

Southport Presbyterian Church
Rev. Jim Capps
April 19-20, 2008

“Nobody Stands Alone”
Genesis 1:26-28; John 1:1-3; 43-51

It was Christmas morning in 1998. Russ Robinson and his family had attended a Christmas Eve service the night before and were in their motor home leaving the frigid weather of the Chicago area for the warmth of Arizona. Russ and his wife took turns driving all day and into the night. While cruising along in the darkness of a rural interstate highway, the headlights suddenly revealed a woman dressed in black, walking in the middle of the road. Russ swerved the vehicle, but it was too late. The motor home crashed into the woman. Her head hit the windshield. Her body smashed into the right side of the motor home, tossing her into the ditch...

Later it was discovered that the woman had been drunk and was attempting suicide. Despite the horrible collision, she survived. Russ was devastated. He pulled off the road, dialed 911, and nearly went into shock.

Can you begin to imagine his feelings? From the joy and celebration of being with his family on Christmas Day on the first day of vacation to the horror of hitting someone on an interstate, it was terrifying. Who would you call in a situation like that? Do you have friends or family members with whom you are so close that you would dial them as a kind of conditioned response? In our culture today, maybe there is no one.

Seconds after the accident, Russ phoned a friend in his small group. Then his wife called someone in her small group. Even though it was the end of a busy holiday, the two groups gathered to pray.

Russ writes: “Their prayer support helped me begin the road to emotional recovery. My community listened during long conversations while I tried to process confusing emotions. When I wrestled with God—seeking to make sense of the experience—people offered me reassurance and other help. I needed people to pray with and for me, and I came to know what it was to have someone ‘weep with those who weep’ (Romans 12:15). I experienced how the Body of Christ can extend real, personal hands to someone in pain.”

As Russ related his experience to the vital need for meaningful community, he says, “You need to invest in community today, so you can reap the benefits during tomorrow’s seasons of deprivation and loss.”

While you and I may readily agree with Robinson, beyond your family, do you have those kinds of friends?

A May 2005 survey asked the question, “How often do we entertain guests for dinner?” How would you respond? Here are their findings:

- Once a week—6%
- Once a month—21%
- More than once a month—12%
- A few times a year—37%
- Rarely or never—24%

To go a step further, a study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, released in June of 2006, revealed that Americans have less people they can confide in than in past generations.

In 1985, the average American had three people in whom to confide matters that were important to them. In 2004, that number dropped to two.

Perhaps even more striking, the number of Americans with no close friends rose from 10 % in 1985 to 24.6 % in 2004.

Dear friends, more than ever, those who call themselves Followers of Jesus Christ, must be a part of meaningful small groups where genuine friendships are formed and fostered. We must be a community where nobody stands alone.

Today, I am bringing the first of five messages by all four pastors on the need for every one being a part of a small group here at SPC. In this first message I want to lay a theological, biblical foundation for the need for small groups so that nobody stands alone.

We are going to begin at the beginning, as we look at Genesis 1:26-28 and John 1:1-3. Read those passages.

As the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God functioned as the first small group.

Did you notice as we read Genesis 1:26, the first person plural being used as it speaks of God creating man? “Let us make man in our image in our likeness.” In seminary, I remember taking at least a three-hour class session talking about what those first person plural pronouns really meant.

It’s quite clear that the person whom God inspired to write those words did not think of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit like we do in our 21st Century Christian World. In contrast to the religions around them, the Hebrew people always thought of God as being one and not many. The idea of the trinity would have seemed like heresy to the writers of Genesis.

Yet, when we look at the beginning words of John’s Gospel, He makes it very clear that the Word, Jesus, the Son, was present and took part in Creation of all that is. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”

As we look back on the Creation account, looking through the lens of the New Testament, in Genesis 1:2 we read about the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity: “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”

While the Trinity is very difficult for us to comprehend, I believe that we can safely say that, even though the Hebrew people didn’t understand the concept, from the beginning God was three distinct persons. God was Trinity. That being the case, the Trinity functioned as the first small group.

While that idea may seem like a little bit of a stretch as we talk about small groups, it is a place to start. Making the same point, listen to these words from Gareth Icenogle, pastor of the National Presbyterian Church:

“The call to human gathering in groups is a God-created and God-directed ministry, birthed out of the very nature and purpose of God’s being. God as Being exists in community.”

Created in the image of God, each one of us was made to be in a small group.

When we turn back to Genesis 1:26-27, we find this God who creates the first human life, creates human being in His image. In that image or likeness, we are above all of the other earthly beings, but just a little lower than the angels.

What does it mean to be in the image or likeness of God? There has been a lot written on that very subject. It seems to me that we are talking about us as human beings having volition or a will in a special way. We can make choices based upon the past, present, and our projection of the future. Wrapped up with that is the fact that we have the ability to relate to each other and God in a way greater than any of the other creatures.

With that ability to relate to others, means that you and I are created to be in community. Just as God, the Trinity exists in community, as beings created in His likeness, so are we created with a community gene. From the very beginning we were never meant to stand alone.

As those created for community, in the world in which we live today where community is much more difficult to find, the Church of Jesus Christ must be a place where people find community. Certainly as we gather at times like this worshipping God, we experience a crucial kind of community.

The problem comes in the fact that we can't know and be known very well in larger groups like these. We need small groups of people who share their lives together. Groups who laugh and cry together; hurt and celebrate together; groups who study together; groups who care for each other; groups who hold each other accountable; groups who share life together on a deeper level. We all have a relational DNA.

As most of you know, Senator John McCain who will most likely be the Republican candidate for president this Fall, was a POW in Viet Nam. He describes the sheer joy of being reunited with fellow POW's after being held in solitary confinement for long periods of time:

“I was overwhelmed by the compulsion to talk non-stop, face-to-face with my obliging new cellmate. I ran my mouth ceaselessly for four days...One of the more amusing spectacles in prison is the sight of two men, both just released from solitary, talking their heads off simultaneously, neither one listening to the other, both absolutely enraptured by the sound of their voices.”

Dear friends, created in the image of God, we were created to live in small groups where we could share our very lives with others.

Jesus called the twelve to be in a small group with him.

Please listen as I read John 1:43-51, which gives us the account of the calling of two of Jesus' twelve disciples.

That time together with His disciples was crucial if the kingdom He proclaimed would take root and be real here on this good planet earth. He spent more time with those twelve unlikely guys than he did with everyone else put together. They read the scriptures and prayed together. Their daily lives were a continual laboratory for learning. He constantly called upon the sights and sounds of the world around them as illustrations of what His kingdom was meant to be. It all happened in small groups where they knew one another, very well, warts and all.

By the way, Jesus small group made up with twelve was probably the maximum number for good group interaction according to group organizational experts. It was small enough so that you could really know one another, yet large enough to allow for interactions with a diverse group of people.

Writer, John Eldridge captures the importance of being in small groups like Jesus had when he writes in his book, *Waking the Dead*:

(Speaking first of the hobbits in *Lord of the Rings*)”When he left Rivendell, Frodo didn’t head out with 1,000 elves. He had eight companions. Jesus didn’t march around backed by hundreds of followers, either. He had 12 men—knuckleheads, every last one of them, but they were a band of brothers.

This is the way of the kingdom of God. Though we are part of a great company, we are meant to live in little platoons. The little companies we form are small enough for each of the members to know one another as friends and allies. Is it possible for 5,000 people who gather for an hour on a Sunday morning to really and truly know each other? Okay, how about one hundred and eight? It can’t be done. They can’t possibly be intimate allies.

It can be inspiring and encouraging to celebrate with a big ol’ crowd of people, but who will fight for your heart?”

On Thursday morning, I met with a small group of men, who helped me grapple with some of the issues of my life. They know me and I know them. They were the kind of guys who “fight for your heart.”

Jesus realized the necessity of small groups and called twelve men with whom he could share His life and ministry.

Application

As a way of using an example of the crucial nature of small groups, so that nobody stands alone, I want to call on Keir Thelander who grew up in this church, and is now a surgeon serving as a missionary in the African country of Gabon.

Interview Questions for Keir

- Tell us about the small groups you have been a part of on your journey of faith.
- What have you experienced as you have shared with others in small groups?
- What words of encouragement would you give to someone who may be considering being a part of a small group?

Just before Easter I was at a nice dinner party where a man who I have know since the 60’s and has moved to another community asked me how many people we would have in church on Easter. After I answered, without trying to play “one-ups-man ship” he said that the church he belonged to would have 7,000 attending instead of the 4,000 they had on a normal weekend.

He went on to say that he met with a small group of people in a member's home every week. They studied together, prayed together and shared life together. He was quick to add that this was where it was at for him. Without this group, he would be lost in a church that size. He also said that 82% of their people were in groups just like his. They were a church of small groups. It was a place where nobody stood alone.

I pray that the same thing might be true for us here at SPC. This is neither another program being offered nor a means of trying to boost our attendance or giving numbers. This is response to the very way we were created and a way we can follow the example of Jesus.

I pray that as more and more we become a church for others, caring for the world around us, we might be nurtured and encouraged by small groups so that nobody stands alone.