

GRACE FOR THE JOURNEY--ASSIMILATION

Acts 2:42-47

Grace For The Journey Series

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One of the most important Christian leaders and evangelists for more than 60+ years has been Billy Graham. Through his dynamic preaching and large crusades throughout the world hundreds of thousands of people have heard the Biblical message of Jesus. As a result countless numbers of people have committed and recommitted their lives to Jesus Christ by faith.

It is really amazing the incredible impact his witness had on our world; on presidents of both parties along with world leaders of many faiths; on some of us here this morning. I will never forget the crusade held at the Metrodome in Minneapolis back in June of 1996.

Overflow crowds poured into parking lots where they watched it on big screens. Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, denominations of all kinds participating. Literally thousands of people coming forward each night to affirm their faith in Jesus. My previous church was very involved (singing in the choir; counselors on the floor meeting with people who came forward; being part of the prayer team). It was an amazing thing to witness and be part of.

Yet something that Billy Graham and his organization learned from the outset is that a person's good intentions of committing their life to Jesus; a person's coming forward at an altar call and praying a prayer of dedication; this action will most of the time not make much of a difference in the life of an individual unless that person becomes connected to a church community.

Therefore throughout his ministry Billy Graham was willing to have crusades only in communities/metro areas where the majority of churches and church leaders were willing to get involved; where representatives from a variety of church denominations would serve on the many leadership committees and organizational teams that were needed.

The churches needed to provide people from their congregations who were willing to sing in the mass choir (many from my previous church along with me and members of my family sang); to be trained as counselors to meet with people who come forward for the altar calls; to be Bible study and support people for those who make a commitment from their church or area.

The Billy Graham Association discovered that any person who responds to an altar call needs to talk to someone right away. They also need to be connected in with a church, a pastor, a Bible study group, with some caring Christians if their good intentions are to last. Without follow up counseling/support most dramatic conversions to faith in Jesus will fizzle away to just a good memory.

One of the basic truths of being a Christian is that no one can do it by themselves. As one of my seminary professors often said, "There is no such thing as a Robinson Crusoe Christian."

According to the Bible being a Christian always means being part of a community of faith—either a church, a home church, a small Christian fellowship group.

Acts 2:42 (the Bible text for today) describes this early church behavior. It says that “*they devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers.*” The Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 12:13, “*For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into the body of Christ*”—which of course is his church.

Throughout the Bible there is no such thing as a believer being separate from the community of God’s people. When God spoke and made promises in the Old Testament it was always to his people, to the community of Israel. When people in the New Testament came to faith in Jesus and were baptized, they were always connected into the community and church.

The truth is that apart from the fellowship, worship, sacraments, mission involvement and serving in a local congregation/fellowship faith is very difficult to sustain. Good intentions are prone to easily go by the wayside; regular discipline, growth in faith and love rarely happens.

Now of course one of the most popular and quoted phrases today, even by Christians is “You don’t have to go to church to be a Christian.” Yes, that is in essence true. Simply going to church does not make us a Christian anymore than going into a garage makes us a car.

Yet as I have also heard it said, “No, you don’t need to go to church to be a Christian. But you will need to go to church if you want to remain a Christian.” A Christian wants to be in church each week (hear God’s Word; have the accountability/support of others; worship and praise God); a Christian wants to learn and grow in their faith; a Christian wants to fellowship with other believers. No, we don’t have to—we want to.

The challenge today then for growing churches like ours is to provide ways new people and members can easily assimilate into the life and community of our church. The challenge is to take down barriers and open up ways so people can easily get plugged into worship, activities, serving opportunities where they get to know people and people get to know them. The challenge is to be a caring church community which helps nurture, support and encourage people in their walk and journey of faith.

Something very important to know, believe it or not, is that the friendliness, involvement level and caring in a congregation has very little to do with the size of a church. There are small churches that are very unfriendly (some even here at Messiah have said how difficult it is to connect); while there are some very large churches which are very caring and loving.

The key ingredient in growing a healthy and caring church is that you grow it smaller as you grow it larger. You grow it smaller through opening up ways which help new and longer term members to get connected in a small group, in some ministry or mission project, in volunteering and helping with some significant activity where they feel they are needed.

It is when people are assimilated into one of these various and different kinds of groups (important to note that no one size fits all) they then feel more apart of the church. They have a

group that will be there, listen, pray and support them in times of need; they have a group that will encourage them in their growth in faith.

When my oldest son, Zachary, was a pastor at Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran in Afton, MN, they were revamping their small groups ministry because they only had 800 people involved in these groups—they worshipped about 1200 people each week and their goal was that everyone be involved.

This dynamic church, along with many others where growing numbers of people are connected in various kinds of small groups, are literally on fire with the Spirit's power because so many people are connecting, being assimilated, finding care and support, and getting involved.

One of the many exciting things at Messiah is to see how increasing numbers of people are connecting and being assimilated into the life of our church. Some have connected and become part of groups like volunteering in our Children's ministry program; coming to our Saturday morning Men's Fellowship; singing in the choir; serving on Task Teams like the Technology Team; helping with youth activities and serving meals; working on a project like building the Fire Pit; helping with the food shelf and other outreach opportunities; and many others.

Some have connected in through our Praise Band singers/musicians; Stephen Ministry providing lay caring support to those in need; being part of one of Messiah's women's Bible studies; being a mentor to one of our youth. There are growing number of people at Messiah who are really connecting.

Yet the truth is that we at Messiah have barely scratched the surface as far as connecting and assimilating people is concerned. New people are coming and some are joining our congregation, yet we have no formal way to make sure each one gets connected in. There are people coming to Messiah who have very good intentions of wanting to grow in their faith and involvement; wanting to receive ministry; wanting to worship and to give of themselves.

Yet when we leave them as simply a name on our membership rolls their hopes and good intentions are often not realized. Studies have found that if new people in a church do not get to know at least 10 people in the first six months; if they don't get into some group or ministry involvement they are more prone to become inactive; to simply fall out the church's back door.

One major problem in our Lutheran Church, as well as in most mainline denominations, is the large numbers of inactive people who are on the membership rolls of congregations. A significant number of these people actually could have been involved and growing in their faith if these congregations had helped them and made it possible for them to be connected/assimilated.

One of the goals for Charis and me at Messiah, as well as our Church Council and Vision Team, is to develop a more intentional small group ministry; more ways for people to be connected. The goal is to empower more ways lay people can be involved in ministry, leadership and ways to grow in faith.

Yet for Messiah to do this, my friends, is going to take an even stronger commitment from each one of us to be that kind of welcoming/assimilating place. It is true that a congregation who is centered on reaching out to the seeking for Jesus Christ; on connecting and building up faith; on empowering service and mission that impacts a community/area is an assimilating church.

At Messiah we want more than anything for other people to experience the love and joy we have experienced in Christ and in our church. We want those in this area to know the care and support of a truly caring church community. We want others to know the growth in faith and satisfaction that comes when each one of us is involved in loving and serving others.