**Better Together**

**Genesis 2:18; Matthew 4:18-22**

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Sometimes I wonder if Peter and Andrew, James and John had any idea what they were getting themselves into.  They were just minding their own business, casting nets and bringing in fish, when along came this guy who says, “Drop everything and follow me.”  There must have been something magnetic about him, something that drew them toward him, because this was not a time or place in history when it made sense to leave good, honest work to join a stranger on a journey with no clear destination.  Both socially and politically, these were stressful times for the working poor.  The social system in which they lived kept them perennially owing more in taxes than they could pay. Poverty and disease were commonplace. Meanwhile, they were governed by the Roman Empire and its puppet king, Herod, who had the reputation of a ruthless madman who wouldn’t hesitate to kill anyone who threatened him.  It just wasn’t worth making trouble.  And yet, these four fishermen left their boats and followed, and that was the beginning of what eventually became Christianity and the Christian church.

Right now, we are living in pretty stressful times of our own.  When our children’s children study U.S. history, this period of time will be a chapter of its own. The combination of Covid-19, lifting the thin veil that has covered systemic racism in our society, and a president who is dividing the country makes this unlike any time we have lived through before.  And it is deeply unsettling.

At the same time, we have lost church as we’ve known it.  It is likely to be months before we can meet in worship the way we once did.  Yet, the Christian church didn’t always meet in buildings.  I wonder what we can learn from the very earliest church about how we might function as the church today. This is the first of a three-part sermon series that will take us back to our roots to discover what we can reclaim from the early church to help us be church in these strange times in which we live.  We’ll start by remembering that long before there were sanctuaries and cathedrals, Christ-followers gathered in small groups to study, pray, and grow together.

When Jesus called those first disciples, he created the first Christian small group.  He knew the truth of God’s words about Adam, “It is not good for the man to be alone.”  God made us as social beings - something that is very hard to be in the midst of Covid-19.  Jesus understood that people need to be heard and cared for.  They need to be able to laugh and cry and get angry and feel grateful together with others they trust.  Jesus also knew that the journey he was embarking on with his disciples would be difficult at times.  They would be taking risks, acting in counter cultural ways, redefining faith and advocating for social justice.  They would need each other, need a community of support, love, and challenge.

So, he brought together twelve people who would be that small community for each other.  They shared their meals and traveled together. They argued and vied for Jesus’ attention.  More importantly, they worked and they learned together, committing themselves to Jesus’ teachings.  Ultimately, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, they became the founders of the church and their small community became the model for the first church communities.

Listen to this passage from Acts, which describes the church as it existed in its infancy.  They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. 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 favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

From the very beginning, the Christian church has existed as network of small groups in which Christ-followers offered support, growth, challenge, and service to each other.  Yet, as Christianity spread, small groups became overshadowed by cathedrals and high priests and worship en masse.   Seventeen hundred years later, when John Wesley came along, he reclaimed the small group tradition.  In fact, he founded Methodism to reform the Anglican Church by creating small groups of common people who shared their spiritual journeys together.  He called them bands and classes, and their purpose was to help people grow in personal and social holiness, to love, as Wesley put it, “without disguise, without exception, and without reserve” (“Rules of the Band Societies”).

 I believe that these kinds of small groups are imperative for Christ-followers to grow - particularly in a church as large as ours.  When 100 people gathered eighteen months ago to begin shaping our congregation’s strategic plan, the development of a small group ministry for adults became one of our five strategic initiatives.  Little did we know that a global pandemic would come along and make the need for small gatherings more important than ever!

Now, you might say that we already have a lot of small groups in our church, and that is true.  We have groups that sing and play bells, groups that meet for dinner, and groups that study the Bible together.  We have all kinds of small groups that gather around a common interest or activity.  This fall, I think we’ll probably form some more of those.

Yet, when I speak of an intentional small group ministry, I’m really referring to the intentional development of small groups that gather for spiritual growth and relationship.  We began small groups in our children’s ministry a couple of years ago based on the idea that children grow in faith when they have strong, lasting, trusting relationships.  Over the next six months, we will be building a similar small group ministry for adults.  Children will see that just like they have a small group at church, their parents do, too.  These groups will not only provide connection, relationship, and faith formation for people who are already in our congregation but will be a place for new people to land when they first come into our community - a place where they can forge real friendships and be seen, heard, and cared for.

We will start building our small group ministry by recruiting and training leaders.  The leaders will be a small group of their own meeting first to learn about how to facilitate small groups and then, once the groups are up and running, to offer each other support and encouragement.   Debbie Houghton and Beth Pascoe are beginning to recruit leaders now.  Please spend some time in prayer and consideration of whether you might facilitate a group like this and contact one of them if this excites you.

In a few minutes, you’ll be hearing from Robin Bursch who helped start small groups in our Children’s Ministry.  Robin will share some of the impact of small groups and why they matter.  It will be a few months before our groups get started, but when they do, I hope you’ll consider joining one.

  From the very beginning, church has been about community.  In the last few months of social distancing, we have all been reminded how much we need community, how important it is to have people who can encourage you, check on you, help you out, and learn and grow with you. But, long after there is a vaccine for Covid-19, long after this period of time becomes a paragraph in kids’ history books, we will still need what small groups offer - because that is how God made us.

As we look back at our roots, perhaps the most important message for us at this time is summed up in a song I sang as a kid, “The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is the people.”  From the time Jesus called those first fishermen, church has been about relationships, about growing and learning, serving and caring together.

May it be so with us. Amen.