



The Community Practice

Teaching Notes

Practicing the Way

Community Teaching 01:

Be Family Around a Table

Intro:

- He was the richest man in the world.
- And he was famous — in his time, a household name.
- The archetype of the American dream: through grit and determination he made *billions* in the oil industry.
- Yet, if you know Jean Paul Getty's story, the more wealthy and "successful" he became, the more isolated and miserly he became.
- Movies have been made about how broken his family was.
- His *fifth* wife wrote a memoir about their marriage and titled it *Alone Together* — not a great sign.
- Here's a picture of Getty just before his death, at his home in England.
- He's sitting at the head of a table for 50, covered in literal gold candlesticks, in a literal palace, all *alone*.
- Notice: there is zero joy on his face.
- All through the library of Scripture, there is this recurring literary motif that biblical scholars call "the messianic feast." It's this picture of the future Kingdom of God as a feast, with Abraham at one end of the table, and Jesus at the other, set with rich food and wine, and every tribe, tongue, and nation together as the family of God, singing, laughing, and giving thanks.
- This image is like the anti-messianic feast.

Seam: And yet it's a kind of visual parable for the modern world. The average person today has more material wealth than kings and queens did in generations past, yet many of us feel deeply alone.

Radical individualism:

- The term sociologists use for this is “radical individualism.”
- The researcher Robert Bellah called it “the defining trait of America,” but really, it is the dominant cultural orientation of the entire Western world.
- We have been culturally programmed to prioritize the good of the individual over the good of the community; to put our own needs, desires, preferences, and pursuit of happiness over the needs and desires of *any* group — be it our country, our workplace, our churches, or even our families.
- And the dark underbelly of radical individualism is *loneliness*.
- Now, you are likely not an oil tycoon, and I doubt you eat dinner alone in your palace ...
- But do you ever eat dinner alone?
- Do you ache to know and be known, to love and be loved?
- And yet do you *fear* it too?
- Do you feel a pull *toward*, and simultaneously, a push away from relational ties? You yearn for it, yet you are scared you could get hurt or pinned down.
- If you feel this way, you are not alone.

Loneliness:

- We are living through a social epidemic of loneliness:
 - In my country, the percentage of people who say they have no close friends quadrupled in the last three decades.
 - 54% of Americans — more than half — say, “No one knows them well.”
 - 36% report they feel lonely “frequently” or “almost all of the time.”
 - That number goes up to 51% for young mothers and 61% for young adults.
 - Vivek Murthy, the former surgeon general of the U.S., made waves when he called loneliness the number one threat to health in America.
 - He claims it’s worse for your health than smoking 15 cigarettes a day.
 - It’s now been linked to everything from anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation to heart disease, cancer, and dementia.

- And it's not just a U.S. problem; the United Kingdom famously appointed a "loneliness minister" a few years ago, and other nations like Japan have followed suit to attempt to heal this wound in the soul of modern society.

Seam: But this isn't even the main problem with radical individualism; the main problem for us as *followers of Jesus* is that it's sabotaging our spiritual formation into people of love.

Apprenticeship to Jesus:

- This Practice was created to help you apprentice under Jesus.
- We define apprenticeship (or discipleship) to Jesus as a life organized around three driving goals:
 1. To be with Jesus
 2. To become like Jesus
 3. And to do as he did
- And *you can't do this or apprentice under Jesus alone.*
- Not, *you shouldn't*, or *it's not a great idea* — *you can't*. Full stop.
- Because the whole point of apprenticeship to Jesus is to become a person who is pervaded by the love of Jesus; to receive his love deep into your being, and to give it away to others.
 - To love the Lord your God with all your heart, and to love your *neighbor* ...¹
- This process of *how* we become people of love is what we mean by "spiritual formation."
- And a truth that cuts across the Christian wisdom tradition is this: *Spiritual formation occurs primarily in the context of community.*
- As Dr. Joseph Hellerman put it, "We either grow together or we don't grow much at all" (When the Church was a Family).

Seam: It's not just that we're lonely; it's that we're stunted in our spiritual growth; we're not becoming who we were made to be.

Hinge: Is there a practice from the Way of Jesus to live in a thick web of loving relationships right in the midst of a global epidemic of loneliness?

- Yes, it is the practice of community.

Turn: Turn in your Bibles to Genesis 1 ...

- Few things are more radical in our time, and more beautiful, than Jesus' call to community.
- But this call begins long before Jesus, on page one of the Bible ...
- In Genesis 1v26, we read this ...

Genesis 1v26-27:

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

- Notice the unique language used by God in verse 26: "Let us make mankind in *our* image."
- This pronoun "us" could be referring to a group called "the divine council," or it could be referring to the relationality that is at the heart of *who God is*.
 - We know from Jesus that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
 - The word later used by Christian theologians for Jesus' vision of God is "Trinity."
 - God is a tri-unity.
 - "God in three persons, blessed Trinity."²
 - Meaning: God *is* a kind of relationship.
 - As mysterious as this is, it makes perfect sense, because God is love, and *love cannot exist apart from relationship*.
 - This is arguably the most important truth in all of Scripture.
 - Darrell Johnson — a teaching fellow at Regent College in Canada — has this line, "At the center of the universe is a relationship." And to be a Christian, in his view, is "to be alive in the intimacy at the center of the universe."³
- Now, whether the pronoun "us" in Genesis is referring to the divine council or the Trinity ...
- Either way, we are created "in the image and likeness" of a God who not only makes community from page one of the Bible, but who *is* a kind of community.
- As my seminary professor, Dr. Gerry Breshears, likes to say, "God is a family who makes family."

- Both ancient Scripture and modern science argue that we are primarily relational beings. Not just brains or bodies, but what the Christian psychologists Plass and Cofield call “relational souls”⁴
- The Father, the Son, and the Spirit designed us to join them in living deeply relational lives of love.

Seam: It comes as no surprise that Jesus begins his preaching with a call to community. Turn to Mark chapter one ... look at verse sixteen ...

Mark 1v16-18:

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

- Notice: Jesus did not have an *apprentice* (singular); he had *apprentices* (plural).
- He called Simon *and* Andrew *and* James *and* John ...
- And he called them to “fish for people.”
- From the beginning, his goal was to form a new community.
- A few pages later we read this ...

Mark 3v13-14:

Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach.

- Why 12?
- Why not 21 or 120?
- Because this is a highly symbolic act; Jesus is intentionally naming 12 disciples to prophetically evoke the 12 tribes of Israel.
- It’s a way of saying he is forming a new Israel, a set-apart people group.
- In fact, the first Christians were called a “new race” by the pagans, not Jewish or Gentile, but something *else*.
- And this new “race” wasn’t based on blood.

Seam: Just a few sentences later, we read ...

Mark 3v32-35:

A crowd was sitting around [Jesus], and they told him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.”

“Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked.

Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”

- This is Jesus’ way of saying his community is to be like a family.
- What we call “the Church” is not a building or an event, nor is it an ethnic group or a political party; it is a new kind of *family*, not based on blood, but on apprenticeship to Jesus.
- The word Jesus uses is *adelphoi* in Greek; some versions translate it “brothers” or “brethren” or “brothers and sisters.” It literally means “*siblings*.”
- The ancient Mediterranean was a “patrilineal culture.”
- Meaning: *Unlike* our culture, your membership in a family was based on the male bloodline.
- So, if I were in an ancient Mediterranean family, my father would be my family, my siblings would be my family, my children would be my family, but my wife would not. In fact, my *daughters’* kids would not; they belong to other bloodlines.
- *In this culture*, your longest-lasting, closest, most intimate relationships were with your *adelphoi*, or *siblings*.
- And *that* is the word used by Jesus and the New Testament writers, more than *any* other word, even more than the word “disciple.”
- Paul, for example, uses the word *adelphoi* over 130 times in his letters.
- Not to mention all sorts of other family language.

Seam: One of the main ways Paul explains Jesus’ work is through the metaphor of adoption.

Romans 8v15:

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.”

- Through Jesus, we have been adopted into the family of God; God has become our father, Jesus our older brother, and our fellow apprentices *have become our siblings*.
 - When my wife and I adopted our daughter Sunday, she became both our daughter and Jude and Moses' *sister*.
- In the same way, to become an apprentice of Jesus is to become a part of a new family.
- Salvation itself is what theologians call a “community-creating event.”
- Meaning: we are saved *into a family*.
- *No other metaphor* for the community of Jesus occurs more frequently in the New Testament than family.
- The Church is likened to a temple, to a body, to a city on a hill, but those are mostly one-offs.
- The analogy used over and over again is family.

Seam: But (and this is very important!), I hear the word “family” and I think of a mom and dad and 2.5 kids, but that is *not* what a 1st-century Hebrew would have thought of. “Family” in Jesus’ culture was far more robust — it was your parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins and friends and business partners — what many cultures call “kin,” people who are not actually your blood, yet are like family to you.

Family as a fictive kinship group:

- Social scientists call these groups “fictive kinship groups.”
- Many of our favorite TV shows are about fictive kinship groups, from *The Bear* to *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*; we love to see a community orbiting around a biological family but made up of friends and others, who all do life together.
- This is a good image for what Jesus is calling his followers to become — a community that is like an ancient Mediterranean family — a large, extended kinship group who live and work and fight and make up and grow *together*.

Seam: If we want to apprentice under Jesus, and to grow and mature into people of love, we need this.

Hinge: But here’s the thing: We won’t find this kind of community by just going to church on Sunday. We have to find it in smaller circles.

- Let me explain ...

Four circles of community:

- There is a growing body of research from the social sciences that groups relationships into different categories based on *group size* and *the depth of vulnerability*.
- One of the most widely accepted paradigms is from Dr. Robin Dunbar of Oxford, loosely referred to as “Dunbar’s Number”:
 1. He calls our inner circle relationships our “intimates” — this is 1-5 people (max), who deeply know us as we are; and who, ideally, love us as we are.
 - Of course, more than half of people in the U.S. have *no* intimates.
 - But, hopefully, you have a few people you can bare your soul to — a spouse, best friend, or mentor.
 - In the language of the New Testament, these are your *brothers and sisters*.
 - The next circle you could call ...
 2. Kin, our family and friends who are like family.
 - Our “fictive kinship group.”
 - For Dunbar, this is about 15 people. But others say it can be up to 50.
 - But these are the people we do life with.
 - We help each other move, we go on vacation together, we share meals, we drop off groceries when people are sick, we spend holidays with each other, we help parent each other’s kids, we help each other make wise decisions, we call each other out in love.
 - This may be formalized for you in a home community from your church or not, but this is our *community*.
 3. Then the next threshold is around the 150-person mark.
 - Sociologists call this “The Law of 150,” as 150 is about the maximum number of people we can be in relationship with; and it turns out, it’s the optimal group size for human organization.
 - We need this wider social network for all sorts of things.
 - The Stanford sociologist Mark Granovetter wrote a famous paper about “the strength of weak ties,” how we need access to a network of relationships to call on when we need to find a new job, or get help with a project, etc.

- Think of this as our village.
 - I love the African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child; but adults need a village too, in order to flourish and thrive.
4. The final circle is our “tribe” — the larger people group we identify with and belong to.
- We don’t know all these people personally, but this group is where we get a vision of life and a call to step outside ourselves and live with meaning and purpose.
 - For some, this is a literal tribe, or it’s an employer or a sports team or a political party.
 - For us as followers of Jesus, this is *the Church* of Jesus.
 - And if your church is larger than 150 people, this is your church.

Seam: And when it comes to our spiritual formation, there are two key takeaways from this paradigm:

1. We need relationships in all four circles.
 - Jesus had relationships at every layer:
 - He had three intimates, who were like his brothers — Peter, James, and John.
 - He had the 12 and a few close friends, like Mary and Martha, who were like family.
 - Then he had the group of 120 in Jerusalem.
 - Then, the larger movement he left behind.
- In the same way, if we want to grow and mature into people of love, we need relationships in all four circles of community.
 - We need our brothers and sisters.
 - We need our kin.
 - We need our village.
 - And we need our tribe.
- It’s very important to find a healthy local church to be a part of, but it’s just as important to find your three and your 12.

- Because, secondly ...

2. Our deepest formation, growth, healing, and change all happen in the smaller circles.

- We all need what Celtic Christians called an *anam cara*, or a “soul friend.” To bear the weight of life together.
- And we need a kinship group to do life with, around a table, not a stage.

Sundays and community:

- Now, churches come in all shapes and sizes, and we celebrate the whole gamut of the Church of Jesus around the world and down through history.
- The early church met in homes, catacombs, and open-air gathering spaces and eventually, when the Empire fell, Caesar’s palace itself was converted into a church.
- Today, churches still meet in homes, school cafeterias, historic buildings and office parks.
- But whatever type of church you belong to, it is possible to attend church every single Sunday and yet not live in community.
- Most churches today are much larger than they were throughout church history,
- Sunday is circle three or four. It’s our village, or even our tribe. And that’s good!
- But we still need to cultivate deeper community inside those larger circles.
- I was a pastor for twenty years, and I would say to our church of a few thousand people, “We are a family, not a building or an event.” And my heart was sincere, I wanted people to live in community, not just come on Sunday.
- It was true that *theologically* we were family, but functionally, I was the pastor and I wouldn’t have even *recognized* many in our church if I was standing behind them in line at the grocery store! Much less known their name. Or known their *soul*.
- That’s not because I was a bad person or a bad pastor. It’s because you can’t be family with thousands of people.
- For that, we have to find or foster a modern-day “kinship group,” a family.

Seam: But this will not just “happen” in our day and age. It will require us to live *intentionally*.
Through the *practice* of Community.

Definition:

- All we mean by “the practice of Community” is the intentional discipline of actively building highly relational, joyfully connected kinship groups that eat and laugh and pray and worship and follow Jesus *together* as a family.
- And *that* is a radical act in our day and age, and it comes with all sorts of challenges and obstacles, not only in our *culture*, but also in our own hearts.
- But it is the *Way* of Jesus.

Sticky line: And the best possible way to start is to gather a small group of people and begin to share a weekly meal.

The table:

- This act of sharing a weekly meal is a key part of the Jesus story.
- Read the four Gospels. Jesus ate meals with people constantly.
- One scholar said, “In Luke’s Gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal” (Robert Karris, *Eating Your Way through Luke’s Gospel*).
- When you read the New Testament, you discover that the center of gravity in the early church was the table.
- In the very first story we have of the early church, we read, “They devoted themselves to ... the breaking of bread” (Acts 2v42).
- When Paul writes to the Corinthians about their Sunday gathering, he writes, “When you gather *to eat*” Not to sing, or hear a sermon, but to eat a meal!
- You may not know this because it’s not how most of us practice communion today, but the Lord’s Supper was originally a “supper,” a full meal around a table.
- And it was a feast!
- The first Christians called it “the agape feast.”
- There would have been thirty or forty people around a table in an open-air Mediterranean courtyard — eating bread, drinking wine, singing, praying, reading from the Scriptures, and doing it all in a spirit of celebration.
- And we recognize there is a wide variety of theology and practice of the Lord’s Supper in the Church of Jesus today.

- We're not here to advocate for one particular view.
- But we *are* here to say: however you view the Lord's Supper, the regular act of "breaking bread," of eating a meal around the table, with fellow apprentices of Jesus who are family to you — this is an essential part of following Jesus in our time.
- My mentor calls this "dining room table Christianity." I love that! But really, it's just Christianity

Ending:

- This way of living in community is hard for many of us to even imagine, because it's so far from the radical individualism of our culture, and it's just not how many of us experience church.
- But it is the Way of Jesus.
- It is *essential* if we want to become people of love.
- It is beautiful.
- And honestly, it's simple.
- To begin, all you have to do is set the table ...

Notes

1. Mark 12v30-31
2. "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty" by Reginald Heber
3. *Experiencing the Trinity*
4. *The Relational Soul*