

Life together

This following text is Jonathan Green's speaking notes from the fifth of ten value talks held at The Sanctuary Westminster on 16th March 2006.

Introduction

The fifth value at The Sanctuary Westminster is that we are a group of people who share their lives together, with all of its joy and pain.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 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, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. **Acts 2:42-47**

Tonight I want us to think about the church as a gathering together of people who are committed to 'Doing life together' around a common purpose. Jesus came to create a new viable community that celebrates and demonstrates the new life, the abundant life that he brings.

Unfortunately, the word 'church' has become synonymous with a building or a service, but that was never the original intention, nor is it to be true to Jesus Christ' teaching. Being a Christian is more than going to meetings – it is about helping one another to live well. To celebrate life together, and share in the joy and the pain, as well as the dull periods.

We were made for community!

Today's culture often works against the concept of meaningful community. Individualism has become an untouchable right in the West. Unfortunately it can so often lead to isolation. I even know some Christians who think that meeting with other Christians is an optional extra. However, scripture affirms that it is good that we meet together. I want to share a story with you that a Pastor called Randy Frazee tells in his book *The Connecting Church* about the need for community.

A few years ago my wife and I finally cracked under the pleas of our children to add a dog to the family. We gave in after eleven years of begging. Two days before Christmas, we purchased a full-bred beagle puppy we named Lady. She had lived with us for about a year when we took a family vacation without her. The children were very concerned about the well-being of Lady while we were away and insisted that if we couldn't take her with us that we get her the best possible accommodations. Through the help of another pet-obsessed friend, we located a place, The Pet Hotel—imagine that, a hotel for pets! This was the first I had ever heard of such a thing. Each pet is assigned an individual room. There is a television playing during the day for the dog to watch. The feedings are at precisely the time we offer them in their normal routine. The pets are actually walked and doted on more in The Pet Hotel than at home. This made the children feel better and made me feel a little poorer...

The family returned home on a Friday night, too late to pick up Lady. So, the first order of business on Saturday was to head to The Pet Hotel. We gathered all her personal belongings, received a report ensuring us that they had done everything they promised, and paid the bill. When we got into the car, each of us eagerly petted Lady, genuinely happy to have her back. However, as we petted her, large clumps of hair clung to our hands. While I tried to convince the children that everything was okay, I was thoroughly concerned.

When we arrived home, I called the veterinarian in a panic. After I explained our dog's symptoms upon picking her up from our seven-day vacation, the doctor told me that Lady was stressed by our absence; he suggested we spend about two hours with her at home, and then her hair would stick once again. I seriously doubted the prescription, but the thought of avoiding a visit to the vet hotel after paying the pet hotel bill worked for me. I kid you not, within fifteen minutes of being with us in our home, we couldn't pull a hair from Lady's body. It was quite unbelievable. The doctor was right after all.

If a dog starts to fall apart after just seven days of being robbed of community, how much more is it true for humans, who are created in the image of God for fellowship? We were designed by God physically, emotionally, and spiritually to require community for our health. In *The Gift of Touch*, Helen Colton says that the haemoglobin in the blood increases significantly when we are touched (haemoglobin is the part of the blood that carries vital supplies of oxygen to the heart and brain). She concludes that if we want to be healthy, we must touch one another.

George Gallup Jr., referring to American (works with UK too) isolationism writes:

We are physically detached from each other. We change places of residence frequently. One survey revealed that seven in ten do not know their neighbours. As many as one-third of Americans admit to frequent periods of loneliness, which is a key factor in the high suicide rate among the elderly.

All this is said to drive home the point that community is not a luxury but a necessity for life.¹

So how can we promote community?

Firstly, we must hold community as a core value! Because it is something we need to be intentional about, we need to be able to talk about it openly together and work through the issues of getting there. Secondly we need to be aware of the benefits of knowing others well in a context that has a shared purpose. Lastly it is important to be intentional about 'doing life together'. It is a discipline and needs to be worked at. Often it requires people to be rooted in a place for a length of time and this is hard, especially when jobs and relationships can take us to the other end of the country. We must also be welcoming to those who are with us for a short amount of time – even if they are only around for a week or two. Of course we need to practice it and be committed to it!

Within the context of The Sanctuary, here in Westminster, after just 5 months I think that you really can say that we are experiencing a growing sense of togetherness. But, we are not going to force it... it has to be a natural thing.

What defines our life together? Who guides our lives together?

The Sanctuary is first and foremost a Christian community. We gather around the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. And when I say 'life' I mean real life right here and right now! We try to let his way of being define our lives. We gather to worship and pray together which shapes us. We gather to grow in our humanity – to grow in Christian character. But let's not stop there; let's have fun together. Play Frisbee in the park or go to a gig or a museum or art gallery. Let's get to know our city – our home – together. This is doing life in its fullest sense. Having shared experiences is good for us, maybe even for our health!

¹ Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church, Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community*, 31-33.

What is the destination?

Ephesians 4 1-16 is good council!

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to one hope when you were called — one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4: 1-6, NIV)

Growing to maturity! Being fully human, in the way of Jesus Christ. That is our destination and the road we are on together as a growing congregation.

Availability & Vulnerability

There are some key qualities that make our community life rich. Firstly, we need to be available to God and to each other. Secondly, vulnerability, which has to be a conscious decision over time, although risky, allows a depth in relationships that might never be reached otherwise. There are many benefits of being committed to doing life together... We become accountable to one another. We have the opportunities to encourage one another, even more so when we know what is going on in one another's lives. With that comes support for one another – we can pray for one another, we can give to one another.

Perhaps one of the best forums for this kind of relational depth is within small groups, where we actually have a chance to get to know one another well. It is a place where we can learn to trust other people. Over time we can foster relationships that have a transparency and integrity to them. Together we can work through issues of belief and practice. It can also become a place where we can push each other when it is appropriate—both to greater things but also keep each other in check. Accountability then is part of this process.

In short, we want to be witnesses to one another's lives.

Sharing interests

It would be good to think that we can connect in all aspects of life. Having a life outside of meetings! The church should be a place where we can share interests and experiences such as food, sport, books, music, shopping, cinema etc.

NT model

If we think back to the passage from Acts 2, it has a lot to say to a growing community, FF Bruce says:

The Nazarenes met in each other's houses day by day for a communal meal in the course of which they remembered Jesus with thanksgiving as they partook of bread and wine. In these gatherings, too, those who had been with Jesus recounted their memories of Him and instructed the others in His teaching. In public they proclaimed to their fellow-citizens the good news of the divine act accomplished in the Messiah. Entry into the new community was solemnized by baptism "into the name of the Lord Jesus"; this baptism marked them off as His people. They met for prayer among themselves and also attended the appointed hours of prayer in the temple. In the earliest days they pooled their property and those who were in need were allotted supplies out of the common fund.

In this fellowship the common people... found new life and new hope; they were no longer leaderless, because if there was one thing more than anything else that was very real to the Nazarene community, it was the presence and power of Jesus. Though no longer with them in visible form, His presence was realized and enjoyed when they met together, and—more stupendous still—the mighty works which Jesus had performed as signs of the new age when he was on earth continued to be performed by His disciples in His name, or (to put it more accurately) were performed by Him from heaven through His disciples. This manifest power of the name of Jesus made a deep impression on the populace of Jerusalem, and contributed materially to the increase of the community.²

I don't know about you, but I long for God to add to our number daily, those who experience Jesus and the life he brings! One of the key things that we see from this passage is that Jesus was the leader within their midst! At The Sanctuary Westminster, Jesus Christ has to be at the centre of everything we do.

The body of Christ

The gathering of Christians is often likened to a body, each member a part. The great thing we can take from this is that we all have something to contribute and we all have a place!

Doing life together doesn't mean that we all have to be best friends! That's a silly notion. In fact, some people will really get on your nerves, but that is OK—as my mother used to say 'it is character forming stuff'! You bring all you have to the community and I think that the payoff will be worth it, in the end anyway... But it is not an automatic exchange. Being involved with others is a risk!

We will probably get hurt along the way, and our enemies would love for us to get hurt and blame one another and cause division etc. But this is also part of the risk. Church is something we get to do together, and something we all shape and protect and guard and pray for and, and, and. You get the idea.

2 questions to leave you with:

Is meeting together as Christians a high priority?

Is involvement in the growing community at The Sanctuary Westminster a priority?

(And if not here, then another Christian community?)

² The Spreading Flame, FF Bruce, 74-75