

Gen. 2:15-18, 21-24
Romans 12:3-8
John 15:12-17

March 6, 2022

The Being Challenge 2: **Commit to Community**

The goal of the Christian life is to become more like Jesus. And the best way to do this is to follow Jesus – why would we follow anyone else? To follow Him we must be in relationship with Him – for our doing like Him flows from our being with Him. Just as He says: ***Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, Matthew 11:29.***

During these forty days of Lent, we're focusing on this goal by **developing habits that regenerate our souls to make us more like Christ.** Habits ... we're all a bundle of habits. Studies have shown that almost half of the actions we take each day are not decisions we've made, but habits we've acquired. The key to following Jesus is allowing Him to instill within us the habits He practiced. ***Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock, Matt. 7:24.***

We are after the keystone habits of the Lord. A “keystone” habit is “a habit that people introduce into their lives that unintentionally carries over into other aspects of their lives” (from Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit*). It is no more difficult to develop a keystone habit than any other, yet it provides multiplied benefits. We've identified 5 Keystone habits practiced by Jesus. They are: Commit to community, Study Scripture, Make prayer a priority, Seek solitude, and Choose church.

Our aim during these weeks of Lent is to practice these five habits, consistently, so that ***...we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, Eph. 4:13.***

Today I'll be talking about the first of those keystone habits: **Commit to Community.**

Wired For Relationships

The distinctive, foundational belief of the Christian faith is the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God in three persons (it's first among our UMC doctrinal statements). God, it seems, is community in Himself. Our Creator made us in His image (Gen. 1:26), meaning that we are made for community. [*After God created the first man He said, It is not good for the man to be alone, Gen. 2:18.*] **Our brains are wired for community.** Zach Zehnder, author of our study says, “... as hard as community may be, I've found that people who are connected in Christian community tend to walk closely with Christ throughout their lives, but those who are isolated tend to make bigger mistakes and are far more likely to give up on their faith,” Zach Zehnder, Being Challenge.

Jesus emphasized this when He prayed for His disciples [Father] ***... I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and***

you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. John 17:22-23.

Power Of Christian Community

We have a redwood tree in our front yard – a very tall one at that. And next to it is the redwood tree in our neighbor’s front yard. If you’ve ever tried to dig in the vicinity of a redwood tree (maybe to replace a sprinkler pipe), you’ll find it very hard going. That’s because the soil is riven with thousands of tree roots, from tiny to large, all interlaced in an intricate and vast netting of roots tied in with any nearby redwood. This system of roots is one of the ways those tall conifers stand in the face of strong winds ... they help hold one another up. That’s a picture of Christian community. *For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others, Romans 12:4-5.* To be great representatives of Jesus, we each must do our part – we all have a part to play. God has gifted each of us, though He hasn’t given any of us every gift. Therefore, **we need each other to fulfill His purposes.**

Here’s another way to look at Christian community: an ember pulled from the fire soon grows cold. Our faith tends to wane when we aren’t in community. When I talk about community, I mean more than Sunday morning worship, although that’s a good start. The genuine benefits and joy of Christian community, are best found in the relationships nurtured in a small group. Encouragement, discovering our gifts, and praying for one another happens person to person. When we bring our gifts and labor together in God’s service, amazing things happen. *Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up, Eccl. 4:9*

Community Influences You

Who is in your community? Jesus chose 12 people with whom He spent a lot of time, and among them three were very close to Him. The Bible also mentions 72 who were sent out with His message. So, who are your closest 3? Spouse, family members, close friends. And who are the 12 or so with whom you hang out, or identify?

Long ago advice from a mentor: **Choose your friends carefully for you will become like them.** There is power in community – for good or for ill. I recall a H. S. teacher who shared that he quit smoking and afterwards found he couldn’t spend time with former friends who were still lighting up. I guess that would apply to any bad habit we’re trying to jettison. On the other hand, you can develop good, healthy habits by spending time with people who have those habits. *Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm, Prov. 13:20.*

[As a competitive tennis player in high school through college, I always looked for opportunities to play against those who were a little bit better – they challenged me to be better.]

Much, if not most, of the success or failure we experience in life is determined by the people with whom we continually associate. If you say you are a Christian, if you claim church membership, then you must ask yourself, “Is my community - those I most

associate with - leading me to be more Christlike ... or less?" **One of the best ways to predict your future is to look at your present community.**

[If we're seeking to be in relationship with Jesus, as we talked about last week, then it is vital that we spend time with others seeking the same. That's why, especially in this Lent study and experience, we start with community. Now I know there are those who tell themselves that they can have a good relationship with God all on their own. Over the years I've noticed that those folks are rarely pro-active in their faith. Additionally, I have observed that they more often take on the worldview of the surrounding culture, as a biblical worldview fades in their conscience. I wonder if many of the activities people pursue are driven by FOMO – fear of missing out. If your kids aren't in the activities or programs that others are in, are they missing out on the most valued thing in life?]

Community Helps You Find Purpose

Not only has God wired us for relationships, He's also wired us to have purpose in our living. When we live the way God intends, community and purpose come together. When 'Ofa and I first took a group to Tonga, we took them as tourists. We quickly discovered that many wanted to do something to help folks there. People yearn for purpose and meaning – not just leisure. Our subsequent trips to Tonga became mission trips.

People yearn to be involved in something bigger than themselves. Your answer to the question, "What's my purpose in life?" depends on what you believe and who you believe in. The Biblical is that our life-purpose comes in finding who we are called to be in relation to our Creator. It begins with two words from Jesus: "Follow me." **Don't wait for God to speak from heaven telling you what to do with your life.** God has already spoken. **Read the Bible.** There you will find numerous ways to live out God's purpose.

[Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed, Psalm 82:3].

[He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God, Micah 6:8].

[He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation, Mark 16:15].

[Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world, James 1:27].

Join others who are fulfilling purposes that God has already given. There you will experience the community God has for you.

The Digital Age

Our church community has benefitted greatly from technology: we've live-streamed worship and held small group and committee meetings through ZOOM. But two years of COVID-induced cyber-relationships has brought home to me just how much communication is missed when we're not with people in-person. **The digital connections** can help foster better relationships, but they **cannot replace genuine**

relationships. The N.T. contains over 100 uses of the phrase “one another” (Greek: ἀλλήλων]. We can’t experience “one another” alone and separated.

I know that video calls have been a great blessing to us in order to continue relationships with our two grandsons (and their parents of course) who live far away. But there’s always something missing in those video calls. We want to put our arms around those two boys and hold them close, and give them kisses, while saying how much we love them. You just can’t do that through the phone or computer.

Looking at the life of Jesus we see a man who was on the go, and yet He pulled His disciples aside numerous times, to be with them more closely, where they could soak up more of Him than just His words.

Accountability

Despite the headline-grabbing reports of moral failures of Christian leaders, let us remember that there are many more Christian leaders who live consistent, morally upright lives. Parents aren’t we always trying to teach our children what’s right and what’s wrong? Sometimes it’s not clear what’s appropriate and what’s not. We all have our blind spots and need others we trust, who will point them out to us. *Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective, James 5:16.*

At its best, Christian community, our small groups, provide us trusted fellow-believers with whom we can talk, share our heart struggles, who will pray with us, and who speak God’s words of forgiveness when we fall short.

Communion

Today we will worship our Lord together in our act of taking Communion. Notice the word communion comes from the same root as community.

1. **Communion reminds us that we are connected with our Lord.** *I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing, John 15:5.*

It means being in relationship with Him as though bound to Him like a branch on a vine.

2. **Communion reminds us that we are connected with each other through Him.** We are not only “communing” with our Lord, we are communing with others, who serve Him as their Lord. *This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you, John 15:12.*

3. **Communion reminds us that we are connected to all the saints** before and after us. *...since we have so great a cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles...* Hebrews 12:1. We’re part of something much greater than ourselves.

In taking communion we are saying “yes” to community.