

From Crowd to Community

January 22, 2006
Special Speaker: Josh Kelley

I LOVE ONLINE SHOPPING!

Have you noticed that technology has made it easier and easier to interact with people less and less? Remember life before ATMs, pay at the pump gas, "U-scan" lines, and online shopping?

I love this stuff! I can go to the bank, fill up my car, buy groceries, and order clothes without talking to a single person.

- But I am a people person; what gives!?!

Q: What is that makes me prefer not having to talk to anyone?

A: It takes time and energy to interact with people.

After working a long day, expending every ounce of my energy, the last thing I want is to make small talk with slow cashiers!

As a society, we live our lives maxed out and have nothing left for others. As a result, we're increasingly disconnected. We're one of the world's most isolated and individualistic societies. We've gained a higher "standard of living", but at what cost?

ISOLATION IS BAD FOR YOUR HEALTH

Q: Which of the following is most likely to shorten your life?

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| A. Eating a poor diet | C. Using tobacco |
| B. Excessive drinking | D. Being social isolated |

A: Being socially isolated.

Research has found isolated people are 3x more likely to die than those with strong relationships. People with bad habits but good friends live significantly longer than friendless health nuts.¹

- Better to eat nachos with friends than Brussels sprouts alone.
- What has our busyness cost us? The research shows that isolation cost us our physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing. But thousands of years before any of this research, God said:

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone." *Genesis 2:18*

This isn't just talking about marriage. God is discussing our basic design - we need each others. It has been hard wired into us, as Admiral Byrd's book "Alone" demonstrates.

¹ See "Bowling Alone" by Robert Putnam.

I love the way Christian author John Ortberg put it:

“...God creates inside [of us] a kind of ‘human-shaped void’ that God himself will not fill.”²

Just as there is a “God-shaped hole” in us, there is also a “human-shaped hole” in each of us. God cannot meet all of our needs because He has chosen not to.

LONE RANGERS

This is doubly true of our spiritual health. Our walk with God cannot be fully lived out in isolation. My alma mater, before it was a college, had been a “drive-in church.”

I can’t think of anything more antithetical to church – people in cars, individually singing and listening to a sermon. The Greek word for “church” means people gathered together.

- It is impossible to “do church” by yourself.

God never intended for there to be “Lone Ranger” Christians. For that matter, even the Lone Ranger had Tonto.

But a crowd cannot adequately fill that “human-shaped hole.” Let’s face it, this is a crowd. Does that mean large churches are unbiblical? No, the first church was a large, over 3,000.

...and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ...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... Acts 2:41-42; 46 NIV

- They moved from a large crowd into smaller groups where they could be a community. It’s great to come together as a crowd. There’s excitement; it’s a big celebration. We get hear good teaching and be part of big picture of what God is doing in Skagit Valley and the world.

This is like the “dessert.” It’s exciting and fun, but you need a balanced diet to be healthy. As Bruce has said, “We’ll never grow to maturity just attending Sunday services.”

Why is that? Because (to quote our membership manual):

“...there are aspects of fellowship, support, accountability, and personal growth that simply cannot be experienced in a weekly congregational setting.”

1. FELLOWSHIP

Q: Which of the following has the biggest impact on a person’s commitment to their church?

² “Everybody’s Normal till You Get to Know Them” by John Ortberg, p. 32.

- A. The senior pastor
- B. The youth and children program

- C. How many weeks the pastor spends on Romans
- D. Friendships

A: Friendships

Research shows that if you don't make at least three friends within your first six months here, chances are very good that you will stop attending. The size of the church doesn't affect this.

- People come to a church for many different reasons, but stay for one reason: relationships, a community.

Life is dull without others to share it with. Friends are the spice of life. But it is hard to have true fellowship in a crowd, you need a smaller community.

2. SUPPORT

If a community is great in the good times, it is irreplaceable in the bad times.

His Place works hard to make this church feel as small as possible. One important tool is Family News. It helps us "weep with those who weep," but it's insufficient.

- Who will be there after Pastor John is done praying?

A crowd can't minister to those in need. We will pray and maybe make meals; the best support comes from a community.

But it's much easier to build a community before trouble hits, not after.

Never abandon a friend-- either yours or your father's. Then in your time of need, you won't have to ask your relatives for assistance. It is better to go to a neighbor than to a relative who lives far away.
Proverbs 27:10 NLT

Q: Who will support you in your time of need? Who'll call on you in their time of need?

The church staff cannot create nor provide that community. All we can do is encourage and facilitate it. Creating community is up to you.

3. ACCOUNTABILITY

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward 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-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25 NIV

Sometime we need encouragement, when things are hard or we're discouraged. But sometimes we need a swift kick in the pants.

"Mind your own business" is not a Christian phrase. Christianity is the world's largest "Neighborhood Watch." We look out for each other!

That's accountability, looking out for one another, making sure the devil doesn't destroy our brothers and sisters and that we don't self-destruct either.

- This can only happen properly in a community, not a crowd.

4. GROWTH

It's a lot easier to be holy when you are by yourself and no one is around to frustrate you, but that's an untested holiness.

- I thought I was a pretty good guy until I got married. Turns out I can be a real jerk sometimes!

It's easy to fool ourselves into thinking we're mature if no one challenges us. We have to be in community with irritating, imperfect people (like ourselves!) to love as Christ loved.

By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." John 13:35 NIV

- It doesn't say "...if you love yourself."
- This love cannot grow or be demonstrated in isolation.

We've each been commanded to grow in love, which means praying for each other, encouraging, serving, accepting, honoring, forgiving, and submitting to each other. Can we realistically do this with the back of 600 heads?

Q: Who are you doing these things with?

WHAT'S NEXT

This is the bottom line: We all need, you need, the fellowship, support, accountability, and growth that can only come from a community, a small group of people committed to each other.

I have my own "small group" of friends. We don't do the Bible studies and we don't see each other every week, but we have spent hours together, in community.

- We've had lots of fun, just enjoying each other's company.
- We've supported each other through some tough times.
- We've gotten into each other's business.
- We've helped each other grow as spouses, parents, friends and believers.

I would not be the person I am without their help. Because of that, I am passionate about small groups, especially when I think of those whose only connection is here on Sunday.

I can't guarantee that you will get this with the first group you join, but I can guarantee that if you just come to church without reaching out, you will never get it.

- I can guarantee it will be worth your time and energy!