

Built for Community

Acts 2:37-47

Good Morning Friends and good morning to our friends who are joining us online today. I'm thankful for this time we have each week to set aside to be with one another and worship our God together.

A pastor friend shared with me that her church streams their services on Facebook Live. "People in my congregation tell me that I need to interact with every comment on that Facebook feed. I just don't think that's my role as a pastor. I see "likes", "hearts" and "angry faces" pop up on the church service as I'm preaching and it shakes my confidence. But I hear people saying that's the future of the church." "If that's the future of the church", I say, "I don't want to be a pastor."

Friends who work in higher education report abysmal marks on final exams for this term, the first term that many people have had to write an exam in person. It's been over two years since they practiced the skill of tuning out sounds of peers writing, coughing. The first time they've done an exam not in front of a computer screen.

Last week, at the potluck table, Marg and Carroll talked about the Church (especially in their growing up years) used to be the centre of everything. It was your entertainment, your peers, your music class, your social life, your community, your once a week outing.

It's not that way anymore.

As we kept our bubbles small, our online world's grew larger for better and for worse. Echo chambers both for and against health restrictions strengthened and civility waned. The algorithm of social media sites such as Facebook admit to putting posts in their users' feeds that they would interact with because it made them angry.

I heard a line in a sermon this week which sums this reality up really well, he said, "Isolating from others was the best way to stay healthy, but it was also crushingly unhealthy for us."

Yet, this retreating from in-person connection and shift to online life has also had a flipside, it has also revealed our deep longing for true Community- true connection and belonging with other people. A friend in Rosthern told me that the grade 10 class at RJC was up by 30 people from the year prior. She suspected that it was because at RJC, they could attend classes in person, eat meals together with friends and be with peers.

Yet another friend and I met up at the park this week so our kids could play. They had been checking out a new-to-them church in the city, and had attended their church picnic the day before. "How was the picnic?" I asked, "Is it feeling good there?" "Really good, she reported. This particular church functions around a cell group/small group model, where people attend the large Sunday morning service, but then are encouraged to join a small group for that deeper connection and discipleship. "They call them Life

Groups, " my friend said. "Their slogan is that it's more than "just a bible study", these groups do life together. I love that! It's what we've been missing in our lives, especially during covid, people to do life with."

All these little vignettes I've shared are just a portion of the conversations and interactions that I have had in recent months about the topic of community. Because the reality is that we are built/made for community, for fellowship, for having people to do life together with.

And our Scripture today reminds us that growing a community of believers, a community of people to do life together is part of God's vision for the church, part of God building his New Kingdom here among us.

Our text for this morning, which Roger read for us comes very soon after the Pentecost story that we talked about last Sunday. The Holy Spirit has filled that room of believers and they have spoken of God's Goodness to the people on the street, all in their own languages, fully accessible, fully invitational. In the middle of chapter two of Acts, Peter preaches the truth of the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. He proclaims that Jesus is the Lord and the Messiah, this man that They have crucified. When they hear this, the scripture says, they are overcome. They shout to Peter, "What do we do now!?" There is a desire to respond in some way to what Peter has said, and he tells, Repent! Be Baptized! Live in God's Ways!". The story says that over 3,000 people responded to Peter's call that day. I'll read a bit again, starting in verse 42, "They devoted themselves

to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." If we look closely at these verses, what was the first thing that these new converts did? They started doing life together, they started building a community. Certainly, the apostles were out preaching, and performing signs and wonders, but for the average person, they were living lives, and doing it together.

We need each other, in real and tangible ways. We need community. But I think we, as the church, now I'm talking about LMF as well. The broader church needs to be honest with ourselves about the way Covid has changed the landscape and the very real barriers that exist to be building community again. Because quite frankly, I know I'm out of practice in regards to living life with other people. I consider myself to be an extrovert, a person who gets their energy from being with other people, and in BC (Before Covid), I could move from one social occasion, one conversation to another with ease, now I come home from church on Sunday and I'm wiped out. My energy for people has diminished because of Covid. Being with people, in deep tangible ways, in ways that go beyond a surface interaction is a skill, it's a muscle that, at least for me, has atrophied during covid and it's going to take time to rebuild that strength.

And like an injured muscle, intentionality is important to help rebuild that muscle. Imagine the Community has a physical injury to your body. You've had surgery, you've been on bedrest for a prolonged period of time, and now you're ready to get back on your feet. Would your Doctor say, okay, all healed up, just go back to doing what you're doing and you'll be just fine? Likely not. You'd probably be referred to a physical therapist, who would work with you, and who would give you a whole regimen of exercises to do on a daily basis. The same is true of a Community, of our Church Community, to heal and rebuild from the past two and half years is going to require some pretty serious intentionality on all of our parts. When I worked in Student Development, one of the big things we aimed for was to equip our student leaders to build community in their dormitories, that was a big part of the vision for residence life at Providence. We had this joke, "All you have to do to build community is to order a pizza." And while it was true that ordering a pizza was the best way to get people to come out of their rooms and gather, that was only the first step. Deep community requires time, vulnerability and intentionality. It doesn't just happen. It asks something profound of us. Something very countercultural

In my devotions this week, there was a section talking about the very radical idea of rooting yourself to a village and committing there. "There is something to be said for a "theology of place"-choosing to orient our lives around community for the sake of the gospel. So much of our culture is built around moving away from people rather than closer to them. In many of the wealthiest countries in the world, we have lost the sense

of a village. And we have some of the highest rates of home ownership, and some of the highest rates of depression. We are some of the wealthiest and loneliest societies the world has ever seen. We live in a mobile culture in which people are used to moving every few years, and in which many folks will uproot without question to move for a higher-paying job.”

I have a pastor friend, this sermon is making it sound like I have a lot of friends, which isn't really true. We were discussing the across the board shrinkage of attendance in churches, including our own. One study reported that the average attendance in churches post pandemic is down 20%, so this is not a problem that is unique to Mennonite Churches. My friend mentioned people who had moved on, many he assumed who had been attending church “out of habit”, not necessarily because they wanted to be there. He said he'd listened to a lecture that Jeanette Hanson had given on Mission a few years ago, and the thing that she said that had really stuck with him was, “The time of playing church is over.” Meaning, the time for going through the motions of doing something because that's just what you do has passed. I've heard many pastors say the future of the Church is about smaller, more intentional groups.

Now that is not to say that large churches won't be around in the future. I've heard the argument too that traditions like our own need to be better at reaching out, at connecting, and “evangelizing”, for lack of a better word. There is certainly some truth to that, however, we sometimes underestimate the witness that is loving one another well. Of caring for one another. Of doing life together.

In our scripture for this morning, it would appear that this way of doing life together is very missional. Verse 42 of Acts 2 says, "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." People were drawn to this group, this place that said, "We do life together because we want to love and serve Jesus."

How can we do life together this summer? I see this happening all the time in our congregation, I see this happening all the time in my family through this church. Doreen left chicken noodle soup on my doorstep, the week my family had covid. Carrol came and rototilled my garden. Roger and Char shared the delight of their new little baby chicks with my kids (I don't think I've ever heard Ezra squeal with such delight) and my Pastoral encouragement would be to keep at it. Have coffee with one another. Check in with one another. Be vulnerable with one another. Give to the community and receive from the community as you are able. This is a gift to one another and a gift to a watching world. This is how we follow Jesus.

A former pastor of mine said it this way, "Following Jesus is a group event, like baseball, or like singing in a choir. It starts with one person who wants to play baseball or sing in a choir, but the real thing does not happen until there is a group. Following Jesus is not a group event because we need each other's love and help in order to follow Jesus, but because loving and helping each other is itself how we follow Jesus."

We are built for a community, we are wired for relationship and connection.

Before I close, I'd like to address one side point. We've talked about how covid has made an impact and the barriers we face to building and participating in community. We've talked about how we need each other, we need to do life together in order to follow Jesus well. This practice of belonging, of knowing and being known is a glimpse, a through a glass darkly experience of being in the presence of Jesus, fully known and fully loved. But we also need to acknowledge the reality that we are not there yet, we are human, we are flawed, and we fail one another. To pretend that the perfect community can exist, Christian or Otherwise, denies the reality of the world we live in. We'll always feel unsatisfied this side of our reunion with Jesus. Sometimes that realization, that there is no such thing as a perfect community, allows people to stay in the community they are in and sometimes people discern if it is time to move on. How do we talk about that reality? How can we bless one another as people move on? This is something I think about, something that I don't have answer for, but hope that we can learn that together

So friends, in this life post pandemic, in this summer "off" I invite you to practice community, to rebuild the muscles of life together (and to please, please give yourself all kinds of grace as you do that). I invite you to give and receive. To love each other well through this summer and to know that is a gift to one another and an offering of praise to God.