

Doing Life Together: 08/22/2004

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## “Doing Life Together”

This month, my son turned fifteen and a half. It’s a big deal in California. He went to the Department of Motor Vehicles and got his Learner’s Permit. He can now legally drive. He is on the streets. So if you see a six-foot four and one-half, fifteen-year-old boy cruising El Camino Real, in the words of Elmer Fudd, “Be vewy, vewy cahful.”

This morning, after the eleven o’clock service, I’m going to go to the airport, board a plane and fly to Chicago. Johnny is already there; he’s been visiting his friends. We bought a used car from a friend of mine who lives back there. It’s a Mustang and has a stick shift. We’re going to drive it from Chicago all the way out to Menlo Park—just the two of us. I know him well enough to know certain things: we will essentially live on beef jerky and on *In-n-Out Burgers* most of the way. Part of the time, I’m going to drive, and Johnny will ride. Part of the time, Johnny will drive, and I will pray.

Do you want to know why I’m doing it? It’s not because it’s convenient. There are quicker and easier ways to get a car. It’s not about finances, although my friend is giving us a good deal. It’s because of who’s going to be sitting next to me. It’s because of who are going to be in the car together. It’s because when you go two thousand one hundred and forty-eight miles together—which we will—over half a continent, and one of you just got permission to drive, you have a chance at a few moments...at a few memories. I’ve done the trip alone. When I left the mid-West to go to grad school twenty-five years ago, I made that drive all by myself. That was kind of an endurance contest. But now I’m doing it with my son. Now we’re going to do this trip together.

In the passage that Doug read earlier, we look at the day that Jesus begins the trip that will take Him to the Cross. The first thing He does is to form a little Community—to put together a small group—from a few ordinary guys like Peter and Andrew, James and John. He says,

*Get in the car. Take a trip.*

He didn’t have to. Jesus is perfectly capable of taking this trip all by Himself. It’s not like He needed somebody to help Him teach better, or that He lacked power to do healing.

You have to understand this about Jesus: Community was His plan to change the world. And when He left the earth three years later, He didn’t leave behind any financial resources for His movement. He didn’t leave behind any big infrastructure—no budget, no building, no clout, no connections—any of

the things that we think are crucial for an organization or a movement. He just left behind His small group. That was it...just twelve quite ordinary people, and then a circle of their friends. And two thousand years later, here we are, because of what happened through them.

I'll tell you how seriously Jesus takes this notion of Community. Those of you who know the New Testament tell me the answer to this: How often did Jesus approach someone and say,

I want you to follow Me. I'm putting together a little band of disciples, and I want you to be one of them. But I know you're busy. You don't really have time to be part of a small group, plus some of the disciples can be kind of a pain. Peter talks too much; Thomas is pretty negative; Judas...don't even get me started on Judas. They're not normal like you and I, so you can follow me offline. You can skip the Community part. Just make sure you read the text; make sure you attend the lectures; you can do discipleship on the "Self-Study Plan."

How often did Jesus make that offer available to somebody? He never did.

At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus' first step was to establish Community. And throughout His whole ministry, He modeled and taught on the nature of life in this new kind of Community. And on the last night of His life, He prayed for the oneness of His Community. He said that the credibility of His whole ministry and mission rested on their oneness. Before He ascended, His final words to His friends were,

*Extend my community. Go to all the world. I'll be with you. Go to all the world.*

We've been in a series of studies on the Fruit of the Spirit, and we've talked about how you cannot produce this Fruit on your own. It comes when you abide in Jesus. But in this message, I want to look at kind of a corollary, which is: You cannot abide in Jesus without being a part of His Community. There is no "Self-Study Discipleship Plan."

We're looking forward to a "Forty Days" adventure this fall, and part of the vision is that everybody who worships in this place can be part of a little Community. I want to talk about why that matters so much. Jesus knew there were certain dynamics of life in His kingdom of spiritual growth that only happen when people are in Community, forming circles of intimacy, commitment and mission together. I want to walk through what those dynamics are, because they are very important for your spiritual development and for mine.

**The first dynamic is this: Jesus is uniquely present in His Community.**

Now, He's always present—every place, every moment—but He's present in His Community in a special way. That's why Jesus said,

*Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst.* (Matthew 18:20)

I was thinking about a picture of what happens in Community. Years ago, we were on vacation, and I was going to fix something on the grill. I made a pile of charcoal briquettes, and I poured a few gallons of lighter fluid over them, and I started the fire. My son, who was a real little fellow at the time, was there watching. He was just fascinated by fire. (For little boys, it's a common stage that usually lasts forty or fifty years.)

He asked what I was doing, and I told him,

There's something about the way these little briquettes are constructed that when you put them together, the fire glows and they get real hot. When you pull one off to the side, and it's on its own, it cools off real fast. It loses the fire, and then it can't fulfill the function that it was made for. But when they stick together, then there is fire, and they feed off each other. God just made them that way. And when they get isolated, they start to cool down.

This week I read a sentence written by Dallas Willard that I want you to see. It just amazed me.

*Personalities united can contain more of God and sustain the force of His presence than scattered individuals.*

Just think about that for a moment. Personalities united—people in Community—contain more of God and sustain the force of His presence much better than scattered individuals.

This is why the writer of Hebrews wrote what he did:

**Let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.** (Hebrews 10: 24-25)

The reality is that when the little briquettes get together, there's a kind of fire, and Jesus is present in His Community. Now I've experienced that, and a lot of you have too. We've experienced moments when He gives comfort or guidance or hope or strength in His Community. He speaks through you to me and through me to you. That's the way the Community works. Jesus is there. And that's one of the reasons why when people want to move away from God, one of the first things they do is isolate themselves from spiritual communion. I've seen that happen many times.

**Here is the second dynamic—and this one is humbling: Community also prevents “spiritual drift” in our lives.**

*As iron sharpens iron,*

the writer of Proverbs says,

*so one person sharpens another.* (Proverbs 27:17)

This is a little embarrassing to most of us.

I said to some friends a few weeks ago,

I wish I had a deeper sense of connection to God in the morning—first thing.

Here's what I've been doing for a long time, and it has served me in the past, but for whatever reason, it feels kind of stale—kind of routine right now. It feels like it's time to start something new.

My friends said,

That sounds like a good idea. We think you should do that.

So the next week when we got together, they asked me,

How's the morning thing going?

And I said,

Yeah. I feel like it's time to start something new there.

This week we met together again. We talked a little bit, and one of them asked me,

So, how's the morning thing going?

And I said,

Yeah. I'm still feeling like it's time to start something new.

And I realized that either I'm going to have to take action, or I'm going to have to start looking for some new friends. They're just going to keep asking the question. It's kind of an embarrassing thing to say,

I need someone to keep asking me questions.

So one of the things I did after we met this week was: I started to pray. As we were together in this group, I realized the prayer that God is calling me to ask is just to talk to Him.

God, how do you want to start the day with me?

He'll lead me in that, but I need to start asking Him. And then I wrote to a real wise spiritual adviser who helps me a lot with this kind of thing and

described what was going on. I asked if we could have a conversation about that, and some other ideas started to come.

Frankly, part of it is because I just didn't want to have to look at those faces again and be asked that darn question and have nothing to say. Without Community, I could just drift. And the reality is that no matter how bright or strong or intelligent that any one of us thinks he or she is, none of us is above the need for Community. We are all prone to "Spiritual Drift." In Community, I am spurred on to good deeds, and I am held accountable. The Community tethers me to what I value most.

Here's part of why I stress this. This runs counter to one of the biggest myths in our day, and the myth is that it is possible for a human being to "do spirituality" by the "Self-Study Method." Most of what you see in popular sources about spirituality makes it sound like it is purely individualistic. Recently, there was a fascinating article in *Time Magazine* that talks about the decline of faith in America. In *Time*, they said that the category that has grown the most in the last decade is not Christianity, not Judaism, not Islam. It's people who say they are Nothing At All—people who do not identify with or commit themselves to any community of faith. It's very interesting. Most of them are not atheists. They just regard themselves as "spiritual free agents."

I can find God in a forest someplace. I don't have to go to church.

Jesus never said anything about "going to church." He called people into Community. He said,

Come on. Let's do the trip together.  
We're going to learn together.  
We're going to pray together.  
We're going to grow together.  
We're going to confront each other.  
We're going to serve together.  
We're going to be on mission together.

That's Community. That's what He called people to do. And apart from that, I'm prone to Spiritual Drift, and so are you. We're made that way.

**There is a third dynamic that takes place only in Community—Jesus-centered Community. It is the one place where it is fully safe for us to take off our masks and to know the healing power of being known and loved—to stop hiding.**

Some of you know that in the Genesis story it said initially that the man and the woman were "naked and not ashamed." You understand that this is not just a fashion statement. The idea behind that is that there were no secrets; they were fully known; everything about them was revealed, and they were loved. Imagine that— "naked, not ashamed."

Then with the Fall came shame, and then came hiding. Adam says to God,

*I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid so I hid.* (Genesis 3:10)

The human race has been hiding ever since, and sometimes people in churches hide the best of all.

There is an old story. I don't know where it came from.

One day a kid comes running into the living room where his mom is. She's meeting with the pastor of the church, but because he's so excited, the boy doesn't see the pastor. He's holding a dead rat in his hand.

He says,

Mom! You'll never believe it, but I was out behind the garage. There was this rat running around, so I picked up a rock and threw it. And I hit the rat! It just dropped there, so I threw another rock at it, and then I kicked it, and then I stomped up and down on it, and then I picked that rat up and I threw it against the garage as hard as I could. And then I threw it again.

At this point, he looks up and sees the pastor there, and he knows that if looks could kill, he'd be a dead man. So he holds the rat up by the tail and says in a very pious voice,

And then the dear Lord called him home.

It's a funny thing, but sometimes in churches, we get really good at hiding. I think of the church where I grew up. It's a really good church. I'm really grateful for it, but sometimes there were people who came to that church every week, sat in the same pew, smiled at the same faces, talked about weather or their jobs or sports—something superficial—week after week and year after year. Nobody ever knew them. Maybe they were dying inside. Nobody knew what he or she was afraid of. Nobody knew what he or she had dreamed of. Nobody knew what he or she was trapped in, addicted to...That's not Jesus' plan for His Community. And every once in a while, somebody would crash. A marriage would end; somebody would have an affair; a child would run away; or someone would just stop coming. People might say,

Wow! I wonder what happened to them?

Nobody knew.

I understand about hiding. One of the areas where I will need God's help until I die is my own tendency to want to look better, stronger, and smarter than I really am. I need Community. The Book of James says,

*Confess your sins to each other.* (James 5:16)

That's deep Community.

I remember a day a long time ago when I decided that I was going to try to do that. I wanted another person to know all about me. I wanted to talk about my temptations, and where I had messed up. And so, I asked my friend, Rick, if we could meet to talk about that. Rick is one of my best friends. By that time, I had known him for about ten years. I knew him really well. I thought for a couple of weeks about doing this. I wrote a bunch of things down and thought about where we would meet. When we sat down together, I told him everything there was to tell about me—all the stuff that felt the darkest and that I felt the most embarrassed about. Now, I'm not going to tell you, so don't look so excited, but I felt so vulnerable.

When I got to the end of saying that stuff, I could barely look up at him. When I looked up at Rick, he looked me in the eyes and said,

John. I have never loved you more than I love you right now.

That felt so good to me that I wanted to make up more bad stuff to tell him. Just to have someone know bad things about me and still love me was so powerful.

This is a really important truth about human existence.

**You can only be loved to the extent that you are known.**

You can only be loved—truly loved—to the extent that you are known. As long as there is stuff you don't know about me, you may say you love me, but inside, even if I'm really good at projecting a certain kind of image, inside something real deep will say,

Yeah, but if you knew the whole truth about me, you wouldn't say that. You wouldn't love me like that.

I can only be loved to the extent that I am known, and I can only be fully loved if I'm fully known.

Jesus said,

I want to build a Community like that.

In the Book of Acts, it says that people would gather together with

*...sincere hearts...* (Acts 2:46)

That word "sincere" contains the idea that when they met together, masks

came off, and they were real with each other. It's a new kind of community, and it only happens when people make the commitment. It takes a while to build up a relationship like that—a relationship where there can be that level of openness and honesty. You don't do that with somebody right away. It takes time, but only happens where people make a commitment to be in Community.

Then there is the last dynamic that only happens in Community. It is the place where we have an opportunity to love the way that Jesus loved. Jesus, when He was with His small group on His last night, gives one command over and over. He says,

*My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.* (John 15:12)

And then a little later on He says,

*This is my command: Love each other.* (John 15:17)

And at another point, He says,

*By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples.* (John 13:35)

The whole credibility of His mission rests on this: not that you are smart, not that you build something big or impressive, but that you love one another. This is a Community of Love.

One of the striking things to me is that even after three years together, Jesus feels the need to give this command over and over and over, because they haven't mastered it yet. Their little community struggles with love, which has an important thing to tell us. It answers an important question:

If I get into a home group, can I expect effortless, deep, rich, problem-free, intimate community for the rest of my life?

Probably not. Community is never easy.

Henri Nouwen says,

*Community is the place where the person I least want to be there is always there.*

One of the striking things about Jesus is that He didn't work real hard to make sure He put together a small group of people who were naturally compatible with each other.

The third chapter of Mark gives us a list of the people who were in Jesus' small group. One of them was a man named Simon the Zealot. Zealots as some of you know were an extremist nationalist political party, committed to the overthrow of the Roman government by any means possible, violence if

necessary, and sometimes assassinations. They hated the Romans. The only people they hated more than the Romans were the people who collaborated with the Romans, like tax collectors who were Jewish people willing to collaborate with the Romans for corrupt financial gain. Zealots were freedom fighters or terrorists, depending upon your political point of view.

Jesus is forming a small group, and He says,

*Simon, you're a Zealot. You despise Romans and collaborators like tax collectors. I'll take you.*

And then He says,

*Matthew, you're a collaborator and a despised tax collector. I'll take you. You room with Simon. You guys should have some interesting talks with each other.*

Can you imagine what it was like? People have a romanticized idea of what the disciples' lives were like. Can you imagine that? There is an interesting little nuance in the text that I read for us earlier. Jesus comes to Peter and Andrew. They're casting their nets from the shore, which typically would have meant that they couldn't afford a boat. They would have been quite poor. And then He comes to James and John. We are told they have a boat. In fact, He leaves them with their father who is with his other hired men. In other words, he has employees. This is a much higher operation. These are a couple of sets of brothers who are in quite different financial spheres.

Have you ever heard of anybody (maybe in a place like this) dealing with envy issues over who has what possessions, or over who lands where vocationally or financially? Jesus puts people in a small group; they have a lot of problems with each other. James and John come back to Jesus later on with their mom and they have her say for them,

You know, after it's all over, we'd like to be the ones that sit next to you in Heaven on your right or your left.

Jesus was always teaching about servanthood—die to yourself—and this was what they had their mom come and ask Him to do. The other ten hear about this, and they are really mad with James and John. This is not a real easy Community.

If you get into Community, I guarantee it will not be easy. There will be difficult people. If you get into a home group, and there is no difficult person, let us know and we will assign one to you. We have files with names of difficult people, and we will make sure that they are evenly distributed throughout our church! Jesus did not come to create a Community for perfect people who all have natural chemistry with each other. What made His Community explode was this implacable, Spirit-empowered determination of those within the Community to lavish love on anybody who could possibly stand it! And then it just exploded! Starting with His little small group—you will never go wrong by underestimating the hunger of a human being just to

be loved...just loved.

This is from a book called *The Whisper Test*. The author writes:

I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I looked to others—a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lop-sided teeth and garbled speech. When schoolmates asked,

What happened to your lip?

I'd tell them I'd fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside of my family could love me.

There was, however, a teacher in the Second Grade whom we all adored. Her name was Mrs. Leonard. A sparkling personality. Annually, we had a hearing test. Mrs. Leonard gave the hearing test to everyone in the class, and finally, it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something, and we would have to repeat it back. Things like, "The sky is blue," or "Do you have new shoes?"

I waited there for those words that God must have put into her mouth...those seven words that changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said, in her whisper,

I wish you were my little girl. I wish you were mine. I choose you.

And what blew people away about Jesus—what wrecked their worlds to an extent that they could never recover—was that He walked around saying,

I choose you. I choose you. I wish you were mine.

Then He started a little community, and His idea was for that whisper to spread.

So here's the vision: This fall, what if everybody who walks through those doors were to hear somebody whisper,

I choose you. I'd like you to be part of my little Community.

What if this could be a place where no one stands alone—where nobody hides—where nobody drifts? And then, what if people in those little communities received a vision for what God wanted them to do beyond these walls, and the whisper started to spread to people in places who didn't expect it? It could happen.

Things are getting aligned here in that direction. The hardest part always is

to find people who are willing to get it started. I talked to our “Forty Days Team” on Friday, and we have now almost 400 people who have prayed about it, thought about it, come to a training meeting, and who have made a commitment to say,

I’ll host a home group.

What that means is—at least for the first time that I know of—it is possible that every single person who is part of our congregation this fall could also be part of a little Community where somebody would know them and pray for them and love them and encourage them and lift them up. Then it could spread. So now, we’ve just got to pray like crazy and ask God to direct a lot of conversations. Maybe you haven’t really been connected relationally, and you’ve been in Drift Mode, and you’re aware of that. Maybe you’d be willing to start praying about that and talk to somebody about being in a little Community. There are little yellow cards for you to fill out. Maybe you’re hosting one of these groups. You are in for an adventure with God. You can start talking to God and ask,

God, whom do you want me to whisper to?

I think sometimes about the disciples when they reached the ends of their lives. John was an old man on the island of Patmos—a prisoner. According to the best sources that we have, Peter was crucified upside down. They were in different parts of the world with different things going on, but I think they looked back on their time in that one small group and that one little community that changed their lives and changed their world. It can happen again. It can happen here. It can. God hasn’t lost His power. Jesus hasn’t gone to another planet.

Let’s pray.