

I Belong to a Discipling Community

I want to start this morning with a question, are you happy? There's actually a journal...it's like an academic peer review journal and it's called The Journal of Happiness Studies, and they're trying to use the tools of research to figure what is it that makes human life thrive, what produces joy. I thought this was quite interesting.

When they look at what distinguishes happy people from less happy people. They find that there is the one factor, one difference that consistently separates those two groups, that distinguishes more happy from less happy people?

It's not income. It's not how much money you have. It is not health. It's not what kind of shape your body's in. It's not security. It's not attractiveness. It is not IQ. It is not career success.

What distinguishes consistently happier people from less happy people is the presence of rich, deep, joy-producing, life changing, meaningful relationships with other human beings.

And for Christians, it goes even deeper, when those relationships are intentionally spiritually directed.

Spending meaningful time with friends, family, people who care about us; just absolutely indispensable to human well being.

Robert Putnam wrote a book called Bowling Alone. I think it's one of the most influential works on analyzing social well being written in decades.

This is one of the things he writes, “***The single most common finding from a half-century’s research on life satisfaction not only from the US but around the world is that happiness is best predicted by the breadths and depth of one’s social connections.***”

The Importance of Being Connected

Of course, that’s not news to God because God made us that way.

The Bible said this a long time ago. God created human beings, and then it says, “*The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for man to be alone.’*”

Part of what it means to be made in God's image is you have this capacity for what might be called a sense of belonging or being connected.

Now, connectedness is not the same thing as knowing a bunch of people or having a lot of names in your iphone contacts or facebook or something.

There are some people who get a little confused about this because they have lots and lots of conversations, maybe lots and lots of text messages but not a lot of close deep friendships. Lots of conversations maybe, but no real connections.

I'll give you a picture of connectedness from the Bible. This is Paul writing to the Church in Ephesus, and he talks about how they can be connected to the Father and then to all of God's children...God's family where we can be like brothers and sisters with each other, and then he says this is what's going on.

He says, "*You are being rooted and established in love.*" (Eph. 3:17)

It's a part of like a tree. When a tree puts roots down in the ground, without that the tree dies but when there are roots going in the ground then those roots are able to take in nutrients and water, and the tree grows and it has life and it has strength, but only if it's rooted.

Paul is saying, in a similar way, we are rooted, our souls get rooted in love of God in other people.

I'm known. I'm cared for, I'm safe, I'm loved. The deal is that living in connectedness creates freedom, strength, and joy in us because God made us for that.

Now, when speaking of being connected, the ultimate connection is to be connected with God, and there is no place on earth where that connection can be severed.

That's what Paul talks about in the letter to the Romans. What can separate us from the love of God wherever we go? Nothing!

There's also the connectedness that happens between people, and you need it and you cannot flourish without it. I don't care how well other areas in your life go.

Here's what gets crushed in us when we're not connected.

Emotionally, isolated disconnected people are more prone to depression, anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, substance abuse problems, sexual addiction problems, difficulties with eating and sleeping because it is not good to be alone...that's disconnection.

People who are socially disconnected are between 2 and 5 times more likely to die from all causes than those who have close ties to family and friends and relationships. That's the power of connections.

Listen, this is how strong this is. People who have bad health habits like cigarette smoking, overeating, elevated blood pressure, physical inactivity; people with bad health habits but that are connected, live longer than people who have great health habits but are disconnected, that are isolated.

Poster boy for this might be Winston Churchill. It's always good to use an Englishman for an illustration.

Churchill was deeply connected, had a wonderful marriage with his wife, he was connected to his family, connected to his friends and his nation and his work. His health habits were terrible. His diet was awful. He smoked cigars all the time. He drank too much, weird sleep habits, was completely sedentary but he lived into his nineties.

Somebody asked him one time, "Winston Churchill, do you ever exercise?"

This was his response, "The only exercise I get is serving as a pallbearer for my friends who died while they were exercising."

The Power of Connection.

Biblically, God says anyone who does not love remains in death.(1 Jn 3:14) This is from the pen of John. John doesn't say anyone who hates, remains in death. Just the absence of love is deadly, not just physically but spiritually.

See spiritually when we live in isolation-

- We are more likely to give into temptation.
- We are more likely to give into discouragement.
- We are more likely to be self-absorbed.
- We are more likely to spend money in selfish ways.
- We are more likely to live in self deception, not know the truth about ourselves. Not even know that I'm isolated because nobody knows and loves me enough to actually let me know about this.

Added to all of that, not only do I suffer when I live in disconnectedness but then other people that God placed around me get cheated out of the love that God intended me to give them.

We have to understand, that was never God's intent for people.

So one day God said, "Now, I'm going to start a new community. This is going to be a community for dysfunctional, broken, sinful people," He offers it through Jesus, and He called it the Church.

It works like this, if anybody would come to Jesus, if I will acknowledge the truth about my sin, I am a sinner, and if I ask God for forgiveness because Jesus died on the Cross for me, and if I repent of my sins and ask Him for power to become a new kind of person, then Jesus says, “You can be a part of my new community.”

This new community right now is spreading all around the world and then you can kind of be a part of this circle of connectedness.

Not just that, you can kind of expand this circle and you can take this circle into your life and make it available to anybody. But here’s the thing, we have to learn to relate to each other in a new way.

We’ll have to have Jesus help.

That leads us to the next area which is we’ll have to relearn **The Circle of Connection**. There’s a little phrase in the New Testament that pops up over and over that we’re going to really immerse ourselves in and it’s the phrase “one another.”

When you see that phrase now, that's about this new circle of connectedness. Right at the heart of the one another passage is, is this one from Jesus, "***A new command I give you, love one another just as I have loved you so you must love one another. All people will know you are My disciples if you love one another.***" That's the new circle of connectedness. That's belonging! That's a discipling community!

Then the master teaches the disciples what this new community looks like and he says follow me and make new disciples by doing what I did.

"Wash one another's feet," Jesus says. Prefer one another, honor one another, welcome one another, don't envy one another, build up one another. The beauty of these one another is we can do them all not just with each other but we can take them out into the world.

You can take it into your neighborhood and to restaurants and to where you work and to your school and invite other people into a discipling relationship of connectedness.

In the little time that remains today, I just want to encourage you to understand what discipling one another looks like.

So listen to these and then let God speak to you and see where is God calling me to do these one another in my life, in my relationships, in my little circles of connectedness and belonging this week.

Here's the first one: accept one another.

Accept one another then just as Christ accepted you in order to bring praise to God." (Rom. 15:7)

Accept...because acceptance is so powerful.

Then if there is any confusion about what does that mean, we're told to accept one another just as Christ accepted you.

How did Jesus accept me?

Well, he didn't say, "Dan, if you just clean up a little bit, if you just dress better, read the Bible more, cut down on some bad habits, then I'll let you into my community."

No, he's not saying that. He is going to help me to change because He wants me to become my best self for his glory, but I don't have to pretend to be anything I'm not.

I don't have to pretend to be any better, stronger, smarter than I am, to be a disciple of Jesus. That is such a powerful thing. How did Jesus accept you? Just the way you are.

There's an old song that used to be sung at Billy Graham crusades - "Just as I am without one plea, but that Your blood was shed for me and that You bid me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come."

I'm just coming the way I am, just as I am. When somebody knows the embarrassing, humiliating truth about me and still accepts me. Oh, that is so powerful. It is so caring for us.

When the Acts 2 Church was born, one of the things it says about the people is that they met together in their homes, and they broke bread together with glad and sincere hearts, because now there was this

community because of Jesus where everybody could come on in “just as I am.”

Glad and sincere hearts because where hearts are sincere then they will be glad. We get to be that kind of community. No more pretending, no more facade.

That’s why James says in another passage, “***Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you might be healed.***”

You see, nobody is part of Jesus’ community because they’re smart, pretty, strong, or successful. I’ll say that again, nobody is sitting here because you are smart, pretty, strong or successful.

You may live in a world where looking that way is real important...not in Jesus’ community.

I’ll tell you a little secret. We’re all here as sinners. We are forgiven sinners, recovering sinners, but sinners, because that’s the only way

that fallen human beings can safely be in the circle of belonging in this Jesus community of discipleship.

Because see if we're just here as sinners, recovering fallen sinners then who's going to pass judgment on somebody else? Who's going to say no, I don't think we'll let you in? Who is going to say, no you're not worthy to be a disciple?

We meet together as forgiven, recovering sinners under the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.

One of the most important moments of my own spiritual life was when I sat down with a man in my men's small group and said, "I don't want to have any secrets anymore. I told him the stuff I was so ashamed of, like being a Vikings fan!

Seriously, I felt so vulnerable because I was afraid that I was going to be outside the circle of belonging, lose connection with him. But, he looked at me right in the eyes, and he said, "Dan, I have never loved and respected you more than right now."

That was so powerful for me.

It's a very interesting connection that James makes between confessing and praying and healing. Sin isolates us, and sin and isolation will make you sick in your soul and even your body.

Confession and then prayer, and prayer is so important.

It is so important that we be a Church of prayer, that we pray for each other. Pray in groups, pray in families. Confession and prayer, connectedness to each other and to God and bring our healing. That's discipleship!

Here's another one another: serve one another.

"You, my brothers and sisters," Paul says, "were called to be free but do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature. Rather serve one another humbly in love," because what makes the kingdom the kingdom is when people **Serve One Another.**

Jesus comes down to Earth and He says to his disciples, "Okay now, you watch this. You watch my life. You hear my words because now the kingdom's coming to Earth.

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.

It's not like the kingdom in which we live where it's all about status and climbing ladders and getting attention. It's not that way.

Jesus said, I didn't come for any of that stuff. I didn't come to pursue this life, but to serve. Because that's what it's like in the Trinity: Father, Son and Spirit. It's just an eternity of servanthood and mutual submission and joy and delight.

And Jesus says, you can be a part of my kingdom if you want to, but I have to tell you it's all about serving and if you don't want the servant deal, you don't really want the kingdom deal." You really don't want me!

I heard a story about Mother Teresa while in Prishtina, Kosova last month, that is the home of Mother Teresa.

There was a man and he was in the untouchable cast. He lived his life on the streets of Calcutta. He ate garbage where he could find it, dressed in rags and he was dying on the streets.

Mother Teresa finds him. Brings him to the shelter, bathes his body, dresses his wounds, feeds him, gives him a cot to lie down on.

These were this man's words, "*All my life, I have lived like an animal. Now I can die like a human being.*"

You see, to serve someone is to treat them like a human being to be loved, not an object to be used, not a rung on the ladder of success to climb on, but a creation of God.

But, leave no doubt, it's about risk! The risk to get close enough to someone to give them a place so you can attend to their needs.

This is connecting! This is belonging! This is discipleship!

Here's the thing: Every time connection happens, it's like something's being poured from one soul into another soul, and it has the power to heal wounds and the one person knows the joy of receiving healing and the other person knows the joy of being used for healing and it is life giving to both of them and that's connection and no one can live without it.

Another one another. One of the early marks of the early Church was their dedication to **Commit to One Another** because they knew connectedness doesn't just happen.

In Acts 2, it says that met together every day. They met in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes. They ate together with glad and sincere hearts.

It was like a daily deal. So this is not just go to church twice a month and cross that off the list. This is about communities, about connectedness, about belonging.

It's a daily deal, but over time, that value began to fade as values will if we don't keep reminding ourselves.

So the writer of Hebrews said, "***Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.***"

Don't give up. Don't give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing. Keep persistent. Keep going. Keep encouraging one another.

I'll be honest with you, community takes a "don't give up" spirit because it isn't easy. God will help us but still it is not easy.

If you're not in a community of one anothers, for whatever reason, we would love to help you move towards that connectedness. We have some pastors and elders and other church family members who would love to have you join them in being connected, belonging, disciplined. They will be hosting a four week study in their homes and in the church beginning in November for those of you who do not currently belong and are not connected.

If you would write "BELONG" on the back of your welcome card, we will put you in contact with a group of people who will encourage you, care for you, challenge you and help you belong to this wonderful community started by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Take the risk to belong and fill out the card.

Robert Putnam, this guy I noted earlier. This is what he said...this is one of the most staggering comments in his book that I read. Putnam wrote, *“As a rough rule of thumb, if you belong to no groups but you decide to join one. You cut your risk of dying over the next year in half.”*

Isn't that remarkable? Anybody here not interested in cutting your risk of dying in half.

That's why I'm thinking about branding the new slogan for our small groups ministry to be - “Belong or Die”.

Kinda catchy and uplifting don't you think?

Now, If you're part of a community, I want to encourage you to ask God what does He have for your group this coming year?

Maybe you have room for one more and could invite somebody to get in.

Maybe you could launch a new group or launch a new leader.

Maybe you could enter more deeply into each other's lives and spiritual growth.

If you're leading a group, thank you. It's a noble thing to do and you are making an eternal impact! Don't give up.

Final picture of connection. I was watching the Vikings last Sunday and as we all know, they are struggling and it is a difficult season. It's hard to be a fan this year. They were up 28-3 at halftime and they were booed leaving the field.

There is a dynamic with a football team where when people are in the stands and it is a bad season, they don't tend to have an attitude in the stands of, "**Let us consider how we can spur our team on.**"

You know the tackling and a good passing game, all the things you need to a successful season. When the season's going bad and the team is 0-4, there's this odd habit where the people who need the cheers the most get them the least.

Jesus says, “Not in my community, not in my circle of disciples, not with you ”

See, because every day, everybody you know faces something way bigger than a football game, and that’s a life. It’s a life with eternity riding on the line, and life has a way of beating people down and every life needs a cheering section.

- Every life needs somebody in the stands.
- Every life needs a shoulder to lean on once in awhile.
- Every life needs a prayer to lift them up to God.
- Every life needs to hear a voice saying, “Your spiritual growth, your obedience to God, your generosity with your resources, your heart of love matters more than you could imagine.
- Keep going, keep going, keep trusting God. Don’t give up.”

That’s belonging. That’s an authentic spiritual relationship, that’s discipleship!

And here’s the good news, we all get to go in this community just as we are. If you are looking for that type of place, welcome to Jesus’ community! Welcome home! Welcome to a discipling community.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You that You have invited us into Your discipleship community. Thank You for the gift of Your Church. Thank You for the power of one anothers. We want that power of one another in God to be released in our lives and into our Church and into our communities. So would You speak right now to everybody about faces and names and real human beings that they can come alongside. Would You make us, God communities of love and keep us connected to You and to each other in relationships centered on you.

We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.