

## Committed to Community

**Prayer: pray for Florida's safety and protection as Hurricane Irma approaches**

### **Acts 2:42-47**

*<sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common. <sup>45</sup> And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

Years ago, people were sitting at their computers when they unexpectedly received an email from Classmates.com notifying them that an old friend was trying to contact them. Curiosity was piqued as they tried to figure out who from the past was trying to reconnect with them? Maybe that best friend from 6th grade they had lost touch with? Maybe someone from their old basketball team or cheerleading squad? Maybe even that old flame they took to the Junior prom? The message didn't give any clue as to who it was. All they knew was that someone from their past was reaching out to rekindle an old friendship again. To find out who it was, you had to upgrade to the Classmates.com "Gold" membership.

Millions of people eagerly upgraded to gold membership, but the hoped for reunions never happened. Turns out it was Classmates.com reaching out to them, in order to make a deeper connection with their wallets. Millions of members were disappointed and one member actually sued Classmates.com for false advertising and won.

Classmates.com was banking on people's curiosity to increase their membership, but they were also tapping into a longing that we all have for friendship and relationship. God created us for relationship. We might be extroverts, we might be introverts, social butterflies or loners, but God wired us to want to connect with others. Way back in the garden the Lord looked at Adam and said, "it's not good for man to be alone." God created men and women with a need for relationship. But not just one on one relationship, the Lord put in our hearts a longing to belong to a bigger community. When God called Abram out of Ur, He wasn't calling a person, He was calling a people. What would become Israel. The people of God. And after Pentecost, what we see here at the end of Acts chapter 2 is God forming a new people, called the church, a community of believers joined together by our common faith in Jesus Christ. The church is more than a once a week meeting, it is a community.

And that's what I love about this picture in Acts - it gives us a window into what community life looked like in the first days of the church. They were really doing life together - they were devoted to God and each other, they were meeting together every day opening God's word, praying fervently, and breaking bread. They shared everything in common, sold their belongings and gave to others as there was a need. God was regularly doing signs and wonders in their midst and hundreds of people are getting saved every day and being added to the church - the community of God. That is an inspiring picture of community life!

...But it also can be a pretty discouraging picture. Let's be honest, when we superimpose this dynamic, on-fire, all-in, picture of community life over the community life that is the experience in churches today - even the best of churches fall way short. Any church that uses this passage to describe the community life they're experiencing could probably be sued for false advertising. I read recently about a church sign that may have been a more accurate advertisement than the church intended. It read: *We Really Care About Our Community*. Underneath that it read, *Sundays, 11am only*. We really care about our community - but only at 11am on Sundays! But this hits on one of the great challenges facing the church: how does the church avoid being a once a week meeting and instead grow into a loving, caring community?

There are probably some here in this room who don't really experience the church community much beyond the Sunday morning meeting. They say that one of the loneliest places to be is in a crowd of people. Does the church feel like a community to you or a crowd?

I had the privilege to preach in another church a couple months ago, and it was a wonderful church and the people were great and very encouraging, but after the service, I was in that place where all around me were groups of people greeting each other and talking, but very few people said anything to me, and what was said was really brief as they walked by like "thank you for that message." I walked out to the lobby, trying not to look like I needed someone to talk to me, but also trying not to look like I didn't *want* anyone to talk to me. Hard to describe but there's this awkward feeling when you're in a crowd of people who have broken up into groups talking to each other but you don't know anyone or belong to any group. And I'm not particularly shy about talking to people I don't know. I wasn't bothered by it - I didn't know anyone and it wasn't my church so it wasn't a big deal to me, but if you come here and that's your experience week after week, I want you to know that we do care and we want to see that change for you. Or maybe you have friends and socialize from the minute you walk in till you walk out, but feel like it never goes deeper. You can talk about the weather, you can talk about football, but it never goes much deeper than that. The reality is no one knows much about your life and you don't know much about theirs.

Over the next couple weeks I hope that we can have an honest conversation about this subject of growing together as a community. For GCC, this is more than a message topic, this is something we want to get better and better at. You might remember Walt preached an excellent message on this same passage back in January. We want to keep coming back to this because we believe that making deeper relational connections and growing together as a community is central to what God has called us to do, central to our vision and our mission as a church. Which means we're going to be working at it for as long as we exist. Community is a journey, not a destination - at least until Jesus comes back.

We started this year with a series called Re:Connecting and I shared with our ministry leaders that our vision this year is summed up in this statement: *Getting more people more connected to Christ by connecting them to the life of Grace Community Church*. The goal of strengthening our ties to each other is to deepen our connection to Christ as we encourage each other in our walk with the Lord.

So, getting back to the passage in Acts 2 - Is the picture in these verses an accurate picture of God's plan for community in the church? If it is, how do we bridge the gap between what they experienced and what churches today experience? We might be tempted to explain it by saying, that was when the church

was a real community, that's what the church is supposed to look like, therefore the church today isn't the real deal. The church, they think, is guilty of false advertising. We'll know we've got it right and that God is really moving in the church when it looks like Acts 2:42-47 again.

But I think there is more to it than that. I submit to you that the picture of community in Acts 2 is accurate. But it's also incomplete. The NT has more to say about community than these 6 verses tell us.

Here's why: this is the absolute honeymoon of the early church. The church is days old, everything is new to everyone. The power of the Holy Spirit has fallen in visible power to the degree that the first small group of believers were speaking in foreign languages they didn't know, and when Peter delivers his first sermon and comes to the "every head bowed and every eye closed" portion, three thousand hands go up to be saved! They are all riding high on this, being taught by the apostles, which is the next best thing to Jesus, and if a sermon does go a little long or get a little dull and people start to nod off, the apostle just performs a miracle and everyone's wide awake again.

It's a powerful picture and it's an accurate picture. But it's not a complete picture. This is the idyllic picture of community. It would be like looking at snapshots of a couple's honeymoon and thinking, "so that's what marriage is like!" Things in the NT church will change. Believers will stop selling their homes and pooling the money. They won't stop caring for each other's needs, but the practice of having everything in common will end. Problems will start to creep into the church. Rapid growth will cause certain people like the Hellenistic widows to be overlooked. Good people like Euodia and Synthyche will squabble, to the point that Paul has to write the church and say, "help these good women who love Jesus to work this out, willya?" Other church communities, like the Corinthians, are messed up in so many ways it's hard to know where to start. And there will even be churches like the Galatian church that are in danger of running right off the tracks of Christian orthodoxy into heresy.

But all of these problems and challenges weren't evidence of God's plan failing, or God not working, they were actually a part of God's plan to grow and strengthen the community of faith. Because here's the thing about community: it can't be built on excitement. It can't be built on miracles. It needs to be built on commitment. We need to be...

### 1. Committed to community

<sup>42</sup> *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

<sup>10</sup> *Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Romans 12:10*

When we think of being devoted we might tend to think of a feeling or emotion. If you're old like me you might even hear Olivia Newton John singing *Hopelessly Devoted to You*. But the Greek word actually describes something a little more gritty. It means to persist in, to continue steadfastly in. To be devoted is to be committed. God calls us to be committed to community. It takes commitment for the long haul to really experience community. That makes sense - have you ever met someone who comes into relationships with high expectations and a low threshold for disappointment or conflict? What happens? They get super excited because *this* relationship (or *this* church) is going to be different than all the others, but then something happens, maybe a misunderstanding, or a conflict, or a difference of

perspective, and their high expectations fold like a cheap suit into a pile of disappointments. If we build our expectations of community for sunny days only, when storms come (and they will come) our expectations will get washed away. There are newer buildings in Florida that were built to withstand Category 5 hurricanes. That's how we want to grow in community, with a commitment that is rated to withstand category 5 storms, cause storms will come.

- *The word devotion (persist in, continue steadfastly in)* tells us that community *doesn't come easily and it doesn't come quickly*. We live in a funny time. With things like Facebook and Instagram it is easier than ever to have the illusion of community and intimacy with hundreds of friends where we are so up close and personal that we post pictures of what we ate for dinner, how our newest haircut turned out, and where we're spending our vacation. It feels like we're letting a few hundred of our closest friends in on our lives but the truth is we're only showing the parts of our lives that look good enough for us to post- people aren't seeing our lives at their worst. Then we get all these "likes" and we feel so affirmed but there's really not much real interaction with anyone. I'm not downing FB, it is a wonderful tool for staying in touch with people. I'm just saying that if we want to avoid getting too close to people in real life, FB can satisfy our longing for community without really having community. Because here's the dirty little secret: there's a part of us that wants to belong to a community where we know and are known, and there's a part of us that doesn't. Interacting with people is awkward at times, it's uncomfortable at times. There's a part of us that would rather not deal with the hassle. Just being honest.

But the love of the Lord calls us to do more. To be involved, to reach out, to care. Next week I want us to take a deeper look at the fears and challenges that try to keep us from doing that, but to break out of our comfort zone and to invest in community takes commitment. *Because* it's awkward at times. *Because* it's uncomfortable at times. *Because* things go wrong sometimes.

Community doesn't come easily and it doesn't come quickly. What meaningful relationship does? The Lord wants to free us from looking at community with a one way street mindset -"do I need community or not?" A big part of God's plan is working love into our hearts so that we realize, not only do I need community, but community needs me. That's not pride, that's reality. That's a big part of love - losing the "how does this benefit me" mindset and adopting an investing in others mindset.

I want to close by getting really practical and giving an unapologetic plug for contexts that Grace has to encourage community. Meetings don't equate community, not at all, but they are important contexts to help foster a sense of community. In our home, we have tried to have dinner be a time when everyone comes together and we sit down to eat together. It's a time to catch up, talk about the day, connect with each other. It's not that dinner time is what creates a sense of family or connectedness or deep communication (believe me, not all our communication around the dinner table is deep!), but it provides a context, a steady anchor point to connect with each other. And the benefit doesn't come from any one dinner so much as it is accumulative. Dinner after dinner over the years. It is a context for connecting.

In so many ways, community is about building bridges connecting our lives together. There are several programs in the church that are meant to help build bridges of connecting us to each other - we've highlighted several in the announcements and I'm excited about all of them from men's and women's meetings to the marriage meeting to our youth group.

But the one I'm most excited about is our new community groups. The reason I love our CGs is that, other than Sunday mornings, it is the one context that isn't targeting a certain demographic but gets everyone together. Young, old, men, women, children, teens. Cross pollination of ages and seasons of life is so refreshing. I am really excited about our new leaders, co-leaders and hosts. We want the CGs to be fresh and provide an environment for growing closer together, not just a meeting. But that can't be done by our new leaders by themselves. We all need to be involved, be engaged, be committed, be devoted. We can't go to CGs as consumers, we all need to be contributors.

When we started Grace, 14 years ago, CGs were a center point of the church. For years we had approximately 80-90% of the church attending a CG. Now the church was smaller then, but we looked at CGs as the place where care happened (called them care groups), and relationships were built. Over the years, I think they grew a little stale and people started voting with their feet. I understand that. At one point we even considered doing away with them. But we felt that would be the wrong direction - they still provide the best potential for community to grow.

So we're coming at them with a fresh approach. By fresh approach I don't mean a lot of bells and whistles or pizzazz. I remember at Lamb's Chapel we asked someone who was a good musician if he would lead worship in one of our cgs. So he shows up with an electric piano - not surprising since he played piano - and an amp and a microphone. So he plugs all this equipment in and starts doing a sound check. We're sitting in this small living room with maybe 10 or 12 people gathered and he's going "check, check" into the microphone. It felt less like an intimate time of believers singing praise and more like a performance.

We're not asking our new CG leaders to perform. Our new leaders aren't highly trained professionals. They aren't going to deliver apostolic level teaching. Our goal isn't fancy, it's care. People doing life together, warts and all. Some evenings will be dull. Some nights will have boring snacks - I've been at CGs where there were no snacks at all! And yet, somehow we made it through - and had a pretty good night. Being devoted means we continue steadfastly, even if the snacks are lousy.

We want the need for new CGs and new CG leaders and hosts to expand, not shrink. And that's not because we want a program in the church to be successful, but because we want our CGs to genuinely be a context - along with the other contexts - for care and connection. Where community is built. Not perfect, not fancy, not entertaining, maybe not many signs and wonders, but God at work in a real way. And over the years I've observed that God does some of His greatest work in an accumulative and unspectacular way over time, just by being connected one to another. So here's what I want to ask of you: refresh your commitment to community. Find a way to get connected. And I want to ask you to consider attending a CG. I'd like us to need a fourth CG pretty much immediately. If you're interested in leading or hosting a CG, let one of the elders know.

And as we renew our commitment to community, let's believe God will work in us and through us in powerful ways. Let's pray.