

September 1, 2024

“Community: The Means of Growth”
Ephesians 4:11-16

FCF: Critical element for success

PROPOSITION: (anchor) The gospel creates community.
(magnet) We grow in the gospel through community.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Amazon Prime has released the new season of *Rings of Power*, set in the Second Age of J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth. In the Third Age, thousands of years later, a hobbit named Frodo Baggins is set on a daunting quest - to take the One Ring back to Mordor to destroy it. It’s an impossible task. How will he do it? He needs more than lembas bread. He needs a companion. There’s a scene in the first film that captures this so well. Frodo has pushed off in a boat across the river but Sam has followed him (**READ**). “Go back, Sam. I’m going to Mordor alone.”

Sam presses into the water. “Of course you are. And I’m coming with you.” He nearly drowns but Frodo pulls him into the boat. Frodo gazes at him. “I made a promise, Mr. Frodo. A promise. ‘Don’t you leave him, Samwise Gamgee.’ And I don’t mean to. I don’t mean to.”

The point? We are all hobbits on a quest. And we need companions for the journey. Our Community Groups are starting next week. And I wanted to take some time to talk about that.

SCRIPTURE READING: Ephesians 4:11-16**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION****SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

The world is searching for community. It’s hard to find. Reflecting in an interview upon the years since he wrote *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam expressed his dismay with the ongoing problems of isolation and loneliness felt by so many. The world is searching for community.

What’s the answer? Paul tells us. It’s not a new idea but an old one. It comes not by surface treatments but a deep transformation. Tim Keller wrote of this a few years ago (**READ**):

The gospel creates community. Because it points us to the One who died for his enemies, it creates relationships of service rather than selfishness. Because it removes both fear and pride, people get along inside the church who could never get along outside. Because it calls us to holiness, the people of God live in loving bonds of mutual accountability and discipline. Thus the gospel creates a human community radically different from any society around it.

The gospel creates community. It is essential that we grapple with this. A couple of weeks ago, building off of that idea, we talked about how community is the means of outreach. This week, we see something similar. Community is the means of outreach. And it is also the means of growth. The gospel is what creates community. And we grow in the gospel through community.

How? Three things. First, the unity of the faith. Second, our relationship with Jesus. Third, our maturity as Christians. Our experience of each of these comes through community.

I. THE UNITY OF THE FAITH

First, in this community we experience the unity of the faith. (**READ Ephesians 4:13a**).

A) What This Implies

1. A diversity

Very simply, what does this imply? To speak of a community demands a diversity. Otherwise, it is just a flat, bland sameness giving no demonstration whatsoever of the Spirit's unifying power.

2. A plurality

Community demands a diversity. And a plurality. You have to have multiple individuals.

B) What This Rules Out

By definition, that's what community implies. What does this immediately rule out?

1. Going it alone

Going it alone. An experience of community cannot be had in isolation. It's impossible.

2. Pervasive in Scripture

And yet, we see this community experience throughout the Bible. Think of the dozens of "one another" commands in the New Testament. Living those out can only be done together.

The gospel creates community. And it takes community to experience this unity.

Application:

Think with me. The gospel forms unnatural groupings of people - darker and lighter, rich and poor, young and old, enlisted and officers, in-crowd and out-crowd, Republicans and Democrats. All bound together by the unity of our faith. It's a wonder to behold. Just to see it can grow your faith. But you can't experience this from the outside. You have to come inside.

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II. OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS

It's through community that we experience the unity of the faith and come to maturity as well (**READ Ephesians 4:13a-b**). There's a depth to this knowledge that we share together.

A) A Factual Knowledge

1. Basic essentials

There is factual knowledge - who Jesus is, why He came, what difference that should make.

2. Ongoing understanding

And our ongoing understanding of how the gospel applies to our lives. We need each other here.

B) A Relational Knowledge

But there is a relational element to this knowledge as well. That is, not just knowing about Jesus, but actually coming to know Jesus. And this can't be done in isolation either.

Illustration:

C. S. Lewis writes of this in *The Four Loves*. The context is a circle of friends (**READ**):

In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's reaction to a specifically Caroline joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him "to myself" now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald. Hence true Friendship is the least jealous of loves. Two friends delight to be joined by a third, and three by a fourth...We possess each friend not less but more as the number of those with whom we share him increases. In this, Friendship exhibits a glorious "nearness by resemblance" to Heaven itself where the

very multitude of the blessed (which no man can number) increases the fruition which each has of God. For every soul, seeing Him in her own way, doubtless communicates that unique vision to all the rest. That, says an old author, is why the Seraphim in Isaiah's vision are crying "Holy, Holy, Holy" to one another (Isaiah VI, 3) The more we thus share the Heavenly Bread between us, the more we shall all have.

Application:

What's Lewis' point? Even we as human beings are too rich and multi-faceted to be fully known by but one person. You or I alone can't bring out all that there is in a person. You need to see the person with others. Then we can begin to know them. Well, if this is true with human beings, finite creatures, how much more so with the Lord? We need one another to know Jesus.

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III. OUR MATURITY AS CHRISTIANS

It's through community that we experience the unity of the faith, that we get to know Jesus, and that we grow in our faith. It's the means of maturity (READ Ephesians 4:13-16).

A) Marks of Maturity

1. Memorable images

Paul would not have us to be like immature children or unstable ships - memorable images.

2. Vibrant flourishing

We are meant for vibrant flourishing, becoming like Jesus by the power of Jesus. We are meant to be grounded in the truth, so gripped by His love, that we literally are "truthing in love."

B) Means of Maturity

So we say, "Sounds great! How can I get that?" What are the means of maturity?

1. Each for the other

Paul tells us. A life of each for the other in which our individualism gives way to a corporate mindset. A shared sacrificial life where each is working as it should for the good of the whole.

2. Memorable images

And again, we have these memorable images. Not that of a classroom. That's not how it comes about. It happens in the life of a living body, in the shared interdependency of each part.

The point being it takes a community to experience maturity, to grow in your faith.

Application:

It can't be done on your own. How do we learn? How do people change? Not by just simply listening but by discovering. Our Community Groups are starting a study on "Relational Wisdom" and what it means to be self, other, God aware and engaged. We'll be learning about what it means to be humble and disciplined, compassionate servants, to remember and to be faithful. We need one another to know what that looks like and how it comes about. We need one another, to grow as Christians, a community for maturity. That's how the Lord set things up.

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CONCLUSION:

Let's go back to Middle Earth. Some of you have heard me use this illustration before but it's too good not to mention here. Again, the Ring must be taken to Mordor and destroyed. The survival of Middle Earth depends on this. It will take the strength of men and wizard and the hardiness of elf and dwarf. But Legolas, the elf, and Gimli, the dwarf, have longstanding grievances against one another. They argue over which of their races was responsible for the waning of their old friendship. Gandalf, the wizard, steps forward and declares (**READ**):

I have heard both, and I will not give judgments now. But I beg you two, Legolas and Gimli, at least to be friends, and to help me. I need you both.

Indeed, they needed one another. And in time, as the story unfolds, their respect for one another grew. We see something of this dynamic in what we've read this morning. We need one another. We each need one another for the mission ahead and that we might each grow along the way.

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