

*Where Everybody Knows Your Name*

Theme Song from “Cheers”

In the past, I have gone on a golf trip with a group of guys from the church. We’ve been able to go a couple of times out to San Diego, California. Let me say that there are some major differences in California and down state Illinois, one of which is their traffic. So many people, so many interstates, six lanes and yet they remain packed most of the day. The first day I was sitting in this traffic jam and then reality set in. There is one lane especially designed to do exactly what I want to do . . . buzz past everybody else. It’s called the HOV lane or a carpool lane.

HOV stands for “High Occupancy Vehicle” lane. Major cities like Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, offer a lane set aside for vehicles with two or more people in them. It’s designed not only to facilitate traffic, but also to discourage people from driving by themselves thus cutting down on energy consumption and air pollution.

So because of the simple fact that I had others with me, I was rewarded by the state of California. The result is that the lone drivers sit there and crawl their way to their destination while those willing to travel together fly along at a quicker pace. If I’m willing to travel with someone, there’s a special access lane just for me and I receive some incredible benefits to help me through my day.

When we travel alone we miss out on a lot of blessings. Our topic is Connected Relationships. We’re going to consider the importance of sharing our lives with one another.

Sure, if you’re in San Diego, it might help you get to your destination more quickly but more importantly I want you to see the value of having connected relationships. And today I’m asking you to do something, I’m asking you to **take a risk and get in some type of a small group.**

There will be times when you are in need so why not be ready for those moments. It is unarguable that we, at First Christian, must become a church filled with connected relationships as we grow in Christ.

Acts 2:42-47 (One verse at a time.)

I'll read a verse and then you all can read the next one, and so on...

Minister: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

Congregation: "Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles."

Minister: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need."

Congregation: "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people."

Minister: "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

This weekend we want to look at how the first Church in the book of Acts set the example in connected relationships and then we'll look at some of the excuses we come up with in order to avoid taking the step to get in to some type of small group. First...

### **I. THE EXAMPLE**

Jesus set the example. Throughout His ministry Jesus modeled the value of small groups. His closest friends, Peter, James, and John were in the inner circle and privy to more insights. The twelve disciples made up another tier of connected relationships. The 70 or 120 was a larger group where information was shared and inspiration took place. Christ was all about pouring into relationships and fostering others to do the same.

And it wasn't just Christ who set the example—the early church set the example as well. The second chapter of Acts is filled with descriptive words in our text: "fellowship," "together," "homes."

**They met in homes for teaching, fellowship, food, and prayer**

Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

They spent time together doing something that everyone likes to do—making relationships and getting together to eat food. Around the table is where defenses come down and relationships are formed. The table allows conversations to flourish.

The apostle Paul really got involved and knew the Christians. That’s why in each of his letters there are references to people’s names. Paul evidently knew those individuals because he had built some type of a friendship and relationship with them. When you get involved in a small group at First Christian, your church experience moves from a large room with a crowd—to an intimate setting where people know your name and your needs.

Annie Ortlund, in her book, *Up With Worship*, says that the average church is too much like a bag of marbles—we scratch against each other and make a little noise, but we really don’t affect each other much. She says the church should be more like a bag of grapes that mesh together, producing a sweet-tasting wine because of the interaction.

The Early Church prayed. In fact, on several occasions in the book of Acts we see people meeting in homes together with the purpose of praying for some need. In Acts 12, they were in a home praying for Simon Peter who was in prison, praying for his release. God intervened and answers their prayer and he is released. They also:

### **Met in homes for Bible study.**

This was mentioned in Acts 2 but there are others times as well. There is a clear example seen in the book of Acts in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter.

Acts 18:24-26:

“Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.”

Now here was a great preacher, but Apollos was uninformed when it came to baptism. His knowledge was limited to John the Baptist's teaching and he didn't know about the baptism that Jesus offered; the one that Peter preached about in Acts 2, that was accompanied by the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So the Bible says, they explained to Apollos the way of God more adequately. Apollos responds to their teaching quite favorably and goes on to preach the whole gospel in Greece. Now I think one of the reasons that Apollos was receptive to the teachings of this Christian couple is because of where they taught him. They invited him to their home, a safe place, a comfortable place, a place where questions could be asked and truth could be taught.

And it gives us a good picture of how the home is a great place to meet and study God's word so we may know the way of the Lord more adequately. A small group, in time, breeds love, learning, and trust.

Look with me to the creation account in...

Genesis 1:26: "Then God said, "Let *us* make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness..."

The phrase, "Let us make man in our own image" is a reference to the Trinity: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It took a community to complete the image, because God is a community! That's why inside each of us is a "relational DNA," a "community gene," an inbred desire to reach out and connect with others. It is instinctive and inherent within us. Why? Because we're made in His image.

Up until this point in creation, after each thing God made, He said, "It is good," then He created man and He said, "It is not good." (Don't get too puffed up over this ladies!) But when He created Adam alone the entire phrase He said was, "It is not good for the man to be alone." That was the first time God used the words, "not good." Now this had to be so confusing—the Garden of Eden was a perfect paradise with a beautiful setting, all the food he wanted, no house payments, he was CEO over all the animals—Adam had everything he needed. So close was his relationship with God, that the Bible says that the Lord would walk through the garden.

And yet it's in that setting that God says that this isn't good. Why? Because Adam was alone. And remember, he was made in God's image—he was wired for community and wasn't complete until he could be in community with someone else. It wasn't until God created the second human being, Eve, that God then stepped back and saw all that He had made as then being “*very good*” (Genesis 1:31). Good is no longer the description; it has improved to, “very good.”

I wonder if early on God was trying to teach us the importance of connected relationships? Why don't more people pursue relationships and connect with others? Well let's spend a few minutes looking at

## ***II. THE EXCUSES***

With our remaining time we're going to look at some of the rationalizations we use to keep us from getting involved in some type of a small group. With each one I hope to dismantle the excuse and motivate you to get in some type of a small group. Excuse #1...

### **I don't need others.**

Independence is a more common battle cry than admitting we could use the help of others. People always say I can do it myself. A number of years ago back, when airlines were much more lax with how many pieces of luggage you could bring on board, when it came time to deplane, the lady in front of me was struggling with like three good size bags plus her purse. And I said, “Hey, would you like for me to help with that?”

And she turned and looked at me with feminism in her eyes and said, “I can do it myself.”

I wanted to say, “Well do you mind carrying my duffel bag?” I wanted to say that—but to be honest—she frightened me.

It's a common mantra these days, “I can do it myself.” Those are the same words muttered by an immature child, but when you mature you realize that feeling can't last over the long haul. There will come a time when perhaps divorce papers are served, or a routine doctor's appointment grows into a series of tests and a diagnosis that was unexpected, or that moment when that police officer and chaplain appear at your door at 3 in the morning with

really bad news. And it's in those moments that you realize you can't do it by yourself.

Now if you still truly believe you don't need other people, then let me appeal to your pride and arrogance and say, "Then at least consider *that other people might need you!*" God is calling you to be the part of the body that ministers to the weaker parts. How can you do that if you don't even know them?

The apostle Paul answers that excuse in

1 Corinthians 12:19-21

"If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'"

Well, another excuse that we think should keep us out of a small group is...

**I've been burned before.** You may have had a past experience that causes you to say, "I tried it once, so why try it again?" Many of you came to this church in search of healing. You had had a bad experience with a church...someone you trusted blew it morally, some class you were in was saturated with either legalism or liberalism. Let's be honest, not every small group or Adult Bible School class will be an awesome experience, but we are trying to make these safe environments with integrity, encouragement, accountability and fellowship.

Conflict or crisis doesn't need to be a death toll, it can actually deepen the relationship. But if your excuse is "I've been burned before," then I lovingly say to you, "Learn from the past, don't live in it." And if you have an aversion to being in Home Bible Study group, come to the church on Wednesday nights at 7:00.

Another excuse is...

**I'm too busy.** We have become a people who are over committed. In our minds we say we are so over extended already how could we find the time for some kind of small group experience in our hectic lives? Our busyness leads us to the point of exhaustion.

*Making Room for Life* by Randy Frazee. In it he describes in detail our need for a return to a simpler, less frantic life. He suggests the value of pouring into your neighbor's lives. Clearing your evenings to have dinner as a family and to block that time out as sacred.

Frazee suggests a way to add relationships but simplify life at same time: focus on those relationships that are within one mile of your house. He suggests and we agree that our primary focus should be family relationships. But we should allow our neighbors into our homes, host them for dinner, for Bible studies, etc., and be willing to go to their homes to get to know them...

We're not asking you to add more relationships to your plate. We're asking you to make a priority out of a few close Christian relationships and to be intentional with some non-Christians so that, together, you can help one another grow in Christ.

So, while we're pruning some programs here at church, maybe in your own life this is a good time to pull back and say no to some things so that you can make an investment of time and connect in other people's lives. If patience is a fruit of the Spirit, then hurry is not.

I'm busy too, but small groups have become a priority in my life.

\*\*\* Our small group meets on Sunday night. I don't hesitate to tell you that when we began, I was reluctant to give it up because I'm usually tired after Sunday morning. Janie used to really clean the house big time because we were having guests. People came and politely knocked at the front door. That was a year ago. We clean . . . but not like we did. It does me no end of good when they just walk in without knocking. They are fast becoming family. It energizes me!

Another excuse...

**I'm a mess; nobody would accept me.**

First of all, it's probably not true that a group here at First Christian wouldn't accept you. If that is the case, I don't want to preach here anymore! People are very gracious here. We've all been forgiven much and we are all in debt to Christ. I've often said, "If you knew about me, what I know about

me—you wouldn't let me preach. But if I knew about you, what you know about you—we wouldn't let you in here!!”

2 Corinthians 1:3, 4

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.” Use that comfort to reach out to others.

Another excuse is...

### **I'm scared of the unknown**

What if we don't click with the group? What if the teacher asks me to give the Greek etymology of some Bible word? What if they ask me to stand and spontaneously pray a three minute prayer with a lot of big words? What if they have us go around and say the worst sin I've ever committed? What if they ask me to turn to some book in the Bible other than Genesis or Revelation? What if...What if...What if...?

Those things aren't going to happen but Satan sure wants you to think they will. And the longer you wait to get off of the fence the more items he'll add to the “What if?” list. Anytime you take a step of faith there is some risk.

While some things are unknown about Small Group Bible studies, let me tell you what I do know. Whether you are involved in a service group, ball team, or Bible study, you are growing your relationships deeper in the process. You can't microwave close community. In time your small group goes from being a class to being a group of connected relationships. God has been building community all along; you just didn't know it.

You know who the best prospects are? You might get someone from the church but the best prospects are those you have a relationship with already. They come from your personal contacts and by going to or phoning your neighbors.

The second thing that surprised me was the percentage of people in the neighborhood who say yes. Depending on which study you look at, if you were to ask someone in your neighborhood to be in a Bible Study there

where you all live, do you know what percentage would say yes?  
Depending on which study you look at, it is somewhere between 70 and 90 percent, if a neighbor would just take the time to personally invite them.

These percentages are staggering. More people say yes than no because they are hungry for relationship. God is a community, you are created in His image, and we long to bond with other people.

Why not take a risk and get in a small group? Some of you need to take a risk and lead a small group or host a small group in your home. Someone said, “Life is relationships...everything else is just details.”

There is a value that comes from being with one another. Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 4:10  
“If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up.”

Remember what we said earlier about the Trinity: God is a community. And He invites you to join His “small group.” I hope you’ll accept.