



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*

Community Teaching 02:

Share Your Joys and Sorrows

Intro:

- Last night I sat around the table with a few other families in our community for a meal.
- I was coming off an emotionally exhausting week, and I was still reeling.
- We sat down and gave thanks. The food was good, but simple, fare. The conversation was good, too, but ordinary.
- There was a good amount of laughter.
- And while dinner did not solve any of my problems, it did put me back in touch with *joy* — with the sense that I'm not alone, and life is good; with the miracle of ordinary life in God.
- It made me think of Dr. Robert Lustig's book *The Hacking of the American Mind*, which is about how modern corporations have capitalized on our brain's primal dopamine system, causing us to confuse pleasure with happiness; or in chemical language, dopamine with serotonin.
- Lustig argues that peak human happiness — the happiest humans ever are — is when we are sitting around a table, sharing a meal with people we love and are loved by.
- He says the only possible way to improve on this level of happiness is to eat the meal outdoors.

Practice:

- We left off the last session with the table.
- Next up is sharing our joys and sorrows.
- Because when we come to the table, the challenge we face is: How do we not let our meal devolve into just dinner with friends?
- A lot of us are used to Millennial brunch culture, where we just kind of hang out.
- That's fine, but it's not Christian community.

- John Eldredge writes about three layers of conversation:
 1. The shallows — which is basically chitchat.
 2. The midlands — "how was your week?"
 3. And the depths — where you get under the surface.
- Our culture is so incredibly superficial, you can be at the table, and yet feel totally alone.
- How does the table become more than just another dinner party? How does it become a *communion* ... with God, *and with one another*?
- Well, one of my favorite hacks is just to go around the table and share the highs and lows of the week (in fact, that is our exercise for this coming week).
- And behind this exercise is a much larger framework from the life of Jesus himself ... where we regularly see him sharing his joys, and his sorrows, with his community.

Turn: Turn in your Bibles to Mark 14 ...

- I want to show you two stories from Jesus' life that showcase this framework, both from Mark 14.
- The first story takes place on the last night before Jesus' death.
- In context, Jesus and his apprentices are around the table for the Passover Meal, an annual Jewish Feast.
- We know it now as the first Lord's Supper.
- Listen to some of Jesus' final words to his followers ...

Mark 14v22-24:

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them.

- There's a lot going on here, but the short version is: Jesus is feasting with his community!
- And Jesus commands his followers to continue on this act of sharing a meal in his memory.
- In Luke's version, he says:
 - "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22v19).

- Meaning: *Keep* doing this.
- And *this* is *the* practice that Jesus left his disciples to organize their life, together, around.
- We call it the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist.
- But what we often miss in the modern church is that originally, not only was the Lord's Supper a full meal, but it was also done in a spirit of joy!
- As we said last time, they called it "the agape feast". It was like a weekly celebration!
- Meaning: Jesus designed our life together to be built around joy.

Joys:

- In the story the Scriptures tell, God himself is the most joyful being in all the universe.
- The writer of Hebrews said Jesus was anointed "with the oil of joy" (Hebrews 1v9).
- Jesus himself said his *will* for his followers was "... that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15v11).
- In Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit, after love, the *next* fruit named is joy.
- Did you know, your brain literally has a "joy center," in the right orbital prefrontal cortex? It is arguably the only part of the brain that never loses its capacity to grow.
- Which is why, many elderly people are the happiest people you know. They've been growing their "joy center" for decades.
- The problem is, that while our brains are made to run on joy, they are damaged by sin, which means they are bent toward the negative.
- Neuroscientists tell us our brains have a 14:1 ratio for negative to positive thoughts ...
- One scientist I read said it's like our brains are flypaper for negativity and Teflon for positivity.
- Research says our thoughts are 80% negative and 95% repetitive. We just loop on the same fears, anxieties, hurts, and resentments.
- The famous Hungarian-American psychiatrist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called it "psychic entropy," (*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*) the tendency of the mind to fall into chaos and negative rumination.
- Joy is not our default state.
- And this matters because "the joy of the Lord is your strength,"¹ as Nehemiah said.

- Which is more than a nice line; it's a key insight.
- The joy of Jesus is what fills our inner beings with the strength to live the way of Jesus.
- This is why Rick Howe said, "The pursuit of joy is a moral obligation." (*River of Delights*)
- Because without joy, we are vulnerable to evil:
 1. Low-joy people are prone to sin (one of Satan's primary strategies is deceiving us into believing that sin will make us happy).
 2. Low-joy relationships are prone to fracture.
 3. And low-joy communities are prone to fall apart. They rarely last.
- Joy binds us to each other and to God.
- My dad used to say, "The family that plays together, stays together." And the same is true for any community.
- By cultivating joyful attachment, we bind our hearts together in God.
- But there's a discipline to this ...
- The Catholic spiritual writer Henri Nouwen said it this way:
 - "Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day." (*Here and Now*)
- Our relationship to joy isn't passive, but active; we have a part to play.
- The Quaker professor Richard Foster called this "the discipline of celebration."
- Many people think of the disciplines as somber and serious.
- This may come as a pleasant surprise for you, that celebration is a discipline that can make you more joyful, and in doing so, more like Jesus.
- But in our culture of authenticity, it can feel wrong, almost like, morally wrong, to celebrate when we don't feel happy.
- But that's because we misunderstand how our brains are wired by God.
- We can't flip a switch and feel joy, but we *can* share highlights from the week, we can practice gratitude, we can cook a meal, we can throw a birthday party and affirm the person, we can look for excuses to celebrate ... and as we discipline ourselves *to* celebrate, God can use these acts to grow our brain's joy center — to make us more joyful like Jesus.

- And this is best done together ...

1. Because joy is a relational experience.

- The UCLA neuropsychologist Dr. Allan Schore actually argues that joy is what happens to your brain when you are happy to be with someone who is happy to be with you.
- He says, “Joy is connection.” (*The Development of the Unconscious Mind*)
- Think of that feeling when you see someone you know and love, you make eye contact, and their face lights up ... that feeling in your body is the purest form of joy.

- But also we do this together

2. Because our wider society is increasingly designed to make us terrified, outraged, and despairing!

- And while there are plenty of things to be angry about, there is also a multi-billion dollar *industry* designed to *stoke your anger*, fuel your fears, and rob you of joy ... because with a brain with a 14:1 negativity to positivity ratio, negativity is where the money is.
- In a culture like ours, “Joy is an act of defiance,” as Bono put it.
- We have to form micro-communities of defiant joy that resist the black hole of fear and anger.
- Little outposts of celebration and gratitude and laughter and happiness right in the middle of the war zone of modern life.
- *Only then* will we have the “strength” to live and love like Jesus.
- We do this by sharing our joys ...

Seam: But, secondly, sharing our sorrows.

Hinge:

- Story #2: Right after the first Lord’s Supper, Jesus and his disciples migrate from the upper room to Gethsemane.
- They end the meal by singing a hymn, the one time we see Jesus sing in the Gospels. Again, the discipline of celebration: He is choosing joy even while facing the cross.
- Then he goes to the Mount of Olives, and we read this ...

Mark 14v32-34:

Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and keep watch.”

- Notice: Jesus calls for his three closest brothers ... not even his community. Remember the four layers of community from the last session; the pain Jesus is about to feel is too intimate even for the 12; it's only for his closest friends ...
- He asks them to just be with him, through the most trying moment of his life.
- In this story, we learn from Jesus that we are to share not just the highs, but also the lows of life together.
- If *Jesus* needed a few friends to bear the weight of the cross, how much *more* do *we* need each other to bear our own crosses.

Sorrows:

- We are not built to carry the weight of life, and our sin-damaged brains, alone.
- One of the first lines about humans in the Bible is, “It is not good for ... man to be alone,” (Genesis 2v18) and this was said *before* sin entered the picture.
- We're made not just to be together, but also, in the language of Paul's letter to the Galatians, to “Carry each other's burdens” (Galatians 6v2).
- We can't escape pain. Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16v33). But it is exponentially more bearable when it's shared.
- One of the most famous lines about church in the New Testament is from Hebrews 10:
 - “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10v24-25).
- People often point out the author's command to not give up meeting together ... this is good to hear.
- But what we often miss is what we are to do when we meet together — notice the author doesn't say to sing, or listen to a sermon, or study the Bible, or even pray — all good things.
- He says, “Encourage one another.”

- The reason meeting together regularly is so important is because, if your heart is anything like mine, we need encouragement constantly.
- I need another brain to comfort the “psychic entropy” of my own.
- Did you know: The Holy Spirit is called the “comforter” by Jesus. The Greek word is *paraklete*, a word meaning, “one who comes alongside.”
- That word “encourage” is *parakaleo* in Greek; it’s the verb form of the noun *paraklete*.
- Meaning, our role in community is similar to the Holy Spirit’s, we are to come alongside our brothers and sisters in their pain and comfort them, encourage them, support them, help them, and direct them, just like the Spirit of God.
- In fact, Paul commands us to do this all through his letters.
- Sometimes this is as simple as identifying who at the table had a hard week, and just taking a few minutes to encourage them, affirm the good you see in them, bless them ... very simple, but so helpful.

Seam: But — for this to happen, we have to share what’s really going on underneath the surface ...

- If we fake it ... “How are you?” “Good!” We will suffer alone.
- You can be around a table with a dozen people you know really well and still feel profoundly *alone* if you don’t actually share your heart.
- And this is what we see in the life of Jesus.

Wounds:

- Joyful as he was, the prophet Isaiah said Jesus was “a man of sorrows who was no stranger to suffering.” (Isaiah 53v3 NCB)
- But look at what Jesus did in his darkest hour: He called for his friends! “Come, stay here with me while I pray.”
- One of the first things you learn if you study trauma is that *all* of us have some form of trauma, just to differing degrees.
- Because experts argue that trauma is not what happens to you, it’s how your body *processes* what happens to you.
- Which is why two people can go through the exact same experience, and one is shattered, while the other seems *strengthened* by it.

- And *the single most important factor* in whether painful events traumatize us or not is community.
- One of the landmark studies on trauma was done by the social psychologist James Pennebaker and his team at The University of Texas.
 - They wanted to know why it was that some people went through a traumatic experience and were devastated by it, they seem to never really recover, but others go through it and seem to not only to recover, but to really grow through it. A phenomenon scientists called “post-traumatic growth.”
 - They conducted this massive research study, and their hypothesis was that traumatic events that bore a social stigma were harder to recover from than those that elicit empathy.
 - They specifically looked at victims of sexual assault and people whose spouses committed suicide.
 - But after years of research, they concluded their hypothesis was totally wrong. There was virtually no correlation between the nature of the trauma and people’s ability to heal from it.
 - What they found, over and over again, was that if people went through a traumatic experience and had a close friend or community to walk with them through it, they usually came out okay.
- As the psychologist Robert Stolorow once put it, “Trauma is emotional pain that has yet to find a relational home.” (*Trauma and Human Existence*)
- The stakes are high: As scary as it is for many of us, we have to share our hearts with each other, share what’s *really* going on, in order to heal.

Seam: And not just to carry the weight of what has happened, but what *could* happen ...

Fears:

- You can group all emotional pain into two simple categories: grief and fear.
- Grief is over what happened in the past; fear is the anticipation of what *could* happen in the future.
- And fear is harder to deal with because it’s unknown.
- You don’t *know* yet what the pain will be.

- Living with that uncertainty is brutal.
- One of the best ways to deal with anxiety is to share your fears with another person.
- The voice of Jesus is not the voice of fear, but of peace. But often, we need another person to help us sort through all the voices in our heads.
- For those of us who are more prone to anxiety, like myself, we have to do this *constantly*.

Summary:

- So ...
- Sharing our joys.
- And sharing our sorrows.
- Is this what your table conversation is like? Or is it more superficial?
- This is how we become a community of love and depth in a culture of individualism and superficiality.

Seam: But this is scary for a lot of us ...

Scary and slow:

- Especially if you've been wounded by a past experience in community ...
- Or if your early childhood years taught your body, on an unconscious level, that people aren't to be trusted, that intimacy is dangerous, that you have to wall off your heart to keep it protected ...
- Powerful forces inside us and outside us, going back to our earliest days, to our relationships with our parents, and their relationships *with their parents*, block our ability to receive love ... and to give love ...
- These forces work to keep us *alone*, keep us from sharing life with community.
- And many of us were not raised with the skills to even notice our own emotions, much less share with them with others in a healthy way. That's just not a tool we were handed by our families or early church experiences.
- Even if the first step for you is very small ... it's just to admit you had a rough day and not give any details ... take it one step at a time.
 - You can't bare all? Okay. What *can* you do?

- As you live in community, the more you share your heart, the more it will unblock your wounding ... and open it to healing.
- But you have to go beyond superficial conversation, and even beyond the safety of Bible study, as good as that is.
- We can meet with a small group every single week and share our insights from Scripture with each other for years, and yet never share our hearts, our pain ...
- And remember: The goal of Christian community isn't *just* to know and love God, it's also to know and love, and be known and loved by, each other. To become people *of* love.
- This does not happen overnight. It takes *years* to build this kind of community, to build trust with people where you feel safe enough *to* share your heart.

Seam: And the best way to do this, that I know, is simply to do life together around the table.

Jesus left us the table:

- *This is the practice* that Jesus left us to organize our life together.
- Jesus did not leave us an architectural blueprint for a church building to worship in (in fact, church buildings did not exist for hundreds of years); he did not leave us a liturgy to follow, hence the wide spectrum of types of churches around the world.
- He left us the table.
- Professor Joseph Hellerman, writing about how unlikely it was that the early church survived the Roman Empire, said this:
 - “Christians had no temples, no sacrifices, no priesthods, no liturgy — just an informal weekly meeting in a local home where they broke bread and sang a hymn... This is hardly the stuff of a major world religion” (*When the Church Was a Family*).
- Yet Christians gathering weekly for a meal changed the world!
- Because this meal was *so much more* than dinner with friends.
- The bread was more than just bread, and the wine was more than just wine.
- It was a meal with Jesus.
- Are you hearing how simple this is?
 1. Share a regular meal with a set group of brothers and sisters.

2. Put Jesus at the center of it.

3. Share honestly in both the joys and the sorrows of life.

- If you do these three simple things, you will be *90% of the way* there.
- So this coming week, may you share more than a meal; may you open your hearts to each other, and share your joys and sorrows, as you share in the love of Jesus.

Notes

1. Nehemiah 8v10