

I don't know about you but I'm a sucker for nature shows. I'm fascinated by how the animal world lives and am always amazed by the footage these people get. Recently, I had the pleasure of watching a new documentary called *Serengeti*, where camera crews followed around several groups of animals across Serengeti Plains over the course of a year and documented how they lived with each other and thrived and struggled. It did not disappoint. As you would suspect, there were tender moments between parents and cubs, fights over territory and group supremacy, and the occasional carnage of the circle of life in Africa that makes Pressler boys cheer.

But the most dramatic moments, interspersed throughout the six episodes, came when one of the animals was apart from their group and living on their own. There they were vulnerable to attack, often forced to fend for themselves, exposed to the elements, and missing the relational intimacy found so often in these assembled groups of animals.

There was the zebra who, out of fear, refused to jump into crocodile-infested waters when the rest were doing so to get across to the lush plain on the other side. It instead stayed stuck, by itself on the far side while the rest flourished in the plain. There was the mother lion who had cubs with a male outside of the pride, and she wandered by herself, unsure if they would accept her back or reject her. There was the teenage male elephant who thought he had all the answers, didn't need help from anyone, and set out on his own. There was the male baboon who was abused and harassed by the leader of the troop to such an extent that he chose to leave. None of these animals thrived when they were on their own. In fact, they barely survived.

Now, we need to be careful attributing human emotions to the animal kingdom, but I believe this is a picture of what can happen in the Church. We too can live lives on our own for the same reasons these animals did. Fear can leave us stopped in our tracks, unwilling to take a risk for our faith and separated from other believers on the move for the Lord. Shame can keep us far from others, not wanting to face the potential for rejection if we let someone truly know us. Our pride can convince us we can go it alone, that we don't need anyone else to thrive, that we can take care of ourselves. And for some of us, because of a painful experience with other Christians in the past, we have promised yourself to never go through that again.

And the costs are just the same. When we choose to do life on our own, we leave ourselves exposed, vulnerable, stuck, and alone. Instead of thriving, we wind up surviving. But that's never the way Jesus intended it. You and I may not belong to a pack, a pride, or a troop, but the Gospel tells us we do belong to a body and family, the body of Christ and the family of God, created to be a gift and blessing to each of us, and created to be a people for us to be a gift and blessing to. This morning, as we continue our series called *Becoming*, we are going to see that we can only become what Jesus wants to make us become if we do it together. That, in order to answer the call of Jesus, we must become **resistant to doing life on our own**.

Last week we saw Jesus appoint the twelve. And while it was an individual calling, it was also the beginning of a new community that would ultimately become the Church. We are going to be in the book of Acts to see how this new community of Jesus followers lives with one another in a specific time of trial and overall in daily life, and that the things that keep us from wanting to do life with others are the very things that are solved for when we do.

We are going to pick it up in 4:23, but what comes before is important to know. Peter and John have just healed a lame beggar, gone into the temple with him, preached the Good News of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, and many believed. Threatened, the priests, captain of the temple, and Sadducees came and arrested them, tried them (where again Peter preached the Gospel), but could say nothing, given the healed man standing with them. So they let them go with a threat and strictly forbade them from teaching in the name of Jesus (to which Peter said “whatevs”). And that’s where we pick up the story.

[Acts 4:23-31] ²³ When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, ²⁵ who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, “ ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? ²⁶ The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’— ²⁷ for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” ³¹ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

When we resist doing life on our own, we discover **a people who come alongside each other faithfully**. When Peter and John were released, we might expect them to, out of fear, go into hiding or strategize how to change the way they are talking about Jesus. But **their immediate response to this crisis was to go be with their own instead of being on their own**. They go to their friends because they know it’s there where they will find fellowship, comfort, and the spiritual encouragement and power to keep going.

The community of believers provides exactly what they needed. First was their presence. This group could have tried to disassociate themselves from Peter and John because of the heat put on them by the religious rulers of the day. Instead, they remained devoted to the apostles and welcomed them back. They then interceded for them in prayer and, in so doing, pointed the apostles back to the Lord. They were reminded of God’s power, that he is creator and sovereign. They were reminded of what God’s Word says about God’s plan, quoting Psalm 2, that the opposition Jesus experienced is now theirs, but God says they should expect it, that he allows it, and that he will ultimately overcome it. And in the midst of this persecution and trial, they close by asking God not to judge those in opposition or to make it safe. They instead pray for God to grant them his power so that they may continue to preach the Gospel with boldness. It is a prayer filled with hope in God, certainty of the outcome, and encouragement to keep going.

Phillips Brooks says “Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men and women. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks.” That’s how this people prayed. And God answered that prayer. He filled them with his Spirit, affirmed their prayer through an earthquake and, by the end of v31, the one who once denied Jesus three times

when his faith was tested now continues speaking the Word of God with boldness. A moment that could have isolated Peter and John and derailed the spreading of the Gospel was met head-on by a devoted group of Jesus followers who came alongside their friends in their time of distress and propelled them forward in their mission.

If you and I are going to answer the call of Jesus and become more like him, testing will come. When our faith is tested, fear and discouragement have the potential to stop all of us in our tracks and cause us to miss out on what Jesus is calling us to...to stay on the other side of the river surviving while others have taken the risk to cross and are now thriving. If you experienced a crisis, a testing of your faith today, who would you turn to? Who are your people?

It's a vital question because Jesus has not called us into something safe. Thankfully, he also hasn't called us by ourselves. You and I can rejoice and move forward courageously because we know, in his abundant grace, he has given us each other for when times get tough. That we can lean in when we face trial, and we can be present and direct others to God when they experience a trial themselves.

I have a wonderful example of this. This past Monday marked my one-year anniversary as Lead Pastor of Fellowship and, at our all-staff meeting on Wednesday, the staff celebrated it with me, and Martha even showed up. At the end of the celebration, I was given this box, and it's full of examples of living out what we see in this passage.

Every once in a while, I'm tempted to believe I need to be the impervious leader who has it all together, who is ever confident to press on, and it's an easy way for me to fall into doing life on my own. But the truth is this first year was challenging at times. There were moments I got discouraged, moments I doubted myself, and moments where fear tried to stop me in my tracks. But as I opened this box, I was reminded I had a whole team of awesome people with me. They pointed me to God through notes of prayer and passages of Scripture, and they encouraged me with their words. Someone even wrote the "Happy Anniversary" song they sing to you at Chilis! What a gift! I could resist. I could try to tough it out on my own. But, in the end, I find myself to have become a glutton for encouragement. It inspires me and propels me forward so that I can press on. This church is ready to do the same thing for you. We follow Jesus when we let him bless and encourage us through his people so that we, too, can press on.

[Acts 4:32-35] ³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Luke transitions from a moment in time to a summary passage, and here he shows us two more results of doing life together. When we refuse to do life on our own, we will experience **a people who accept each other fully**. Luke defines this community as being of one heart and soul. They

are united in every way. **Where there is unity there is acceptance, and where there is acceptance there is belonging.**

I asked our staff in a few different settings this week what it was that keeps people from doing life together, from being a part of a community. And each time, one of the first answers was that we are hesitant to be truly known by others. The question “If they really know me, will they accept me?” It’s a matter of shame, and it’s the fear of rejection. **Shame is the enemy of relationship.** It’s been that way since the very beginning when Adam and Eve hid from God. Shame keeps us from getting close, keeps us from revealing who we really are, keeps us from allowing others access and influence in our lives, and it becomes a barrier to receiving others’ love, help, encouragement, and counsel.

But here’s what the Gospel says. No one is better than anyone else. Each and every one of us are broken and helpless to do anything about it on our own. We have fallen short of God’s perfect standards and can’t make up for it by anything we do. That means we are equals in our desperation for God’s forgiveness, and that means the only thing we can boast in is Jesus Christ. The only reason we are something is because he made himself nothing. You are a part of a community that exists only because of the love and grace of God, and that makes the church a no shame zone. **The family of God is at its best when it welcomes those who think of themselves as the worst.**

If you are tempted to do life on your own because you suspect others won’t let you in, let me encourage you to give this church a chance. I am regularly moved by the stories I hear from those who have come through our doors, been courageously vulnerable by telling their story, and then joyfully accepted. We want this to be a place where we can get real and rest in the love, grace, and mercy of Jesus, regardless of what has come before. If you have things in your past you are not proud of, let me say “welcome”, you are in great company, and we want you to be part of our family.

A people who care for each other fervently.

Luke tells us that out of that unity sprang a love for one another and a desire to meet each other’s needs. This community consisted of believers who came from other parts of the world with nothing. The economic situation in Jerusalem was deteriorating, and unbelieving Jews were putting economic and social pressure on Christians. For many believers, the need was great, but that need was met with bold generosity and radical hospitality. None there saw their possessions as their own but, instead, as a means to care for their fellow believers. Many sold property and gave the proceeds to those in need. And while selling all our stuff isn’t prescriptive, the heart of generosity and hospitality is.

But for a need to be met, it must first be known. For these believers the need was material, but for us it could also be emotional or spiritual. Some of us may feel far from God, struggling to hear from him, stagnant in our walk, or wrestling with big questions that are causing us to doubt our faith. That’s my story. I had big questions that I wasn’t asking for help with, and they began eroding my relationship with God. I had a need, but I kept it to myself, and it came at a cost. Some of you are beaten down emotionally with all the strife in the world, you’ve experienced loss that has caused pain, or depression and anxiety are constant companions in your everyday life. We

have heard and seen too many instances of people trying to handle these on their own, and the consequences are tragic.

I know that it may be hard for you to raise your hand and say, “I need help”, but let me assure you **we are all running a deficit in some way**. I have yet to meet the person who says, “I have everything I need. I am one with the Lord. And my emotions are perfectly healthy!” You may be concerned that need will appear as neediness, or that you must show that you can take care of yourself on our own. But if we do, we neglect the gift of grace God has given us in each other, and we’re left to fend for ourselves. But when you resist life on your own, you let the family of God help lift what is burdening you so that you can move from surviving to thriving and be free to live fully for Christ.

We may look at this passage and be tempted to think that’s how they lived way back when. But while the context may be different, we too can share our lives with each other in that way. And, for some of you, the courageous next step God is calling you to take is to begin to do life with those around you. I want to close with some encouragement by sharing this story, one of the 1,000 we hope to share this year, of a courageous next step. It is the story of Lauren and Patrick Metang. **It is a story of what happens when you become resistant to doing life on your own.** Watch this.

Jesus wants to make you thrive in your life, and he’s given you the people around you to help make that happen. But, like all aspects of following him, we must choose to do so. These are your people. They are a gift from God. And if you let them in, you will have taken a hugely courageous step in becoming more like Jesus.