

## The Problem with Small Groups.

We've had more leaders this year than ever before and we've had more small groups at once than ever before. 8 small groups for the first time in the history of our ministry. Pretty awesome. In small group ministry, we've sometimes used a tool called a Flight Plan. The first three months are the Take Off stage, the next three are the Flight, and the final three are the Landing. And we change our goals a bit depending on what stage we're in.

Well, keeping that analogy – this year we've also experienced the most turbulence.

Small Groups are hard. Sometimes they create conflict or disappointment or can be emotionally challenging. Right? We as a church owe it to ourselves to acknowledge that truth. Small groups don't always live up to our expectations.

As a Church, it's easy to paint a picture of small groups and present them at their highest ideal, because that's what we're aiming for, right? We want thriving, flourishing, Christian communities where people pursue God together build each other up. and care for one another. And we don't always experience that.

What makes small groups difficult? There's two factors. Here's the **first**.

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In other words, small groups are difficult because our **lives are more private than ever**. It wasn't always like this. Even 20 years ago, small groups were easier than they are now. But what about 2000 years ago?

Scott Boren, author and small group expert writes this about why small groups occurred naturally in the early Church,

**"In the first century world of Jesus,** Paul, and the other apostles, the home was a public place that was integrated into daily life. A carpenter did not go to a factory to do his work. He worked from his home or the home of another carpenter. Education, play, social interaction, eating – all of this would have been part of home life. To meet in the home of a church member during that time would have reflected daily life patterns..."

There was repetition of contact between people in a town that would've naturally built up social capital between people. Take something like shopping, for example. You'd buy your goods from the same several merchants every week and chances are, you'd go that person's home to do it. If you wanted to buy clothes, you'd probably purchase them from the same family that made them. The home was a public place and lives were more interconnected.

So it's easy to see how Jesus' can give instructions to his disciples like what we see in Matthew 10:11-12

<sup>11</sup> **Whatever** town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave.<sup>12</sup> As you enter the home, give it your greeting. <sup>13</sup> If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you.

Picture life today. You wake up, drive 20 minutes or more to your job. When you get there, you interact with a lot of people who have never been in your house and might never meet your family. You go to the grocery store to buy your food and you'll never know the names of the people who made it or sold it to you. Maybe you'll stay inside for the night with your family and eat at home or go out to eat somewhere 20 minutes away from your actual neighborhood where you'll still be expecting a fairly private evening.

When someone does knock on your door unannounced, you're not really sure how to respond.

Life used to be a lot more public and a lot more shared, a lot more intimate and social and group oriented.

Today our lives are highly individualized, compartmentalized, and private. As a result small groups are difficult, they're tiring. We experience ourselves working against the current of our natural flow of life. It's not going to get better. Is it? So the church is faced with a decision: **do we change our expectations** of Christian community to fit our lives today or do we change our lives today to fit the expectations of New Testament Christian Community.

Individually, that's something that each of us has to decide for ourselves. As a Church though, we want to be obedient to scripture, to live a life that is faithful to what Christ expects of us and to conform ourselves to the image of Jesus. So the question for us, the question we're addressing today, becomes – how do we make it so that the difficult work of going against the grain of our individualistic culture is exciting and life-giving.

Before we do, I want to acknowledge that there's something else that makes Christian Community difficult. That's this: **We're not there yet**. As individuals, we're not who God wants us to be and so as a Church we're not yet all that God wants us to be and so in our smaller communities, of course we won't be experiencing our idea of Christian Community.

That's okay. Because what we're doing is building something that doesn't yet exist. We're growing into it. For some of us that means, changing our preferences, changing what we're accustomed to, changing our normal mode of operation. And that's hard. And we get people that come to small group that have different visions of what small group should be.

Bonhoeffer, in his book, "Life Together" offers **this** warning

Those who love their dream of Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial...the Christian community has not been given to us by God for us to be continually taking its temperature. The more thankfully we daily receive what is given to us, the more assuredly and consistently will community increase and grow from day to day as God pleases.' (38)

For Bonhoeffer, even though we're not experiencing our idea of Christian community – that shouldn't keep us from loving the reality of our Christian community.

I mentioned Scott Boren before and part of this message is inspired by his book, "Beyond Small Groups."

One of the questions, he tries to answer in his book is how do we move small groups from programmatic meetings to flourishing communities.

One of the ways he introduces this concept is by talking about Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones. He looks at this vision that unfolds of how God desires to restore Israel's their spiritual life. And he says that small group ministries go through the same three stages that these scattered bones go through.

### **1) Bone Stage**

We read in Ezekiel 37:7

<sup>7</sup>So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone.

During this stage we **focus on the structure of the group**, on answering the question: How will we gather the bones together? How often will groups meet? What size will they be? How long will they last? Who will be in them? This is the structure of the small group ministry.

This was our primary focus for our first two years of our small group ministry. During that time we spent a lot of time nailing down our structure: What it was that our small groups were going to look like and how they were going to operate. And then we put it into action, tested it out, tweaked it and made changes to it.

The second stage is the

### **2) Flesh Stage**

We read in Ezekiel 37:8

<sup>8</sup>I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them...

After the bones come together, they're connected by tendons and flesh and skin. This moves us from focusing on the structure of the group to **focusing on the people** in the group.

After our first two years were over – at the end of last year we said, “Now that we've built our structure. We want to build our team. Because one of the problems we faced was burnout.

So we responded to that need. We recruited a coach (Holly) to care for half our small groups and I took half and we've been checking in more often, meeting more often, and we've also had two small group leader meetings a month. So we've created more sharing, more training, and more time for us as small group leaders to care with each other and carry each other's burdens and spur one another on to good deeds. We've shared the highs and lows of small group ministry with each other. And so we've focused more this year on the flesh portion, the human portion of our small groups.

And that brings us to the last stage

### **3) Breath Stage**

<sup>10</sup>So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

After the bones came together, with the flesh, Ezekiel observes, “there is no breath in them.” So the Spirit breaths life into them. When the Bible talks about Breath is talks about spirit, of life, of energy, of power. It often refers to the Holy Spirit. The focus of this stage is **spirit empowered love.**

So as I read this book, and saw those stages in Ezekiel, It was cool to see how that progressed for us. We organized the bones, and we’ve spent time investing into the body, We’ve got the skeleton, the structure of small group is in place. And we’ve got the flesh: an excellent team of leaders and coaches and members who want to gather in small groups to pursue God together. And now we need to breathe life into small groups.

**Remember that question: how do we make it so that the difficult work of going against the grain of our individualistic culture is exciting and life-giving?**

That’s the answer: Spirit empowered love.

What’s that look like? I want to draw your attention to **1 Peter 4:7-11.** It’s one of my favorite passages for envisioning Christian Community. Whether you’re in a small group or not – this is a description of the Church.

<sup>7</sup>The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. <sup>8</sup>Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. <sup>9</sup>Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. <sup>10</sup>Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. <sup>11</sup>If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Look, Peter says, “We’re in the final stage of human history before judgment. This is it. As a result, here’s how we’re to operate.” And out of all the things that we could be doing in this final stage of human history, Peter says, above all, love each other deeply. Isn’t that amazing? There’s four things that I want you to see about this love.

### **1) Love is Most Important**

The pastors in our district just finished reading a book together called “Growing Young” and in it, the authors researched churches that had higher populations of young people and one of their main findings was: It doesn’t matter how cool your church is, it matters how warm your church is. In other words, the most important thing for young people was: do these people love me?

Don’t you think that’s true for all of us though? Isn’t it true that when you’re with people you love – it doesn’t really matter what you find yourselves doing together? Wouldn’t you rather eat kale with people that you loved than eat cake with people that you tolerated? Small Groups can be difficult at times – but if we love each other deeply, won’t it be worth it?

Peter says this is the most important thing we can be doing as a Church. Loving each other deeply. Let that sink in. The best contribution you can make to your small group is to love them deeply.

Remember what Bonhoeffer said? We destroy Christian community when we love our idea of it more than we love the community itself. If we love each other deeply, that'll never happen.

## **2) Love is Rooted in Who God is, Not Who We Are**

I see this in two things that Peter says. When Peter says in verse 9 “Offer hospitality without grumbling” he’s talking about people you don’t know very well. That was common in NT life. The home was more of a public place back then and often times Christians would rely on one another as they shared the gospel or fled persecution. When Peter says love one another deeply, he’s not saying: spend a lot of time with one another so you’ll develop a love for them. His expectation is that you would love new people too. For a Christian, deep love isn’t something people have to earn from us. It’s something we’re to freely offer.

How? Peter hints at it: Love each other deeply because Love covers a multitude of sins. Now, this passage has multiple possible meanings but I think that’s intentional. I think Peter wants us to be quick to forgive and quick to cover an offense. But I think he’s also making a reference to God. God covers a multitude of sins through Jesus. And God is love. Therefore love covers sins. And love has covered my sins and your sins so that we are both aware of our brokenness and aware of the grace that has redeemed us. That reality ought to well up in a deep love for one another.

That word for “deep” in the Greek, “deep” love carries with it connotations of perseverance. This type of love doesn’t come effortlessly. Just the opposite. It stretches us and challenges us to do things we can’t do on our own. We’ll get back to that.

## **3) Love is Primarily Expressed Through Action**

Peter makes that clear, doesn’t he? Part of loving each other means that we’re in each other’s lives. It means that we seek to serve one another. It means that we find ways to bless one another. It means we see gathering together as an opportunity, not an inconvenience.

In verse 10 Peter says <sup>10</sup> **Each** of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.

that each of us have a gift that’s been given to us so that we can serve others. And we’re to steward the grace that God has given us. I’ve mentioned this before but it’s my job as a small groups pastor to repeat it to you: God has given you grace that you’re meant to steward to others. And part of what that means is that when you don’t participate in Christian Community – the grace that God has given to you for others is withheld from them. Do you see that? Yeah sure, people miss out on how cool and funny and witty you are but most importantly, they miss out on God because God has given you grace that He’s expected you to steward to others.

How do we love each other well? We show up and we offer up. Here I am, Here's what I have. Maybe that's a word of encouragement. Maybe that's a word of knowledge that you received from God as you prayed for your small group members. Maybe it's an insight from the text. Maybe it's a tray of homemade cinnamon buns. Maybe it's money for childcare. Here's I am. Here's what I have.

#### **4) Love Comes from Prayer and it Leads to Prayer**

In other words, if we want to love well, we'll have to pray but also the more that we love, the more that we'll find ourselves praying. Look at verse 11– Peter says, if anyone serves, they should do so with the strength of God. Loving each other deeply means offering each other more than what we would ordinarily do for each other without God's Spirit. It means asking God for help and for grace so that we can love and serve one another well. It means going beyond what comes natural to us.

So the more that we love each other, the more that we'll turn to God and ask Him to help us express that love well. And of course, the more that we love each other, the more that we'll be concerned for each other too. So our requests for one another will increase.

Someone joined our small group and only a few weeks into it they said: You know, I've been praying a lot more. Partly because I'm thinking about God more but also because I'm praying for you guys now.

#### **So here's where we're at.**

Some of our small groups have ended for the year. Some have just a few weeks left. Summer REST is right around the corner. A new year of small groups will be upon us soon. The question for us will be: how do we make it so that the difficult work of going against the grain of our individualistic culture is exciting and life-giving.

And the answer to that question is: Spirit empowered love.

I need your help. You are stewards of God's grace. Will you breathe new life into our small groups by loving each other deeply through the power of the Spirit? When we participate in small groups next year can we make every effort to offer spirit empowered love?

Scripture says – that's what we ought to be doing above all else.

In our lobby, we've got a new poster at the small group table that says "In this house" and then it shares ways that we can breathe spirit empowered love into our small groups. It'll serve as a reminder that what we do isn't a program but a practice of creating time and space for God's community to love Him and each other deeply. We've also printed out a copy and put it in a frame for our small group leaders to take to their home so in your small group meetings you'll have a visual reminder of that truth too. We're here to love one another through the power of the Spirit.

But let's take a moment now as a church to show our appreciation and express some of that deep love. If you led a small group at some point this past year, even if you're not currently leading, would you please stand so that we can appreciate you?