

## Community Teaching 04:

# Stay Together to Grow

### Intro:

- Just a few years after Jesus' death and resurrection, during the reign of Caesar Nero, there was a small group of people sitting around a table in the city of Corinth.
- The owner of the home was named Gaius, a common Roman name. We don't know much about him, other than he was a Roman *paterfamilias*, or head of a household.
- The group likely met in the open-air courtyard of his urban home because he had the space.
- They were there that night, as they were every Sunday night, to remember Jesus.
- None of them had likely ever heard the name "Christian" before.
- They called each other "brother" and "sister," but they were not a biological family.
- In fact, if you were a 1st-century Corinthian and you were to walk by this group, you would have done a double take; nowhere else in the Empire would you have seen a group like this.
- Most meals in the home of a *paterfamilias* were for men only; this group was men and women, and the women were treated with great respect.
- Most groups were made up of Roman citizens only; this group included slaves and free people and refugees from various ethnic groups.
- Most groups would eat to excess, get roaring drunk, and then bring out the sex slaves; this group would pass around bread and wine, give thanks, sing a hymn, and read a letter from Paul or an excerpt from the Hebrew Scriptures.
- Little did this group know they were part of an emerging social movement that would go on to change the world.
- They thought they were just sharing a meal.

**Seam:** This is the power of what a mentor of mine calls "dining room table Christianity," of a com-

munity of Jesus doing life together.

**Bio:**

- This practice has changed my life.
- For most of my life, I did not live in the kind of community we've been dreaming about over the last few sessions.
- I was very involved in church.
- I was around stages all the time, but rarely was I around a table; and rarely did I bear my soul to another.
- Back to the four circles of community; my life was rich in the village and the tribe. But I had no kinship group, no family, and no brothers or sisters, who actually knew me as I was.
- In hindsight, I was the pastor of a large church, yet I was incredibly isolated.
- Then I began to notice from reading the New Testament just how much I was missing.
- So, my wife and I invited some friends to move into our neighborhood. They bought a house across the street from us.
- We then invited another family and they moved in a few streets over.
- We were all a part of the same church, so we would all sit together on Sunday, but then we began to just share a weekly meal.
- Then we began to share highs and lows ... to open our hearts to each other.
- A few of us began to confess our sins in smaller circles.
- To share our budgets and make financial decisions together.
- We began to serve our neighbors; we would host an annual block party on the 4th of July and throw a Christmas party and meet practical needs.
- Nothing we did was all that radical, but it radically changed my life.
- We were together for over ten years.
- It was a lot of time and effort, and there were seasons of drama, but it was never a burden; it made bearing the burden of life so much easier.
- Recently, our family moved to California, where my wife and I are from. And we really felt God called us to move, but not a day goes by where we don't grieve all we've lost.

- I am painfully aware of just how much we lose when we move, and just how hard it is to build community from scratch.
- And I know how long it can take. And how there's often a season of sowing before a season of reaping.
- But we will *never* go back to just going to church on Sunday and occasionally getting together with friends.
- We are committed to living in community.

### **Practice:**

- Today we come to our final session of the Community Practice.
- We have been working through four key skills for living in community:
  - Be family around a table.
  - Share your joys and sorrows.
  - Confess your sins and ...
  - Now we come to our final skill: Staying together to grow.

**Seam:** Living in community sounds amazing. And it is! But it's also very hard. When it goes right, it's a glimpse of eternity in time. But when it goes wrong, it's horribly painful.

**Turn:** Turn your Bibles to ...

### **1 Corinthians 3v1-4:**

Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere human beings?

### **The challenge:**

- People say they want to be “like the early church,” and I’m all for that.
- But read Paul’s two letters to Gaius and his house church in Corinth; they were highly

dysfunctional — full of drama.

- Here we read they were turning their leaders into celebrity pastors and playing favorites and factions.
- But read the letter and you'll also discover they were ...
  - Sleeping together
  - Getting drunk at communion
  - Mistreating the poor
  - Being wild in the Spirit
  - Suing each other in court
- ... behaving far more like *Corinthians* than like *Christians*.
- It's very easy to idealize community.
- To project onto it our unmet needs, going all the way back to our families of origin; all our yearnings and desires for love, that ultimately, no other human could possibly meet.
- And just as our Western culture's romanticized vision of marriage — a fantasy, not a reality, that is fueled by pop music and Hollywood and waiting room magazines — is actually a leading cause of *divorce* ...
- So, too, an idealized vision of community is actually the cause of so many people living alone.
- Because they can't find the *ideal* community, they end up with *no* community.

**Seam:** No one has ever said this better than the German Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer ...

### **Bonhoeffer's Wish Dream:**

- ... who started an underground community of about a hundred people in Nazi-occupied Poland called Finkenwalde ... it was a small community, living by a Rule of Life together, in a quiet attempt to resist the push and pull of the Third Reich.
- During this time, he wrote *Life Together*, in which he lays out a beautiful vision of community, but he's shockingly honest about how difficult it is.
- He writes this:

- “The sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and to a community the better for both... Every human wish dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. He who loves the dream of community more than the community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial...
- This has come to be called “Bonhoeffer’s Wish Dream,” and it’s just a way of saying that when we idealize community, when we project a utopian fantasy onto a group of ordinary, flawed people, we actually destroy community.
- There is no ideal community, not in the early church, or in the modern church.
- Community is made up of real people with real problems.
- And that’s not easy.

#### #1:

- First of all, because Christian community is not based on like-attracts-like, but on a shared discipleship to Jesus, we end up in community with people who we would normally never be friends with.
- The Quaker Parker Palmer, based on his time living at the Quaker community of Pendle Hill, said it this way:
  - “In true community we will not choose our companions, for our choices are so often limited by self-serving motives. Instead, our companions will be given to us by grace. Often they will be persons who will upset our settled view of self and world. In fact, we might define true community as that place where the person you least want to live with lives.”<sup>1</sup>
- This rubs against the grain of our consumer-oriented hearts.
- But these kinds of relationships tend to spark the most growth in us!

**Seam:** But even if we really click with our community and we won the chemistry lottery, still: it’s going to expose our shadow sides ...

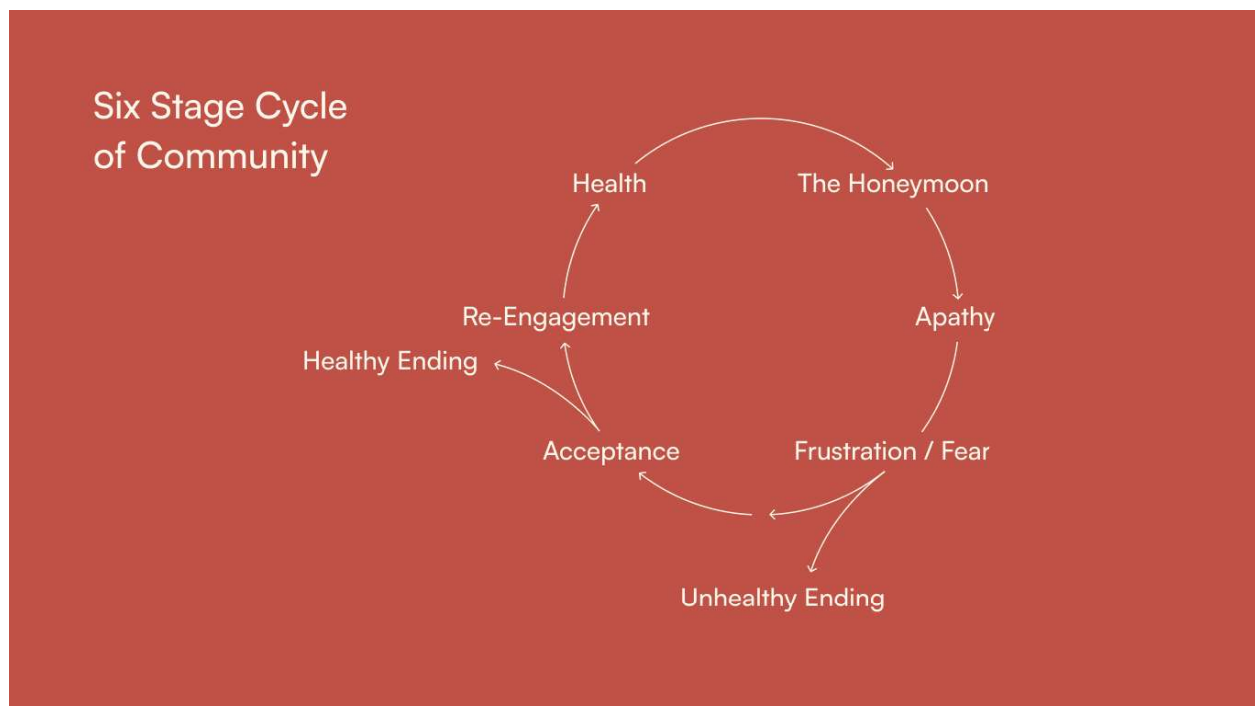
#### #2:

- Living in close proximity to others moves us into what the psychologist Phil Stutz calls “the zone of engagement.”<sup>2</sup>

- The closer we get to each other, the more we let our guard down, the more we open up to each other, the more our true selves are laid bare, *including* our shadows.
- This zone of engagement is the place of vulnerability.
- It's the place of our deepest healing and most significant growth.
- But it's also the space of our deepest wounding.
  - The word "vulnerable" is from the Latin *vulnerare*, which means "to wound."
  - To be vulnerable is to make yourself woundable. To put yourself in a place where you could get healed, or hurt.
- And both happen in community.
- Inevitably, if you live in community, you will get into conflict.
- But *all* of this is a feature, not a bug! It's *supposed* to happen; it's *how God designed community to grow and mature us into people of love.*

**Seam:** The problem is: What most people do when they enter the zone of engagement, and they get frustrated, is they just leave.

### The cycle of community:



- The church where I pastored for just shy of twenty years has a Sunday gathering, but it's best understood as a network of house churches that are neighborhood-based and gather for a weekly meal.
- After doing church this way for many years, we started to notice a pattern in our communities: we call it the cycle of community.
- First is the honeymoon; people often go through this 'high' as they begin to live in community for the first time. It's often life-changing for radical individualists who have ever only known church attendance.
- Then comes the apathy stage: You get to know the people around you and they become kind of boring, change is slower, more gradual, and you don't get as much out of it as you used to.
- Then you begin to get frustrated. Not only are you stubbornly untransformed in certain areas of your life, so are your fellow community members. You want it to change.
- At this point, many people bail. They walk away. The moment a relationship is no longer delivering the instant gratification of meeting a felt need.
- But if you stay, and press through to acceptance, you enter a whole new stage.
- You may still discern that you need a healthy ending.
  - There is a time to leave a community ...
  - The three rules of thumb for leaving are:
    1. Leave slowly — err on the side of staying too long, not quitting too fast.
    2. Bless people as you go, and do not curse.
    3. And don't decide by yourself, but discern with others.
  - That's a healthy ending ...
  - But if you're not called to leave, then the next stage in the cycle is to re-engage and enter into health.
  - But it's hard to stay with this cycle.
  - We have been socially conditioned by radical individualism to put our own needs and desires above the good of any group, and by our consumer culture to approach relationships like commodities, and the moment a community or friend or even a spouse doesn't make us happy or meet our needs or they trigger our shadow or

touch our wound ... we leave.

- As a result, we never *grow*.
- We remain spiritual adolescents who never mature into spiritual mothers and fathers.
- When we run away from conflict, we run away from our shadow, from our blind spots, from our wounding, and from our healing.

**Seam:** To grow, we have to learn the discipline of staying.

### **There are two primary reasons for staying ...**

- The first is pragmatic ...

#### **1. It takes a long time to build this kind of community.**

- Years, for most people.
- There are ways to expedite this, by going on retreat, or going deep with each other, but it takes more than time; you have to *go through life* together and get into conflict and work it out to go through what attachment specialists call “rupture and repair.”
- And this just doesn’t happen if every few years we move to a new city for our job, or a new church, or a new small group.
- We have to stay.
- The other reason for staying is ...

#### **2. We need this kind of deep, long-term community to grow.**

- Dr. Joseph Hellerman says it this way:
  - “Spiritual formation occurs primarily in the context of community. Persons who remain contented with their brothers and sisters in the local church almost invariably grow in self-understanding. And they mature in their ability to relate in healthy ways to God and to their fellow human beings. This is especially the case for those courageous Christians who stick it out through the often messy process of interpersonal discord and conflict resolution. Long-term interpersonal relationships are the crucible of genuine progress in the Christian life. People who stay grow. People who leave do not grow” (*When the Church Was a Family*).
- Notice his language: “long-term interpersonal relationships.”



- You can chart your relationships on two axis points — length of time and depth of vulnerability.
- **Short-term/shallow** relationships don't change us at all. I've never been transformed by an interaction with a TSA security officer on my way through the airport.
- **Long-term/shallow** relationships make up a lot of our lives, and they are important, but they are rarely transformative. You can live on the same street as a neighbor for ten years or know your grocery checker or barista by name or even go to the same church as someone for decades, but not be transformed by that relationship.
- There are rare occasions when **short-term, but deep** relationships imprint on our soul — on a retreat or with a therapist for a season — but generally, it's in our **long-term, deep relationships** where real change happens.
- This is why marriage is so painful, yet so formative. Same with therapy or a best friend or long-term community member.

**Seam:** But these relationships are hard to find, and even harder to *keep*, in all ages, but especially in our age.

- This is why in the Benedictine Order, which is one of the oldest monastic orders in the world, when you join the Order, you take a “vow of stability”: You vow not only to remain in the Order, but to remain in *that particular community until you die*.
- Here's an example from Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey:
  - “We vow to remain all our life with our local community. We live together, pray together, work together, relax together. We give up the temptation to move from place to place in search of an ideal situation. Ultimately there is no escape from oneself, and the idea that things would be better someplace else is usually an illusion. And when interpersonal conflicts arise, we have a great incentive to work things out and restore peace. This means learning the practices of love: acknowledging one's own offensive behavior, giving up one's preferences, forgiving.”
- There's a Benedictine Abby I visit a few times a year on retreat; over the years, I've become friends with the Abbot.
- He joined the Abbey when he was 23; he's in his seventies now. Forty-plus years in one community.
- The brothers live in a kind of dorm-room style building, and he said in passing that the reason community is transformative is because, when you take a vow of stability, you have to learn how to work things out!

- He *can't* just bail. He has to stay, to have hard conversations, to humble himself at times, and repent.
- And this is hard, but it drives spiritual growth.
- This same Abbey is also very beautiful. It's almost like a village; it has its own park and retreat center and curated grounds; it has its own *graveyard* (because the monks die there). I was there when the Abbot was asked how a group of monks could build such a beautiful facility. He said, "Well, when you know you're going to die in a place, you tend to take really good care of it." (Abbot Jeremy)
- I think of cities like LA that are so transient, and so poorly cared for ... more ugly than beautiful ...
- Many of our relationships suffer from a kind of urban blight. Because we don't plan on staying, we don't take care of them the way we could or should.
- We *use* them, rather than *love* them.

**Sticky line:** So, to live in community, for this vision that started with the early church and we've been laying before you for the last four sessions, for it to come to pass, you and I have to learn the discipline of staying.

**And there are two skills and one commitment we must learn in order to stay:**

### 1. To deal with conflict

- You *will* get into conflict. That's actually a sign of health, not dysfunction. It means you're in the zone of engagement!
- Where dysfunction comes in is how people deal with conflict.
- We get angry or blame shift or gaslight or withdraw or avoid or gossip or manipulate, *or*, we just bail.
- The odds are, you deal with conflict how your family of origin dealt with conflict. That may be good, or terrible.
- And while it's beyond the scope of this session, we need to identify the patterns, going back to our childhoods, that we adopted to cope with pain, the way our families dealt with conflict, in order to relearn how to deal with conflict in an emotionally healthy way.

## 2. To forgive

- Jesus put such a high value on forgiving and being forgiven that it's almost shocking.
- He said: "If you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."  
(Matthew 6v15)
- I wonder if it's because, without this discipline, we *cannot* live in community.
- It's been said that marriage is the art of learning to forgive over and over and over again ...
- The same could be said of community.
- We will *hurt* each other. I will hurt you, and you will hurt me. It's only a matter of time.
- Combine that with the truth that "intimacy only resides in the safety of commitment," and the only way we can make space for intimacy and healing and change to emerge is in relationship where people are committed to forgiveness.
- Finally: The house of community *has* to be built on one simple foundation that we all share: a commitment to what ancient Christians called ...

### Conversion of life:

- This term is from the monastic tradition.
- The actual phrase is *conversatio morum* in Latin, which is usually translated to "conversion of life."
- The idea is that to live in community with other Christians, you need a shared commitment not to a one-time conversion in the past, but to an *ongoing* "conversion" until the day you die.
- Conversion of life is like a lifelong commitment to spiritual formation; to never stop growing. To become more and more like Jesus, more humble, and joyful, and gracious, and gentle, and disciplined, to become more *loving*.
- Secular psychologists talk about the difference between a "fixed mindset," where people just want to maintain the status quo, and a "growth mindset," where people want to change and grow and mature, and they are willing to suffer pain in order to do so.
- Problems arise whenever Christians come to community with a fixed mindset — if they just want to make Christian friends, hear other people agree with them about politics and theology, and enjoy life.
- To stay together, we need a growth mindset; to come together less like country club members, and more like athletes, training together for love.

- Without this, the moment we are challenged or triggered or called to repentance or called on to sacrifice or put the good of another or the good of the group ahead of our own, we won't be able to stay.
- It only works with conversion of life: A shared commitment to yield our will to Jesus, and to softly, gently, but firmly, never stop growing in God.

**Recap:** In order to stay, we have to learn to ...

- Deal with conflict.
- Forgive.
- And never stop growing.

**Ending:**

- So, to end, where do we begin?
- You may be watching this, and you don't yet *have* a community to stay *in*.
- Maybe you're in a community, but it's kind of superficial, it's not all that deep or raw; or it's honest, but not everyone is committed to spiritual growth.
- Here's the last thing I have to say: Just take the next step.
- Generally, when something feels impossible, it feels too hard or out of reach, it's because we're trying to take too large of a first step.
- Psychologists tell us we grow when we take a step that's about 10% out of our current capacity; if we try for 50%, we fail.
- Just see if you can nudge your community, or your relationships, 10% toward this New Testament vision.
- Your end goal may be to live in a fictive kinship group! Or to start a house church. And all move into the same neighborhood. Or to start a cohousing community and remodel your own apartment complex and live by a Rule of Life together!
- But you likely can't go out and "do" that tomorrow.
- But what *can* you do?
- Can you have a few people over for a meal?

- Can you get together with someone you know from church for coffee or a walk and just go a bit deeper?
- Can you find a confessor?
- Can you see a need and meet that need?
- Don't stop dreaming. Bonhoeffer's warning wasn't against dreaming, it was against wishing, that's based on fantasy, not reality.
- We need more dreaming in the modern church, not less.
- But for now, who are the real people, with real light, and real shadow, who are already in your life? Who are the brothers or sisters in Jesus that God may be spiritually adopting you to? What's the next small step you can take?
- Just take it, together, into being the family of God.
- Like Gaius and the Corinthians sitting around his table, it may not look like much, but it's the only thing that will ever change the world.

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## Notes

1. *A Place Called Community*
2. *Lessons for Living*

# Cutting Room Floor Research

For each Practice, we commission freelance researchers to explore key questions related to the Practice content. Their findings help shape our resources and ensure they are accurate and informative. However, due to video length constraints, we often have to omit some great material. [This document](#) features some of the omitted research related to the Community Practice.