

(CONNECT) THE WAY OF COMMUNITY
Matthew 18:19-20

Connect January Message Series
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The older I get; the longer I serve as a pastor the more I am convinced that community, friendships, small groups are essential for a healthy life. I have seen it time and again that those who try to live life on their own; who turn away from others; who try to be the lone ranger have more struggles in life than those who have a supportive circle of friends.

People in isolation are ones whose minds easily play tricks on them because they don't have others to help them see things in different ways; to hear another perspective; to confront them when they are wrong. Focusing mostly on themselves and only on their own world-view easily leads to selfish thinking; to forgetting about the needs and concerns of others.

When the trials and challenges of life come (and they will come) those without a community and support network are often left standing/blowing in the wind, by themselves. They are faced with the challenges of handling a crisis or problem without the wisdom; listening ear; the personal care; the prayerful encouragement; the physical presence of others.

It is amazing the difference there is in going through challenges in life when you have a caring friend(s) (a small group) to walk with you. Being able to know that you don't need to muddle through your issues alone gives you a confidence (a strength) you can never have by yourself.

This is why I believe the Bible makes it clear that whenever a person comes to faith in Jesus they are always to be placed in and connected to a community of faith. In fact, the Bible is clear that there is no faith apart from community; God has always chosen to work in his people together.

These weeks of January our Sunday messages have been focusing on Messiah's mission emphasis "connect." We have been focusing on the importance of developing more and more small group connections; to enable a stronger support network for all who are involved here.

Next Sunday we are beginning a new message series, *"Breaking Bad: Seven Habits of Highly Ineffective People."* These messages will focus on what the ancient church designated as the "seven deadly sins" and the "seven Godly virtues." Next Sunday, February 7, the message will be on *"Pride."*

Today however our focus is on the way of community. The truth is that if you want to follow Jesus; if you want to grow your faith as his disciple you need to be connected in a faith community; in a congregation; in a Christ-centered group. To grow as Christ's disciple you also need a smaller group in that community/fellowship—a friend, a mentor, a small group.

If you look at Matthew 18, vs. 19-20, Jesus said these words, *"Again I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them."*

Jesus makes it clear that through his Holy Spirit he is truly present with us each day; yet his presence and power is experienced most fully when two or three people are gathered together in his name. Jesus is most real when more than one person discerns; listens; prays; seeks God's will.

I remember many years ago when I received the Letter of Call from Shepherd of the Hills in Shoreview to be their senior pastor. I know that some people actually think that pastors see some special light from God to direct them in these decisions; that the Holy Spirit somehow speaks directly to us. However it doesn't work that way—at least for me.

Making a decision on that call was very difficult for me. I loved my ministry at Zion in Litchfield and after 7 ½ years things in that church were better than ever. We had completed an amazing new building addition a couple years before; we were on cable TV and the radio each week. It was an exciting ministry in a church with over 1800 members.

Not only that but our family was very connected in the schools and community; Kim and our kids all had some incredible friends. We loved our first house that we were able to purchase when we moved from Maynard to Litchfield; also after 12-years living/ministering in smaller towns we really liked the rural lifestyle and the wonderful caring people.

Therefore in contemplating and praying about this call to SOH I sought the help and guidance of others. Kim and I certainly talked extensively about this change; I trust her insights and common sense perspectives more than anyone else. Yet I also spent time with some special Christian mentors/friends—the hospital administrator; the head of the public utilities; the pastor I worked with; a friend in our small group Bible study;

In our confidential conversations together I asked these individuals to help me discern God's call. I asked them to discern with me whether my growth and gifts as a pastor would be served well by taking on this new challenge. I asked them to tell me how they saw God working in and leading me. I asked them to pray for me.

After meeting as two or three of us gathered together I came to believe that God was calling me to that new church/community. It was very sad for us to leave that community/ministry yet God often calls us to new places. Even today after 26 years Kim and I still feel very close to Zion and Litchfield; we are still spiritually connected to many.

God does not work in isolation. It is not simply my God and I; it is not that God reveals his truths just to me or to one individual. Be extremely careful if you ever hear someone claim this kind of thing. God always chooses to make himself present in community; where two or three (a small group) meet in his name.

Perhaps you remember the story of the disciples immediately after Jesus' resurrection? They were together in the upper room when the resurrected Jesus appeared to them. The problem this first time was that Thomas was not there; as a result Thomas was the one who doubted that Jesus was alive.

However one week later Thomas was with the disciples when Jesus again appeared to them. It was then that Thomas experienced the resurrected Jesus; he touched him and believed. It was in

this small group community where Jesus made himself present; where Thomas' doubts were erased.

I know of so many people today who say they don't know if Jesus is real; they doubt God's love and promises; they have decided in their own heads not to believe. The problem is that most of these people are trying to figure all this out on their own; they are relying on their own selves and their own intellect.

Yet this will always lead to a dead end. Jesus always chooses to reveal himself in and through a community of faith. His resurrection is made real to us as we see Jesus living in others; his love is evident when it is experienced through caring Christfollowers; his power is witnessed when we hear testimonies of the miraculous things Jesus is doing in others.

A study a few years ago conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago revealed that Americans have less people to confide in than past generations. For example in 1985 the average American had three people in whom to confide matters that were important to them; more recently that number dropped to two. However even more startling the number of Americans with no close friends rose from 10% in 1985 to more than 24.6 % today.

Having community/friendships is so important. It is a rapidly increasing need as people today often move more often; as families live farther apart; as busyness and constant activities have often taken away precious time needed to develop closer relationships.

This is why Jesus gave us his church, his community of faith. It is in Christ's community that we can develop the closest and best relationships. It is where we can be completely real; can experience God's acceptance, grace, forgiveness; can pray for each other; can encourage one another in living lives of faith. God's church is a place of love.

Perhaps some of you saw the documentary film a few years ago, *"The March of the Penguins."* It follows the emperor penguins of Antarctica on their incredible journey through ice and snow to mating grounds up to 70 miles inland.

Once the males have reached the breeding grounds and have been given responsibility for the eggs, they override their competitive nature and form a team for the sake of survival. As a massive storm sets in, vicious winds pelt the penguins which are huddled together. (Video)

My friends, this is a picture of Christ's church, of his community at it's very best. It is where we work as a team; taking turns protecting and helping each other; keeping each other warm. It is a place where new people are always welcome—to find help in the challenges of life.

My Friends, when Jesus calls us to follow him he always calls us into community. As you seek to follow Jesus may you find ways to develop this kind of connection/community. Join a Lenten small group; find a mentor; get involved in a service opportunity; sing in the choir; help with children or youth. Remember that wherever two or three gather in Jesus' name, Jesus is truly present in and among them.