



WEEK TWO - CONNECTIONS

CHECK-IN

How are you? Where have you seen Christ working in your life in the last week? And... it's that time of year again... the humidity has broken, evenings are getting cool, football is in full swing, and there's one last gasp of 90-degree weather, cuz well, Illinois. It's also the inevitable return of the Pumpkin Spice craze... so let the battle begin. Are you Team Pumpkin Spice? Ready, go.

OPENING PRAYER

God of Connection, remind us that through the family of faith and your unending love, we are never alone.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the greatest part of fall football... is tailgating. Hours before the game, rabid fans line parking lots to char oversized hotdogs on undersized grills, pound down coolers-full of frosty sodas, and toss around the pigskin with complete strangers reveling in the glory days of their own gridiron careers. Game-time acquaintances who may never associate in any other way, who may not even like each other were they to meet in any other setting, are now ride-or-die soldiers in arms against a common foe. The connection to the team has built a connection between them... and none are alone in the struggle. In the same way, the connections that are created when a faith community comes together, the affiliation to a kingdom that is bound together by Jesus Christ, the relationships that are built through THIS team, are stronger and more meaningful than any tailgating party.

Setup Question: What is your experience with tailgating? Are you an expert, complete with mini-hibachi, umbrella attached lawn chair, and team-logoed cornhole set? Or is your only “tailgating” done on the interstate when you’re late for work?

SCRIPTURE & REFLECTION

Through this series we are looking at the elements of our *faith* that make up our identity *in Christ*. What makes up *who we are* when we decide we’re on *that* team? Another way to look at it might be, what are the benefits... what do we receive from our faith? Last week, we

talked about the strength that comes from God to get us through our struggles, and ultimately leads to a hope we don't find anywhere else in life. Today, we're going to continue that discussion with another core element of our identity in Christ...

CONNECTION

In the same way fans are connected at tailgate party, we are connected to our brothers and sisters in Christ. But in order to understand why these connections are important, we must first understand the problem. Why are deep, meaningful connections important? Well, a clue to answering this question comes from the way many people answered the survey question of why their faith was important to them. One respondent said, "My faith means I'm never alone." That word popped up over and over again: *alone*. We are living in a different sort of pandemic now, loneliness. Millennials and Gen-Z report feeling lonelier than any other generation before them.¹ "But we're more connected than we ever have been? Don't my 1500 Facebook friends, 1000 Insta-followers, and 3 Tik-tok subscribers (apparently I can't dance,) matter? I get my fill of relationships through those." The same study suggested that the higher the social media use, the more often a person reports feeling lonely. So, no...because those 1000 relationships are about the depth of a click.

Now, technology isn't bad. Relationships can start that way. You can stay in touch with friends and classmates and family members... even the ones you'd rather not. You can post announcements and stay

informed. In that way, technology is great. But when it comes to building deep, meaningful relationships, the studies bear it out... we are lonelier than we ever have been. And so, we gravitate to a few deep, close inner-circle of friends, (a posse, tribe, clique, peeps, bros, or fam... depending on your age bracket,) because we all long for a solution to loneliness. We long for connection.

Question 1: How lonely would you say you are? When does that need for relationship or connection hit hardest? What relationships help you most to not feel that isolation? (This can be a difficult question for some, so be as open and honest or vague as you'd like. And remember to offer compassion in the discussion, and hold space for the feelings that might come up.)

But let's go one step deeper. What is at the core of our need for connection? What drives our loneliness? Well, build into us from the very first breath we breathe until the last is a need to be loved. God programmed us with this love-shaped hole in the very center of our being that we spend our lives trying to satisfy... and humans go down so many unhealthy roads trying to find the thing that fits in that space. And ultimately, this why our social media feeds and chat groups, even our PTA and Pumpkin Spiced Pilates club, doesn't satisfy... won't satisfy... *can't* satisfy... because they aren't based on love. This is why our connections in faith are different... because they are based in love. Don't believe that they're different? Just try it next Saturday, lean over to the soccer mom next to you and go, "I love you...", then see what happens. "Umm... coach, I need a new team, I don't want my children

on the same team as this weirdo.” But in a community of faith, the relationships, from the outset, are based in love. Jesus, before he went to give himself up for us, told his disciples, “Love each other as I have loved you.” (John 15:12)

The kind of relationships that are built in a faith community are the kind of deep meaningful relationships that help you feel “not alone,” whatever you’re going through. They are the kind of connections that check on you when you’re in the hospital, the kind of connections that welcome you home when you get out, the kind of connections that lift up endless prayers when you’re waiting on that biopsy to come back, the kind of connections that allow you to be yourself and not have to put up the “everything’s fine” face you have to with the rest of the world... and it’s born from love.

Question 2: Share a time when you felt loved by a faith community. What difference did that support make in your struggle? How do these relationships help you feel not alone?

But, we don’t get it right all the time, do we? We’re human. Even in what’s supposed to be the best representation of humanity, the church, we seem to screw it up a lot. God knew this. God knew that, even with the best of intentions, we’d drop the ball. So, God gave us this promise...

Read Joshua, chapter 1, verse 9.

We don't have to be lonely. We don't have to struggle with that need to love and be loved. We don't have to fear or be discouraged... bouncing from thing to thing, looking for love in all the wrong places. We don't have to try to satisfy our loneliness with whatever the world is trying. Because, we have the ultimate connection, one that satisfies that need, one that carries us day to day, minute to minute, one that will not let us down. We have a heavenly parent who loves us unconditionally and endlessly. We have a God who goes with us wherever we go.

Question 3: What does this Scripture and promise of God mean to you? Does it offer you comfort and help you to not feel alone or do you have a difficult time accepting it and embodying it? What would make it easier for you to feel and believe in God's unconditional love for you?

CLOSING

We can have the assurance that God is with us, every step of the way... and more than that... that we are loved, every step of the way. And that's a pretty good team to be on. The first element of our identity in Christ is strength, endurance from God that can get us through any trial. The second element of our identity in Christ is deep, meaningful connections, with other members of the family of faith, but also from an eternal promise, that God will go with us wherever we go. And therefore, we don't have to fear being alone. So, as you go this week, if you feel that twinge of loneliness or isolation, reach out to your faith

community... that's what it's there for. And also, remember that you've got a God who is as close as your very breath. So, close your eyes, feel God's presence, soak it in... soak in it... Feel that you are loved, and know that you are not alone, because "the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

**Take some time to share prayer requests or celebrations.
Close in prayer.**

¹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/23/loneliness-is-rising-younger-workers-and-social-media-users-feel-it-most.html>