

“Hand in Hand”

What’s the Point? part #3

Acts 2:42-47

What a great day to be at the beach. Tell the person next to you, “I’m glad you’re here to worship with me.” You are not here by accident, even if you have just wandered into the park. We welcome you and thank you for participating in this worship service today.

Friends, we need each other. God needs us all to be a part of the church’s mission. We’re all in this together. And most importantly, we need to pray together. Would you join me now?

Lord, if you have something to tell us, we are ready to listen. Search us and know us, God. Look into our hearts and see where we need to change. Help us live in your eternal way. In Jesus we pray, Amen.

For the last two weeks, we have been talking about our purpose in life. We claimed you and God form the most important love relationship of your life. We read 1st John 3:1, which says, “Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us, that we should be called the children of God.” And we learned that if we would give God the time and attention he deserves, God will bless our other relationships, too.

Last Sunday we learned that we are created to worship God and only God. Worshipping God means honoring God with our whole lives. Jesus told his disciples in Mark 12:30 that the most important commandment is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength.”

All that said, today I want to talk about fellowship. What does fellowship do for our relationship with God?

Fellowship is more than just having acquaintances. It means doing life together....and I don’t mean in prison... I mean, going deeper than just knowing someone’s name. Fellowship is forming deep, meaningful relationships.

I’ll give you an example. In college, I joined Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia, a professional musical fraternity. As a national organization, I was connected in brotherhood to Sinfonians across the USA. We all knew the same songs, recited the same purposes, and wore the same Greek letters on our sweatshirts. I

attended district and national conventions and met musicians from all around the country. It was very cool.

Although I was a member of the national organization, my main activities were in the local Iota chapter at Northwestern University. We had our own house, gave our own concerts, paid our own dues. The local chapter had around 40 members.

Of those 40 members, I was pretty close with about a dozen. We had a barbershop quartet, a design team, and even study groups. These were my best friends who came to our wedding in 2003 and serenaded my wife.

Within that small group I had some great individual relationships. My friend, Jan, and I spent ten weeks backpacking in Europe. I recently spent a few days with my friend Josh in Cincinnati. I stop by Nate’s house in Chicago every time I go back for homecoming.

There is an African proverb that says, “If you want to travel fast, go alone. But if you want to travel far, go together.” Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 says something similar: “Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts. For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up. ...A cord of three strands is not easily broken.”

This is fellowship. We were created for a relationship with God and with others. Joining Phi Mu Alpha was an extension of what God created me to do in the first place. And in that fellowship, I thrived.

Listen, friends: You were formed for God’s family. You were created to be in relationship with others. You could go fast, alone, but wouldn’t you rather go far? If we want our church, our community, our nation to thrive, then we need to go together. That’s what fellowship is all about. Journeying through life together.

When I think about my current relationships, I find many great blessings. Not only do I have the friends here at Grace – people of Grace, as Pastor Sarah said a few weeks ago, I have many great colleagues, friends and mentors in the United Methodist, both pastors and ordinary folks I admire greatly. We pray together, eat together, worship together, and play together, the very things we are doing here in the park today. And guess what? That’s not new. The early church practiced the same things two thousand years ago.

Acts 2 explains the early disciples grew in fellowship. Peter had just preached his very first sermon. Three thousand people repented and were baptized. They joined the church. Wow! They were deeply impacted by Peter’s message.

These new converts were not all baptized by Peter alone; the whole church helped. Notice that the apostles didn’t immediately start a building project. The scripture says, they met in their homes. They devoted themselves to prayer and to learning. And they ate together. You can’t be the church without food. That should be the eleventh commandment.

Scripture says they “broke bread” together. They shared their food, literally taking a loaf of bread and tearing pieces off of it until it was all gone. It would be like sharing a family-size bag of chips. The first person says, “I can’t eat this by myself.” They take a few and pass the bag. Someone else takes a few and passes the bag. And so on, until the whole bag is gone and everyone is full. That’s the breaking of the bread. That’s fellowship.

They had everything in common and gave to all who had need. This is critical. In those days, there was no Salvation Army, no St. Vincent DePaul, no Love Inc., no DHS to ask for help. If you were thrown in prison, and no one came to give you food, you starved. No wonder the early church enjoyed the favor of all the people. Their fellowship was radical! It literally saved lives.

When the early church did these things – worship, fellowship, prayer, breaking bread, meeting in temples and homes, sharing, and giving, God did something amazing. God added to their number daily those who were being saved.

What a fantastic image. Who doesn’t want that for their own church, right? Still, we have to ask, so what? We were formed for God’s family. We’re created for relationships, for fellowship. So what?

If you believe that you were formed for God’s family, then your goal is to intentionally connect with other Christians. The Church is God’s primary instrument for connecting his people on earth to each other and to the good news of salvation. How do we connect to that?

We can apply the same levels of relationships from my college days to the church. Consider four concentric circles, as printed in the bulletin. These

represent four levels of fellowship, each one going deeper and involving greater risk, greater commitment, and greater reward.

The first and largest circle is the Church with a capital C. This is the universal Church. It means the Church everywhere in the world. When you say yes to Jesus and commit your life to worshipping God, you join the greatest family that ever existed. It's like God says, “Congratulations! You're adopted!”

You have brothers and sisters all around the world. Even Jesus prayed that we would all be one (John 17:21). Ephesians 1:5 says God's unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. And this gave him great pleasure. God loves to see his children worshipping him in unity.

The second circle is the local church, represented in the group here today. The local church is the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs. Romans 12:5 says, “In Christ, we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”

Now, you might be here for different reasons. You could have been born a Methodist. You may have come today by your own choice. Or you might have had a drug problem – as a child, your parents “drug” you everywhere, to school, to the dentist, and to the church. Maybe you came because you heard the music and stayed to hear the rest. Or maybe you returned to the church as an adult because you long for something you have lost. Regardless of the reason, this is a place to connect with others, to connect with God, and to participate in the greatest mission ever, to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation for the world.

The local church is the level of fellowship where many people remain. However, I challenge you to risk more, to go deeper. The greater the commitment, the greater the reward. So let me tell you about the third circle: small groups.

Small groups commit to prayer and ministry together. For example, we have a Covenant Prayer Group that meets weekly on Tuesdays. I personally meet monthly with a group of pastors every month for lunch, to feed our souls and our stomachs. Some of you naturally are part of small groups. Maybe you do mission

projects together. Or you play in the band together. What might be missing is simply the recognition your group exists and a realignment of your purpose.

We will only grow in faith if we are held accountable by other Christians. Anyone can start a small group, anytime. If you say, Pastor, “I want to start a small group,” I will personally help you get the resources you need. And recommend what sandwiches to bring.

The importance of small groups cannot be understated. We help each other in times of trouble. We build each other up. We learn from each other. We do the work of the church. We go far, together.

Small groups are good, yet there is one last circle. This is the greatest risk and greatest reward. It’s called an accountability partner. Not an accountant...that’s a CPA. Unless CPA stands for “Christian Partner in Accountability.” This is someone who comes along side you in the ups and downs, to celebrate the victories and share the burdens.

I have two CPA’s: my friend, John, a pastor in Menominee, with whom I have developed a great relationship over the past few years, sharing our struggles, celebrating our victories, and playing music together. The other is my District Superintendent, Scott, whom I regularly go to for advice and accountability.

Do you have a “CPA”? Do you have a person who not only listens, but challenges you, advises you, and mutually pours into your life? If not, you are missing out on a great blessing.

To recap: You were formed for God’s family, so connect with other Christians. Connect to the church in the world by a relationship with God through his son Jesus Christ. Connect to the local church, like the families who are being baptized and confirmed today. Connect to a small group, and to an accountability partner. In this way, you will fulfill the purpose for which God created you.

You are not here by accident. Don’t go through this life alone. I promise you, if you deepen your connection to God and others, it will pay off in this life and in eternity. Let’s pray.

Reflection questions:

- In what ways has God created you for relationships?
- Who first brought you to church? What kept you coming back?
- Where would you say you are in the four levels of fellowship (“Church”, GUMC, small group, accountability partner)? Where would you like to be?
- How can you extend the fellowship of the church to someone else?

Memory verse:

“So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” Romans 12:5

Based on Rick Warren’s “The Purpose-Drive Life”, 2002, with Doug Fields Youth Ministry resources.