

Church Matters

Week 5: Connect Groups

Covenant Group Recap (Show picture)

- Sole purpose of the group is soul care.
- Encourage, challenge, love, and support one another.
- Be better husbands, fathers, and leaders in the Church.

Alan Ahlgrim, “Everyone needs a track to run on, and a team to run with.” These men are my running partners in life and ministry.

Who’s that for you?

- Your 2am friends that you can reach out to for anything, at any time, and you know they’ll be there.
- The people who you share life with. The ups and downs, joys and pains.

Deep down, we all desire these kinds of relationships. To know others and be known. To love others for who they are and be loved for who we are. And yet, also, to be challenged to be more.

I think the reason we desire this kind of community is because God created us this way. God created us *in* community. Gen. 1:26 says, “Then God said, ‘Let *us* make mankind in *our* image...”

Did you hear the plural language? God has always existed in community through the Trinity. The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, Three persons in one. Community is deeply rooted in the nature of God. And, because community is deeply rooted in the nature of God, it’s deeply rooted in our nature, too. Part of God’s image on us is that we were made for community with others. This desire is wrapped up in the very core of who we are.

It’s why a little later in the creation account, we see this in Gen. 2:18, “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone.’”

This passage is typically used in the context of marriage, but I think it also speaks to our fundamental need to connect with others. And, what’s interesting is that this passage was written before the Fall. Adam was still in perfect relationship with God. Nothing separated them. And yet, God said it was not good for it to just be the two of them. It’s not good for Adam to go at it alone without someone else coming alongside of him.

And so, this God, who created us *in* community, also created us *for* community. God created us *in* community and *for* community. He created us to deeply and intimately connect with others. It’s rooted in his nature and it’s rooted in ours, too.

And yet, as much as we desire community, there’s also something in us that pushes against it. That keeps people at arm’s length.

At the end of Genesis 2, we find Adam and Eve and God living and moving in perfect unity with one another. In fact, chapter 2 closes by saying they were both naked and felt no shame. It's this picture of fully knowing each other with nothing separating them. It's the purest form of community and connection that anyone could experience.

But then the Fall happens in chapter 3. Sin and brokenness enter into the world and the first thing we see is Adam and Eve hide. They hide from God and they hide from each other. This perfect community they shared is now broken and there's strife between them.

And, we still live in the aftermath of that first broken relationship. We experience the same thing in ours and it makes us separate from each other, even though there's this deep desire to connect with one another more fully.

We want to be close to others, but we're afraid of being rejected. We want to be known and fully loved, but we're afraid of getting too close and being burned. And, we're afraid of these things because most of us...if not all of us...have experienced the pain of rejection or betrayal before.

And, what's interesting, is that science has discovered that our brains group the pain of rejection and betrayal in the same category as the pain of a broken bone, or slamming your finger into a car door. It's a traumatic experience. And in trying to protect ourselves from feeling that pain again, many of us isolate from others.

And so, there's this battle in us between **wanting** to experience the rich community we were created for, and yet, at the same time, being a little afraid of that kind of vulnerability.

Our enemy in this battle is the same one who showed up to Adam and Eve in the garden that day. Satan wants nothing more than to isolate us from God and others. But, our Heavenly Father wants to redeem our relationships. He wants to restore them back to the way they were intended to be. His deep desire is to connect *with us* and **for us to connect** with others in community.

And we see this desire play out in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus is fully God and fully human. He had an intimate relationship with the Father like no one else had experienced since Adam and Eve in the garden, and yet he surrounded himself with community, fully aware of the rejection and pain it would cause.

He shared life with his disciples. He ate with them, laughed with them, cried with them. He walked through the highs and lows with them, not because he needed their help, but because he desired community, just like they did. *Just like we do*. And, he knew the danger of isolation and all it can do to us mentally and emotionally and spiritually, so he surrounded himself with others.

And when the Church is born in Acts 2, (if you have a Bible, or Bible app, turn there with me) we see this Jesus-shaped community central to how these first followers of Jesus connected with each other. The book of Acts is the story of the early Church, led by the Holy Spirit, revealing Jesus to the world, including this new community he invites us into.

The Gospel, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, calls us out of darkness and into light. Out of death, and into life. But, it also calls us out of isolation and shame, and into community with others. And we see in Acts 2 this beautiful picture of community that God desires for us to experience in the Church. Look at how Luke describes it. Acts 2:42-47...(READ and point out Topic Heading)

Now, did you notice where the Church gathered in verse 46? It says they met together in the Temple Courts. It was the closest thing they had to the Church buildings we have today. They would gather together to worship and hear a teaching from God's Word with their Church family, but it didn't stop there. It goes on to say they also broke bread in their homes. It's this picture of rich, life-giving community that they shared with one another. And so, they worshiped Jesus in the Temple Courts, but then they connected with each other in their homes.

And that's the first two parts of our ministry strategy as a Church. Our strategy at Sherwood Oaks for being the Church we feel like God desires and designed us to be is Worship Gatherings, Connect Groups, and Serve Teams. We gather together for worship each Sunday, but then we connect in community throughout the week in groups. Nearly every day of the week, we have some kind of Connect Group meeting, whether it's a men's group, a women's group, or a couple's group.

And, I could spend all day talking about why Connect Groups are so important, but just a few reasons as we wrap up this morning. First, Connect Groups help us live out our faith with one another. In fact, the truth is, it's impossible to fully practice our faith in isolation. Scripture was written out of community, to community, and for community. If we try to live out our faith in isolation, there are large parts of Scripture we can't even practice!

For instance, the phrase "one another" appears 59 times in Scripture. The Bible gives us 59 ways we are to relate to each other as we live out our faith. We are to:

Love one another (1 John 3:11)

Instruct one another (Romans 15:14)

Encourage one another (1 Thess. 5:11)

Forgive one another (Eph. 4:32)

Spur one another on (Heb. 10:24)

We cannot put these verses into practice apart from intentional, close relationships with others. Connect Groups help us live out our faith and sharpen one another. The Apostle Paul says in Eph. 4:15, "We will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like

Christ.” We need others to speak God’s truth into our lives to help us become more like Jesus, and others need us to do the same for them. So, Connect Groups help us live out our faith.

They also give us a way to encourage one another.

There’s a famous hill on the campus of the University of Virginia. The incline is 26 degrees, which might not sound that bad, but it’s pretty intimidating when you’re standing at the bottom of it looking up. (18 degrees on a bike feels like I’m going to start rolling backwards, so, it’s pretty steep!) People will often times race to the top, seeing who can make it there first before running out of breath.

A study was done a few years back that asked people to stand at the bottom of the hill and guess how steep it was. And here’s what they found. The people who stood there alone and guessed significantly **OVER**estimated how steep it was. Thinking about climbing the hill by themselves felt **harder** than it actually is.

But, here’s the thing...and you know where I’m going with this...whenever a **group** of friends were asked to guess how steep it is, they significantly **UNDER**estimated it. Thinking about climbing the hill together felt **easier** than it actually is. The study concluded that everything looks easier when there’s a friend by your side.

When we connect in community with others, we encourage one another, literally, put courage inside of one another, to tackle the hills and hardships of life together. I think it’s one of the reasons God created us for community, and it’s why we value groups so much.

Finally, groups help us realize that we’re not alone. C.S. Lewis once talked about how friendships get started. He says, **“The typical expression of opening friendship would be something like, ‘What? You too? I thought I was the only one!’”**

Sharing life with others helps us see that we’re not alone. Often times in Connect Groups, people realize they’re not the only ones who have ever struggled with doubts, who sometimes don’t feel like reading the Bible or praying. They’re not the only ones who have dropped the ball as a spouse or a parent. They’re not the only ones who put on a good face for Sunday, but deeply struggle through the week. Connect groups help us realize we’re not alone. They give us a chance to live out **Galatians 6:2, where Paul says, “Carry each other’s burdens.”**

Those things can feel heavy. Groups give us a chance to lighten someone else’s load as they lighten ours, and what we find is that we can actually carry a lot more together.

Several years ago, there was a horse-pulling contest. The winning horse pulled right at 9,000 pounds. Second place was just shy of that. Crazy amount of weight. After the contest, people wondered how much the two horses could pull together. They figured it’d be somewhere around 18,000 pounds, 9,000 plus 9,000. In the end, the two horses, side by side, pulled a combined 30,000 pounds!

But, we know this, right? The sum is greater than its parts. It doesn't matter how strong you are, you can pull more when you're with others.

So, that's why Connect Groups are such an important part of our ministry strategy. They help us live out our faith, they give us a chance to encourage one another and be encouraged. And they give us people to share our life and burdens with, so we don't have to carry them alone, and they won't either.

If you want to take your next step and join a group, our Spiritual Formation team would love to help. You can email them at connect@socc.org. Just let them know you're ready to connect with others in a group and they'll help you find your people and your place.

We believe that finding your people changes everything. It's how God designed us...both in and for community. Connect groups aren't just about getting together to have more friends. They become the people that show up when life is hardest. They become the chosen family that you walk through life with. They are the people who are a steady presence of empathy, care, and courage to look outwards and serve and care for others. This type of community changes everything.

Life is messy, but it doesn't have to be lonely. Find your people, connect in a group, let us help.

We were created to be in relationship with others and the greatest relationship is with Jesus. Our standing before God will not come down to a morality resume. A list detailing all the good we've done and all the bad we've avoided. The truth is, none of us are worthy to stand before a holy God, which is why our standing with him comes down to our relationship with Jesus.