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Re-Member: Why LifeGroups? John 15:9-13

As we continue to re-member, to focus on the requirements of membership – who we are and what we are committed to this morning we are diving into our requirement on community.... "I will find a LifeGroup to continue growing in Christ together with my church family."

OK, Bible quiz time! What does Gen. 2:18 say? "...it is not good that man be alone". It is the first time in the Bible that something was **not** good, up to that point everything was good – now not good!

So, tell me, when in your life have you felt profoundly alone? When were you deeply aware of how much you needed others – how much you agreed that it was not good that you were alone?

Good, bookmark that memory because we are coming back to that in a minute!

In order for God to do what he desires to do this morning we need as much God as we can get so let's pray and ask God to open our hearts.

Jesus agreed that it was not good that we be alone and used his final moments with his disciples to share his solution to our aloneness. The 15th to 17th chapters of John are really Jesus' effort to sit with his disciples and say "I'm leaving very, very soon and there are a few things you have to know!"

This morning we are going to zoom in even closer to the very heart of that solution, the core of his farewell sermon, John 15: 9-13.

I'm going to read Dale Bruner's wonderful translation of the text that brings out the richness instead of the NIV translation we usually use. As I read the word of the Lord please listen for the phrase or words that surprise you, that grabs something in your heart!

"Just as much as the Father has loved me – there! That is how much I have loved you. Make your home in this special love of mine and relax. When you keep my commands, you will be making your home in my love, just as I have kept my father's commands and so am making my home in his love. I have said all these things to you so that my very special joy can be there in the midst of your community, and so that your own personal joy can be overflowing. Here is my very special command: that you have a heart for one

another – out of the well of my heart for you. There is no greater love than this: giving one's life for one's friends."

For me the most compelling passage is *"Here is my very special command: that you have a heart for one another – out of the well of my heart for you."* So let's peer down that well together for a moment. What does that look like?

First, it is love that is sacrificial. It is costly; it involves putting what you care most about on the line. It means we give up what is precious to us – our time, our financial resources, our hearts – we risk getting close enough to others so that they can hurt us! Just as Christ did for each one of us!

Secondly, it grows out of and is sustained by intimate community. It is a God who lives in intimate community Himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – perfect love, perfect community! And HE is a God seems to want intimate community with His children (although sometimes I simply do not understand why). So, **if God Himself** loves out of intimate community and commands us to love the same way we must arrive at the realization that we simply cannot love this way without living in intimate community ourselves. He is desperately telling us, beloved...**"You have to** live in loving, sacrificial, costly, gloriously messy community in order to experience the abundant life I have for you!"

Our Lord points us towards a community of faith that we see in Life Groups at Chapel Hill, and in our Celebrate Recovery Groups. Groups that try to figure out how to honor Jesus Christ with their daily lives and how to be "all-in", not just giving a piece of their hearts but realizing that they don't have time to play at religion, the Kingdom of God is coming... today! In LifeGroups we also see our lives and the lives of those around us changing like time-lapse photography and that life-change leads us to more life-change... and also leads us to want more time together and to depend on one another more intimately.

When we risk being in that kind of community we thrive – and when we find ourselves out of it, isolated, alone and insulated, we are headed for trouble!

Almost one year ago, I had an experience that, while He didn't cause, God used in some amazing ways in my life. I was in Nazareth in Israel having just completed three weeks of consulting with World Vision on the use of Chapel Hill Lay Counseling structure for counseling programs for Palestinian Christians. I was about to take off for an amazing two weeks in the Jordanian desert with our Palestinian, Israeli and American Sound & Sand young people. I had just picked Shari, Randy, Madeline, and Hillary at the Jordanian border, hit the drive-through at McD's for McFalafels (no kidding) and taken the crew to spend the night in Nazareth. I had reservations at a B&B in the old city while the rest of the crew stayed at an upscale hotel downtown.

My plan was to wake up early the next morning (Sunday) and meet my friend Mary Abu Hanna—yes, Mary from Nazareth—for church. As I hurried through the narrow limestone streets in the old city I noticed that it had rained that night which turns the limestone paving stones into black ice. While this might be a concern for mere mortals, my view is that Lance is impervious to such dangers. (Not sure why I think that).

As I wound in and out of blind alley after blind alley looking for my car I came upon an alley that led downhill at a perilous angle, and I could see my parking lot below. No problem I thought.

Half way down the alley I noticed I was not on steps but a wet limestone ramp at a dangerous pitch. I recall thinking “I need to move to the dry side of the alley” when it happened. I hit some gravel, my right ankle shot out from beneath me, snapping my right ankle tearing my right shoulder out as I tried to catch myself and knocking myself out as my head hit the limestone.

I was unconscious in an empty alley thousands of miles from home.

What was it that God said in Gen.2: 18 again? “It is not good for man to be alone.” Say it!
No, not good at all.

When I came to, I could tell my ankle was broken, my shoulder screaming in pain, my head throbbing, my cell phone in my back pocket where I had no chance of reaching it because I was unable to roll over. Not a soul to be seen, and no one knew where I was to look for me.

I laid there for over an hour, trying every strategy I knew to help myself. The only sound I heard was chanting coming from down the alley. I thought I was either hurt a lot worse than I thought and angels were calling me home, or I was close to a church. I prayed, and waited, and prayed. I was alone and out of answers. I was cut off from community and needed my fellow human beings now more than ever!

And then, after I had confessed every sin in my life twice, a pudgy elderly Palestinian Israeli threw open his back door to take the garbage out and nearly hit me in the head with the door. He stood there looking at this large American laying on his porch and quickly closed the door! After about 30 seconds, he returned with his wife and they began an attempt to drag me into the house.

Soon one solution was discarded and another developed. Neighbors came scurrying to my aid from up and down the alley speaking 10 different languages. I had gone from no community—no connection with my fellow man—to overwhelming community!

Eventually I was dragged, carried, pushed down the alley to my waiting friends who

had been called to help as well.

One glaring lesson I learned that day was how profoundly helpless I am without others. There is nothing like feeling absolutely alone—cut off from others—to see clearly how much you need them. And it is not just that you need them to reach your cell phone out of your back pocket, you need them for encouragement, for accountability, for connection. Isn't it odd that we don't usually seek community until we are convinced we need it? Why is that?

The curious thing is that we seem to structure our lives so we don't need one another. Americans are supposed to be self-sufficient, self-starters, self-reliant and self-confident.

Sometimes it is very hard for us to see how we are shaped by our culture but we really are molded and dramatically affected by the world around us. We think we seek intimate community and relationships, but our values and life goals often get in the way.

Our culture encourages us to skim off the surface of relationships like a stone across a lake. We learn to value relationships where we know a little bit about several hundred people and not much about anyone...and no one **really** knows us! We have the appearance of friendship and community but not the reality. People know what **we** want them to know about us and vice-versa. Generally speaking, we protect ourselves from real community by keeping a safe distance.

I see over and over as I listen to parents as they talk about their hopes and dreams for their children. They hope that when their children are teens that they will invest in a small D-group at church where they share their real lives with other believers and are positively influenced by friends who are committed to Christ. They hope their children's friendships will be deep and real and Christ based but they as parents they do not pursue the same things they desire so deeply for their children. They often opt for marriages, friendships, and spiritual relationships with less depth and intimacy... and wonder why their children make similar choices.

We are alone in a crowd and don't know it! This is exactly how the enemy would like to work, to make us believe we are full when in reality we are starving for community. Part of what Jesus came to save us from is being alone in a crowd. Part of saving us is making us part of a community that gives life—life the way Jesus wants it, the way Jesus gives it... life with others in Him and through Him.

I am so excited about Pastor Mark's vision for LifeGroups here at Chapel Hill. His vision of them being increasingly prayerful, dareful, careful is exactly what we need to create the kind of real life community that will stretch us and make us the kind of believers we need to be. Prayerful is a no brainer, but dareful is tough for us! Dareful means daring to tell others the truth about the real stuff of our lives—the stuff that needs saving, forgiving, healing, making Christ-like. Dareful involves risk,

vulnerability, gut level honesty with ourselves, with God and with others!! When we are dareful and trust others with the real stuff of our lives we grow in amazing ways!

Careful is a huge part of this process of growing in community. Without careful, dareful is foolhardy. Only fools dare to tell precious things to people who cannot be trusted. Trust must be developed. We don't shove people into the deep end of the pool around here; we walk down the steps into the shallow end. But letting others close enough to really help, to really know you, makes all the difference in the world.

We all need 2am people. 2am people are those who you can call at 2am when your teen has been in a serious car accident, or you are headed to emergency angioplasty or your best friend attempted suicide. Who are your 2am people? What are their names? We don't join a LifeGroup because we want the casseroles when we are sick, we do it because we know we only grow when we are allowing other believers close enough to cause me to grow in Christ, we do it because Jesus wants us to have a 2am Group we can be dareful with and who will be careful for us.

Have any of you ever tried to unravel a knot that was seemingly impossible to untie? Whether it is one of those hopelessly knotted extension cords at Christmas or a shoelace that defies us! Yeah, me too!

This is a picture of the ring I wear on my right hand. It represents the knot that I have in my life. The knot is my "sin disease"—my wounds, my denial, my selfishness. You have a knot in your life too! My life's journey is to see that knot untied, untwisted. I know I cannot untie that knot myself. I need others to help me. I need their honesty, their love, their closeness in order to see myself realistically. I need intimate community with God and others who see into my life, especially those parts of my life that I want to hide. I need you, and you need me.

It is not good that man be alone. How will you respond to the requirement of community? Today would be a wonderful day to act on that pledge. Don't leave today without responding to what you believe Christ has been telling you to do – don't put it off and don't believe the lie that you don't have time. Grab the LifeGroup card in your bulletin, begin by filling it out and simply committing to begin the process of exploring joining a group and drop it in the offering plate this morning. Be willing to obey God's very special command... and please don't wait until you are laying in an alley somewhere!

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **DIG DEEPER**
 1. Focus on Jesus' "special command"—what does loving each other out of the well of His heart for you mean to you?
 2. Share when intimate community gets tough in your life, in your group.
 3. Share when it really pays off to be in intimate community. How you personally have benefited from being deeply known?