

HOW DO YOU SPELL "LOVE"?

The Gift of Time Together

Texts: Psalm 133:1-3; Acts 2:42-47; Hebrews 10:24-25

We're looking this month at the secrets behind the most amazing kinds of communities. I'm talking about families, groups, and teams that not only survive and thrive together where others don't, but which also produce people who go on to be nearly UNBREAKABLE in the face of life's pressures and pains.

If you are a student of history, then you know that no group has survived and thrived through more pain and pressure, or produced stronger people, than the community of faith that Jesus Christ founded. For that reason, I want to invite you to consider with me the very first description the Bible gives us of the life of that early church. We find the account in the Book of Acts chapter 2:42-47. Listen with me for a common theme...

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 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, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

When you read this passage (and the rest of the Book of Acts), one theme hits you over and over again. The early Christians spent a remarkable amount of TIME TOGETHER. I mean, Church for these people is not a ninety-minute, once-a-week experience that you go to. Church is a many-hour, multiple-day identity that goes with you. These first Christians are studying the Word of God and praying together. They are watching the wonders of God's grace together. They are sharing their resources in order to meet needs together. They are meeting in the temple courts together. They are eating in their homes together. They are praising God and inspiring the favor of the community around them together. They are seeing God rescuing people from what troubles and threatens them together. If you take nothing else from this passage, please take this: The ground from which sprang all the resilient good of the life of the Early Christians was the amazing amount of TIME they spent TOGETHER.

Relational ADHD

You know, for a lot of years, I found going to Church (even as a pastor) less than fulfilling. Don't get me wrong. I've loved the encounter with God. I've watched his Word expand my vision and grow my character. It has been a joy to see our mission outreach changing lives for the good. But I secretly wondered sometimes: "Where is the profound sense of fellowship, of deep togetherness, that Christianity is supposed to be about?" I'm around a lot of great people. But I'm not forming relationships anywhere near as satisfying as when I was younger. Can any of you understand this?

Did you have a gang of friends when you were a kid? I did. We rode the bus or walked to school together. We went to the same classes and played endless hours of ping-pong and pool. We ate thousands of slices of pizza and listened to thousands of hours of music together. We mourned our losses in love and celebrated our victories in sports. We got braces together and acne together and arrested together and, somehow, a diploma together. There was so much fruit and fullness from all that time together.

When I got to college, I was already so rich with best friendships that I wasn't looking for more of them. As Bill Clark says, all the little nibs on my Relational Lego Block were already covered by these amazing connections from my younger years. Of course, I kept on meeting new people. I joined every club and committee that would have me as a member and headed up the student government. I met more people when I went to Northern Ireland after college and met many more in graduate school. There were more when I lived in San Francisco, and more when we moved to San Diego, and more still when God brought us here to Illinois where God prefers to spend the summer!

But, to be honest, I think I gradually developed a sort of "Relational ADHD." I'm hyperactive when it comes to the number of relationships I juggle. But there's a deficit when it comes to giving any of them the sustained attention that would make them more deeply satisfying ones. Sadly, even those best friendships I had when growing up have slipped away now. Sometimes I feel like my relational pool is an ocean wide but a puddle deep. I've got a heart for lots of people but little time to meet with any of them. Do you understand this? I wonder if this condition was what the writer to the Hebrews was thinking of when he said: **"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" (Heb 10:24-25).**

Dwelling Together

Several months back, some couples in our church invited Amy and me out to dinner to celebrate my birthday. I'd been in a small Bible study group with some of the guys, but hadn't spent a lot of time with their spouses so I thought, "Great. It will be nice to get to know them better. Besides, it's nice to have a few friends in one's advancing age!" Several days later, we got another invitation to get together with this same set of couples and I thought, "Wow. We're going to see those people again. So soon?" But, off we went, and it was another terrific time together. The stories told were more vulnerable, the conversation was even deeper.

And then, before I knew it, the wives were getting together on a regular basis for lunch. Then they were taking a class together in the evenings and several of the guys and I were meeting together on Fridays. One weekend not too long ago, we had dinner together on Friday, lunch on Saturday, and dinner again on Sunday. By now, I'm thinking, "Gosh, I've got a lot of different people who want to get on my calendar. I've got all these activities and events that I now can't put on my calendar because I'm spending so much time together with these people. Do they not know how busy I am? Do they not get that I'm trying to juggle a lot of different friendships here?"

And then it hit me: "These people aren't interested being friends. These people want to be Church – like the early church was Church." They are inviting Amy and me to do life together with them – to have a circle of relationships so close that there is almost no pain or doubt or failure that can't be safely shared there... no crisis in our health or calamity with our kids or challenge in our workplace that can't be endured better because of the support of the people there... no leap of faith or step of growth and service that will not eventually get spurred on there.

Somehow, these people figured out that the kind of relational transparency, trust, and truth-seeking God uses to transform our lives doesn't just happen in an ADHD world. It takes being willing to commit yourself to some people. It involves showing up again and again to encourage those other people. It means working at communicating with one another. And that only happens as we spend a lot of time together. That's true if you want a great family, great friends, a great workgroup or team. It's why our couples' group was out celebrating someone else's birthday again last night!

The Psalmist once wrote: **How good and pleasant it is when God's people DWELL together in unity! For there the Lord bestows his blessing. (Psalm 133:1,3).** That word "dwell" there literally refers to the act of pitching your tent and sharing a campsite with someone, the way the ancient Bedouins did. To "dwell" means to get down on the ground with someone and throw your food and your fortunes in with them. It means to companion them along the journey of life. Interestingly, we meet this same term "dwell" in the New Testament when the Apostle John marvels that the divine "Word" – the infinite Mind or "Logos" that created the universe and holds it all together – chose to become human flesh so

that he could dwell amongst us (John 1:14). What John is saying is that God wanted more than a now-and-then, ricochet here-and-there ADHD relationship with us. So he slowed himself down and focused himself in and resolved to love us in a dwelling sort of way. "Now, he says, **"love one another as I have loved you."** (John 13:34).

Who are you dwelling with these days? Or whom might you invite to share the kind of deeply satisfying, truly together life we see modeled by Jesus and church he founded? What do you need to stop doing in order to have margin to dwell more intentionally, to meet more regularly, to love more fully a few important people in your life? In the quest to build an unbreakable group or resilient people, there is simply no substitute for spending a significant quantity of quality time together.

The Blessing of Time

I've been thinking this week about a memorable Saturday many years ago. In those days, I spent most Saturdays writing my message for Sunday. But that morning, our eight year-old was clamoring for my attention, so I thought, "Hey, I'll delay the sermon a bit and spend a little time with Cole." We ate breakfast together and then decided to go for a bike ride. Well, one thing led to another, and before I know it, we've pretty much spent the whole morning riding our bikes around town. We hung out at Train Bridge over in Hinsdale and watched the locomotives go lumbering by. Then we went out for lunch and ate ice cream. We laid down in the grass on our back lawn and picked out faces and animals in the cloud formations up in the sky.

I had not planned to spend the whole day like this. As the hours wore on, my anxiety over the unfinished sermon mounted, so I begged off dinner to work on the message. And then Amy said, Cole is in bed and he's asking you to come say good night. I anguished over the interruption, but went upstairs, performed a lightning prayer, pecked the boy on the forehead, and turned to leave when he asked the question: "How was your day, Dad?" "It was a good day," I answered, though I was now feeling I had wasted a bit too much of it. Just to be polite, I said: "How was your day, Cole?" He answered softly: "It was the best day of my life, Dad. I got to spend it with you."

That eight year-old is eighteen now. This past week, he boarded a plane bound for college in California. I cried hard as he went – not because I worry about him. Like our other boys, Rush and Reed, Cole has had the benefit of spiritually-rich friendships. Through our youth ministry, he's been a member of a series of fabulous small groups. He's known the benefit of weekly worship in a wonderful church. He's been part of a household that made family meals and prayer a priority. He's been in those blessed circles where commitment and encouragement and communication happened not perfectly, but a lot of the time. And God has used these things to make Cole a young man of courageous faith and resilience.

But you know what? I still wish I had spent more Saturdays like that one when he was eight. I wish I had managed more often to overcome the pull of my ADHD life and really dwell more with my family members, with a few very deep friends, and with God himself. I pray for the power and focus to do more of this in days ahead. I hope you will join me, if the Holy Spirit is stirring you to do likewise. Because this time together we spend is a major strand of what God uses to make us truly UNBREAKABLE.

Let's pray together...

Great God we are reminded today that when children spell love, they often spell it "T-I-M-E." We remember that you do too. All of eternity and all of this universe are yours to enjoy, yet you chose to become flesh that you might dwell among people. You walked this earth surrounded by thousands of people who clamored for your attention. Yet you chose to spend so much of your time pouring yourself into just Twelve, or just Three. Lord, help us to be more like you. Lead each of us to do something this week that overcomes the fragmenting pull of our ADHD world and moves us into spending precious time together with some sacred circle of people. In this way, Lord, lead us into the best days of our life. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.