:16 – “Confess your faults one to another . . .”** Confession means that we MESS UP and FESS UP from time to time!

***BASIS of our fellowship: By the blood and in the light! 1 John 1:7**

- None of us are here because we earned it!
- We aren't here to make each other feel good about our sin, but to deal with it.

SMALL GROUP: EXPECTATIONS AND REALITIES.

- Do not mentally DISMISS the importance of community
- Become DELIBERATE in developing Christ-centered friendships
- JOIN a Life Group [Group link next week!]**
 - *Invite someone you are already close to into a group with you
 - *Give new people a chance to get close.
 - Reach out to someone who you realize is disconnected in this church body.
- Do not assume that you have to be “BFF” with everyone in group
- Do not expect “instant gratification.”
 - Choose to INVEST DEEPLY (“KOINONIA = Joint Participation, Partnership!)
- Stay CONSISTENT, even when you are wondering if it is worth it!
 - Expect group to STRETCH YOU, not just to meet your needs.**
- Refuse to participate in any conversation or activity that sows division

*When it comes to getting involved in small groups, everyone has to start where they are. **So, where are you?**

WE MUST CONSISTENTLY WELCOME OUTSIDERS INTO OUR COMMUNITY.

***Welcoming others involves HOSPITALITY. Hebrews 13:1-3 NIV**

1Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. **2**Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. **3**Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

Hospitality is such a gracious spirit of generosity! **[OSCAR and LILY]** It is the willingness to SHARE what you have with those who are in need. It is the mindset of those who realized that what they have, came from God in the first place, and that just as God shared it with them, so they should share it with others! It is a HUMBLE spirit of SEEING others and VIEWING them as every bit as important as we ourselves are! **[Philippians 2]**

***Welcoming others involves EVANGELISM. Acts 26:17-18 The Message**

17-18 “**I’m sending you off** to open the eyes of the outsiders so they can see the difference between dark and light, and choose light, see the difference between Satan and God, and choose God. I’m sending you off to present my offer of sins forgiven, and a place in the family, **inviting them into the company** of those who begin real living by believing in me.’

Evangelism requires us to move outside of our inner circle toward those that are not followers of Jesus Christ. Of course, our PRIMARY relationships must be with those that know and love Jesus, but we have to MOVE TOGETHER toward those that don’t know Jesus so that we can share Jesus with them. Getting close to them allows them to SEE the difference that he makes in our lives. **I know that this is a CHALLENGE to many of us, especially if we are enclosed in a close circle of godly friends that satisfy our longing for community.** But we must not STOP there! **Community was NEVER meant to be a CLOSED CIRCLE.** Jesus made this clear by the way that he loved and led his disciples. They were each other’s primary community, but Jesus taught them to move around together and look for opportunities to meet needs and serve those who don’t know him in order to bring them to faith! We can do this through a variety of means as a church body! The question is: Will we do it!

God created community for us, but he commands us to CULTIVATE it and make it the CORE REALITY of our daily lives. This is something that no one can do for us. **We have to choose it and pursue it personally and passionately as a local church body.** When we do, it not only blesses our lives, it changes the community around us as well!

Let’s pray.