

Several years ago the “Doonesbury” cartoonist Gary Trudeau gave a speech at Yale University. Here was his introduction: “Dean Kagan, distinguished faculty, parents, friends, graduating seniors, Secret Service agents, people of class, people of color, colorful people, people of height, the vertically constrained, people of hair, the differently coiffed, the optically challenged, the temporarily sighted, the insightful, the “out of sight,” the out-of-towners, the Eurocentrics, the Afrocentrics, the Afrocentrics with Eurailpasses, the eccentrically inclined, the sexually disinclined, people of sex, sexy people, sexist pigs, animal companions, friends of the earth, friends of the boss, the temporarily employed, the differently employed, the differently optioned, people with options, people with stock options, the divestitursts, the deconstructionists, the home constructionists, the home boys, the homeless, the temporarily housed at home, and God save us, the permanently housed at home...”

Trudeau’s wit and exaggerated political correctness underscore a serious reality in our contemporary American life together: our understanding of “community” has shifted radically in the past generation: from the sense that we are “one nation, under God,” one complex community, to the sense that the one American community has fragmented into myriad competing “rights” and interests and grievances.

Encouraged by those who shape pop culture, many around us understand their well-being, their sense of fulfillment, even their sense of identity, to spring from their independence from any genuine community. (“Go your own way,” “Seek your own path,” “Do your own thing...sever the ties that bind; live however you see fit. It’s all about personal choice...”)

An older definition of “community” implies concern for one another; connection with one another—even commitment and obligation to one another. We once understood that individual fulfillment came not as a result of isolation and walking away from others—but that only in committed community with others will we ever become who God created us to be; enriching and encouraging others as they likewise invest in us.

(Here’s a simple way to say all that: were you here last Sunday to hear Ben tell us about his family, his church? How he has been shaped and encouraged and held accountable since before he can remember? (I won’t ask Ben to come and stand up here, but we could consider his life to be “Exhibit A” to this sermon.)

Contrast his experience—knowing who he was, knowing he was loved by God and church and family—but also watched over and held accountable and corrected—with the rootlessness or loneliness of so many people all around us—even many overwhelmed by acquaintances and activities. (I just read of a professor at the University of Utah who performed his own experiment some years ago. He randomly chose 600 names of people he did not know from phonebook listings in Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland. He sent them Christmas cards in early December and included his return address. How many responses do you think he got?

117 wrote him back—expressing all sorts of sentiments. One wrote, “It was really great hearing from you again. We will be in Salt Lake this summer and if you have a spare room, we’d like to stay with you for two or three days.” One said, “At first we had difficulty remembering who you were, but after some thought, we remembered.

Please give our love to your father—he is a wonderful man.” Another replied, “I just got out of the hospital, and how good it was to hear from a long-time, wonderful friend.”)

Our culture seems perversely designed to frustrate long-term, close relationships. We work day-to-day with one group of people and socialize with another. Many relocate periodically and have to start up cultivating another set of friends. Many are busy, busy, busy with activities of all sorts. Too many children have never known a secure family or church foundation—and grow up to repeat the patterns of their parents.

[I am so grateful for the way this church offers our Logos program for our little ones most every Wednesday afternoon during the school year—our children are experiencing in another way, week-to-week, that they are indeed children of God; they are important and beloved by others; what they have to offer—songs or crafts projects or enthusiasm or ideas—is valuable. Jesus loves them and this church loves them and believes in them whether they are the most quietly behaved or the fastest or prettiest or smartest—or not. Logos is starting up again for the new year, and can always use adults who might want to participate.]

Our Lord Jesus offered a strategy to overcome this prevailing problem of separation. From the time He called His twelve on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, He has always called people into life-changing relationship with Himself, and He has always called us into life-changing relationship in and through one another. (Paul’s awareness that we, His disciples, are mystically but actually “the Body of Christ” here on earth came two or three decades after Jesus. But Paul built on the foundation laid by Jesus:

--“I am the true Vine; you are the branches...in Me, you all will bear much fruit” (but branches and clusters of grapes live in relation to one another if they share the same Vine. A vine with only one branch is a deformed one.)

--“I am the Good Shepherd” (Shepherds watch over a flock of sheep; one lone lamb occurs only after some tragedy)

--“You all, My followers, are the light of the world” (Any one lone oil lamp, even lit, is hardly enough to do much damage against all the powers of darkness—but together, all His disciples, have made a great difference)

--“Whoever does the will of God is My brother and sister and mother” (Jesus radically, scandalously redefines family—but still He does not redefine His disciples as isolated individuals but in new interdependence with one another in relation to Him.)

For the first three centuries, the Church understood and responded to the Christ’s vision for His Church. Every “church” named in the New Testament was a “house church,” which meant it was small enough to meet together in the living room or courtyard of one family. Not until after Constantine in the fourth century did the Church become institutionalized (or legal) enough to build their own buildings.

You know there followed an era which still pertains into our era: it became possible for people to think of “Church” as the building or the campus or the denomination or even the international structure trying to organize or educate or govern all the Christians. Early on, those bands of believers met in someone’s home, or in the Roman Catacombs under penalty of death and they gladly gave up their lives before betraying any one else in their small group. Eventually, “Church” became where you went on Sunday mornings or how you tried to behave the rest of the time; “Church” became hoops you were supposed to jump thru in order not to wind up in hell or at least

on the wrong side of the social register. With “Church” you made a semblance of an agreement: you paid your dues and they promised to treat you nicely and offer you what churches are supposed to offer: baptism, funerals, weddings, respectable friends. “Church” was where you could write out checks to help relieve the suffering of the less fortunate, and try to do some good in the world. (I know this characterization may sound petty on my part, but I do not blame these church folks at all. If you or I had experienced the kinds of churches they had, we would have, and most of us did, also kick this “church” habit, too: life’s too short for “playing pretend” every Sunday morning—or any other time!)

It’s good to keep in mind that the Spirit is continually nudging, whispering to draw each one of, wherever we are, us into deeper relationships which in turn will change our lives—just as Jesus kept inviting. For some it’s a great act of courage and faithfulness simply to attend worship one Sunday morning. Getting into the habit of worshipping every Sunday may be a huge step people take, as their faith grows from concept into practice. For you regular worshipers, the Spirit continues to call you into a committed small group—after all, worship can be a place to hide; for some intense communion but for others empty ritual. In a small group, however, old patterns and fears may be broken; here, life-change may happen.

(Sometimes it reassures me to consider that even Jesus wasn’t a good enough preacher to change the lives of his hearers merely by His preaching—instead, He met with His twelve, His “church” every day, traveled with them, ruthlessly examined them, laughed with them, critiqued them, spoke the truth to them, encouraged them on.)

The Sunday Church many Americans have come to understand it may be therapeutic, and relevant, and professionally competent even to a high standard—but I fear this all may amount to nothing Jesus would recognize as His Church. According to John, Jesus is pretty clear on the matter, and this is His department: “Keep on in the habit and lifestyle of loving one another, My disciples, in the same way I have loved you all...” [13:34]

You’ve already noticed how Jesus’ command that we are to keep on loving one another genuinely and warmly presupposes, of course, that we first know one another intimately. Jesus did not love His twelve as strangers or even casual acquaintances. He knew them inside and out; He knew their failings as well as their virtues. (“Peter, before the cock crows you will betray me three times ...”)

We can’t have it both ways—we can’t hang onto what feels comfortable, onto our arms’ length distance and our autonomy, where we get to make the rules and keep it “safe”—and also benefit from the growth and life-change God intends for us. Jesus didn’t call the twelve to keep them comfortable or safe, nor has He called you or me so we can stay comfortable. Maybe you have thought something like:

--“But I barely know these people. I don’t think I’m ready for this kind of small group...”

--“I’m far too busy already; this would probably be a waste of time and I don’t have this kind of time even if it were worthwhile...”

--“What if I have nothing in common with others in the group; I may have nothing to add.”

--“I’m don’t know anything about the Bible, and I’m not comfortable being exposed as totally ignorant”

--“I’m afraid I might be expected or pressured to open up and tell my deep dark secrets. I don’t need anybody else getting into my business...” (These misgivings may or may not be yours, but in any case it’s important always to be truthful with ourselves. God can do something with us when we get truthful!)

Sorry, men, but we are not very good at all this. One recent survey of psychologists and therapists estimated that about 10% of American men have real friends. We may have golfing buddies or professional colleagues—but most men have not a single friend with whom we truly share our thoughts or feelings. Many men, naturally, have adjusted to this state of affairs and think it’s normal or even optimal. And some of us are here because we’re tired of the old state of affairs, and we know God has something better for us than the way things always were, the life we have tried to make essentially alone and isolated.

(By the way, no one is ever pressured or expected in any of our small groups or retreats to reveal more than they are comfortable with. We respect that each one has come from a different life-experience. At the same time, we try to remember that Jesus seems to think that in His Church we are to learn to become trusting; we practice sharing and loving and giving ourselves to one another. Of course His ways for us will not feel natural or always even comfortable at first—this was true even back toward the end of the First Century when Hebrews was written, before they had coffee hour on the patio and wonderful refreshments and cookies for the kids: even back then they had to be reminded, “Keep on considering how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but continually encouraging one another...” [10:24-25])

This is why committing to a small group is a spiritual discipline: we keep at it.

The entire New Testament illustrates this vision of Jesus for His Church. The Greek word “koinonia” (that is, what we might call “committed small group” or “communion” or “being there for one another”) appears 20 times—initially and paradigmatically when Luke describes how the earliest Church “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers,” and how “all who believed met together and held all things in common;” how the church/small group “would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all within the group, as any had need.” [Acts 2:42-44]

You may be familiar with some of the many “one another” encouragements in the epistles:

- “confess your sins to one another” [Jas 5:16]
- “speak the truth to one another, in love” [Eph 4:15]
- “teach and correct one another in all wisdom” [Col 3:16]
- “bear one another’s burdens” [Gal 6:2]
- “be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving to one another” [Eph 4:32]
- “put up with one another in love” [Eph 4:2]
- “encourage one another; build up one another” [1 Thess 5:11]
- “thru love [for Christ] become slaves to one another” [Gal 5:18]
- “serve one another with whatever gift you have received” [1 Pet 4:10]
- “be sacrificially hospitable to one another” [1 Pet 4:9]
- “love one another”—repeated in several ways and places

All these reminders assume we already have a very close relationship with those in our church. (You never have to forgive someone you barely know and merely act politely toward when you see them now and then. You have no business correcting a casual friend; you would never speak the truth in love unless there were a sound basis to the friendship; never mind actually confessing our sins out loud to one another.)

Many of you “get” all this, and I know a good percentage of you are already participating in a small group. Then you are one of the great sources of strength in this church! Some of you have been part of one before, and maybe it wasn’t that great. Maybe you’re not in one now. I don’t doubt it; I have been in small groups that have been flat, guarded, boring and superficial. (I’m afraid I have led some like that.) If there’s one thing none of us needs it’s one more weekly activity on our schedule where you meet with people you have to be “on guard” around or “on good behavior” with, submerging your self or your measuring words in order not to feel disagreeable or inferior. This sort of relationship, this pattern of involvement is exactly why so many people feel perpetually busy but lonely, active but still isolated. This is no “koinonia;” no real community. (“Thanks for the Christmas card; what a great friend you are to have remembered me after my recent knee surgery.”)

If you’ve not been thrilled at how your own small group involvement has worked out for you, I’ve got to ask how you have contributed to help cause your group to remain superficial? One of my favorites is to hide behind my knowledge. It’s easy for me to act like the expert, the “know-it-all”—especially in my field, Bible Study, where I do know something. It’s always easy for me to talk from my head rather than my heart. It’s always tempting for me to try to sound as if I “have it together” a lot more than I do. Whether you can top these or not—God has arranged it so that in small groups each one of us affects the outcome, and each one of us can accept responsibility for its vitality. For a small group to work, we literally need each other. This may not be the American way, but it sure is the Holy Spirit way.

We are to keep on meeting together—when it’s not Sunday morning—loving one another with the same level of risk and readiness and room for growth as did Jesus’ first apostles. We are to keep at it: there’s no “beginner’s luck” in the Kingdom. We need to be taught how to help a small group to thrive.

But when you give the Spirit a chance, and obey on God’s terms, look out! One of the Spirit’s most welcome gifts to me was a small group of men who met every Saturday morning at 7:00 a.m. for Communion and Bible Study. There were Tim, and Art, and Nate, and Joe, and Don, and Gary, and others, and some are still meeting together 25 years later. At first I had nothing in common with this unlikely collection and would never have chosen any of them for friends. However, I was new to the East Coast; I felt isolated and adrift. They had learned to share their thoughts and feelings; they were willing to bear my burdens and to encourage me and offer me warm hospitality. It may sound melodramatic to say that they helped God to save my life—but they did. (Let me add that my affection for Art only increased when his wedding gift to Trish and me turned out to be a fine new golf club—a putter. I’m sure Art hoped it would help in some small measure to balance out all the beautiful china, linens, and decorative frou-frou items our new family received.)

One main reason I was attracted to this church, and why my family and I are here with you today, is that we and many of you have had a vital commitment to small groups. (I can somehow trust a church to whom this spirit of “koininia” is important; it means the church is built on that foundation given by Jesus: “Love one another just as I have loved you.”)

One of you on the Search Committee who met and spoke with Trish and me as we were visiting—just before we agreed to move out here to become part of this church—one of you told us how you and your family used to come to this church to worship on Sunday—for a decade or more—but then how, recently, you had gladly reoriented other weekly priorities around your small group and your church commitments. (Not because anyone had told you should, but because you no longer wanted it otherwise.)

Another of you has spoken so fondly of being part of your small group for over ten years; how even in the first year or so it became so exciting to you that you resolved to schedule all business travel so as to be here in town with your group each week. Your group has indeed helped to “bear your burdens,” and I know you have multiplied the love many, many times over. (You also know that a small group commitment is like another covenant commitment, a marriage. After you build up enough trust and love, enjoy enough good years, it helps you weather a down year or two and grow even when all may not be so exciting.)

Many of my great joys in this church have come from that Holy Spirit sweetness small groups can feel; that holy connection we experience sometime during sharing; during weekend Retreats.

As always, God allows each of us to pursue our own next steps. I hope you’ll inform Heather or me if you’re ready to take your next step into a small group. We offer several ongoing small groups, and I expect we’ll soon be adding a new men’s group and perhaps a couples’ group.

“For where two or three are gathered in My name, I, [the Holy Spirit of the risen Lord] am there with you.” [Matthew 18:20]

Hebrews 10:23-25

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

John 13:31-34

When He had gone out, Jesus said... “Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for Me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

