

Sharing - Practices that lead to Interdependence and Community

Series: Habits of the Heart: Practices to Commune with God and Transform your Life

Date: 19 June 2022, 1st Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Leviticus 19.9-18; Hebrews 13:1-2; 1 John 3:7-21; John 13.34-35

It is not good for man to be alone

One of the great lies we hear and often believe is that because religion is personal it is therefore private. It used to be said that there were three topics that should be avoided in polite conversation: religion, sex and politics. We always talk about politics. If our media is anything to go by we're talking about sex, but religion is, you guessed it, private. This is not the case in other cultures. I'd love to hear from our Chinese sisters and brothers what it's like in their culture, but when I've spoken with people from the Middle East, Africa and the Pacific, religion is always on the table. There is a moral and spiritual vacuum in our culture, and people turn to internet celebrities like Brene Brown or Jordan Peterson for guidance. My hunch is that non-believers are hungry for spiritual conversation, they just don't quite know where to start. But that's also true for us in churchland too.

We're continuing our series *Habits of the Heart: Practices to connect with God and transform your life*. The different spiritual disciplines develop different spiritual muscles and they help us in areas that we're weak in. I'm an extrovert. Give me a room full of people and I'm happy. Claire calls it the gift of schmoozing. She, on the other hand, is an introvert. A day alone with a book and knitting is pure gold. The last 2 weeks we've looked at disciplines that perhaps are easier for introverts - Opening myself to God and Relinquishing the false self. These are about you alone with God. Today is the extroverts turn. We're looking at SHARING - practices that lead to interdependence and community. These are practices that go against the grain of religion as being something private. I realise that for many of you that idea is something you've grown up with and how you've approached a lifetime of faith, especially if you're lifetime Anglicans. So, I don't want you to take my word for it, rather I invite you to come on a journey with me through what God's word has to say on the subject. We'll look at 3 points today. First, the "one another's" in the New Testament, then 2 concrete practices, hospitality and witness.

One Another

In the creation narratives of Genesis 1 & 2 God declares all that he has made as good, good and very good. That is until we come to Genesis 2 where God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone."¹ As human beings we are made for community. To be alone is not good. And this is just as true for our spiritual lives as for the rest of our lives. The great 4th century theologian Basil of Caesarea put it like this: *The Creator has arranged things so that we need each other*. To grasp this fact we only need to read the "one another" statements in the New Testament. One of the ways the New Testament describes the church is as a family. So, we read in Hebrews 13.1

¹ Genesis 2.18

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.

This is the spiritual reality. When you trust in Christ you become part of the family of God, and this is why traditionally in baptism you are given a new name, your family name, that is your Christian name. Hence why baptisms are sometimes called christenings. In Christ we really are sisters and brothers, and you cannot love your spiritual siblings alone in private.

A second way the New Testament describes the church is as the body of Christ. Romans 12.5 says,

So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

Did you see that? We are not our own. In Christ, not only do we belong to God, we also belong to each other.

If you did the Gospel in Life studies earlier this year, you may recall that in chapter 4, Tim Keller lists 9 community building practices from the New Testament. He groups these “one anothers” into 3 sets of three. There are three practices that affirm one anothers. These teach us how to be friends. There are three practices of sharing with one another, which teach us how to be family. And finally there are three practices of serving one another. Let’s look at each in turn.

Affirming one another

The first affirming practice is to affirm one another’s strengths, abilities and gifts.

Romans 12.10 says, “Honour one another above yourselves.”

James 5.9 says, “Don’t grumble against one another, brothers and sisters.”

Texts like Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 that speak of the different gifts that God gives people for the church indicate that these should be recognised and affirmed.

The second affirming practice is to affirm one another’s equal importance in Christ.

Romans 15:7 says, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you.” 1 Corinthians 12:25: “Have equal concern for each other”. 1 Peter 5:5: “Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another”

Or again Philippians 2.3 - Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others.

James 2.1: Don’t show favouritism.

The third affirming practice is to affirm one another through visible affection.

Romans 16:16 - Greet one another with a holy kiss. James 1.19 - Be quick to listen, slow to speak.

Ephesians 4:32 - Be kind and compassionate toward one another.

1 Thessalonians 3:12 - May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other.

John Stott writes,

The word “one another” or “each other” emphasises the reciprocity of Christian care. We are not to leave it to an elite of professional comforters or counsellors. These have an important role to fulfil, of course, but supporting, caring, encouraging and comforting are ministries which belong to all members of the body of Christ.²

² John Stott, *The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, (IVP, 1991), 115

Sharing with one another

The first practice of sharing is sharing one another's space, goods and time.

Romans 12:10 - Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. 1 Peter 4.9 - Offer hospitality to one another. Galatians 6:10 - As we have opportunity, let us do good.

We get a picture of what this looked like in the early church in Acts.

"All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone in 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."³

The second sharing practice is sharing one another's needs and problems.

Galatians 6:2 - carry each other's burdens. 1 Thessalonians 5.11 - Encourage one another.

Hebrews 3:13 - Encourage one another daily.

The third sharing practice is sharing one another's beliefs, thinking and spirituality.

Colossians 3:16 - Teach and admonish one another.

Ephesians 5.19 - Speaker to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.

Romans 12:16 - Live in harmony with one another. 1 Corinthians 1.10 - Agree with one another.

In Philippians Paul urges us to be "like minded, hav[e] the same love, be[.] one in spirit, and of one mind."⁴

Serving one another.

The first practice of serving one another is serving one another through accountability.

James 5:16 - Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other. Romans 15:14 - Instruct one another. Ephesians 4.25 - speak truthfully to your neighbour, for we are all members of one body.

This is very much breaking the "private" take on religion. Each of us need to ask ourselves, "Am I open to correction?" What depth of relationship there is to be able to confess a sin to a sister or brother, and find love, encouragement, prayer and accountability.

This leads to the second practice of serving one another, and that is through forgiveness and reconciliation.

Ephesians 4.2 - Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Colossians 3.13 - Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.

Galatians 5.26 - Don't provoke or envy one another. James 4.11 - Don't slander one another.

And in Matthew 5 and 18 Jesus speaks about seeking to reestablish broken relationships with one another.

Finally, we serve one another's interests rather than our own.

Hebrews 10:24 - spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

³ Acts 2.44-46

⁴ Philippians 2.2

Romans 15:1-2 - We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbours for their good to build them up.

Galatians 5:13 - You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But don't use your freedom to indulge the flesh, rather serve one another humbly in love.

There are more "one anothers" in the New Testament, but you get the point don't you? We cannot be who God calls us to be without each other. We cannot grow into all that God has for us without each other. The spiritual life of the Christian cannot be wholly or even mostly private, because we are members of the body of Christ, brothers and sisters in the family of God. It's through one another that God chips away at our rough edges. It's through one another that we learn how to trust, how to worship, how to pray, how to serve, how to love, how to be Christian. It is through one another that we encounter the Holy Spirit. As Cyprian that great African bishop of the 3rd century put it, "You cannot have God for your Father unless you have the church for your mother."⁵ Sharing our lives of course requires vulnerability and courage and commitment. But these are essential for real intimacy and depth of relationship. It is not good for us to be alone. The Catholic spiritual writer Ronald Rolheiser writes,

We go to church so as not to be alone - alone in our joys, alone in our suffering, alone in the everydayness of our lives, alone in the important passages of our lives ... we go to church to tell people we love them, and hopefully, to hear them tell us the same thing.⁶

With the remainder of our time, let's look at 2 particular disciplines that will help us share our lives and lead to interdependence and community, namely hospitality and witness.

1. Hospitality

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. **2** Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.⁷

Last year we did a church life and health survey. One of the great strengths the survey showed was our Bible Study groups. These are a great place for sharing your life with others and growing spiritually. One of the questions asked in the survey was, "when you first arrived at church did you feel welcomed and included?" 64% answered very much, and 28% quite. The next question was, "Do you actively look out for newcomers at church in order to welcome them?" Only 18% said very much, and 25% said quite. The third question was, have you hosted a function at your home and invited people who were new to church? 10% of you said, yes, more than 10 times this year. 30% said once or twice, 54% said not at all.

We all appreciate the love and welcome we receive at church, but for us to grow as a church, and for you to grow personally, I think we need to work at the spiritual discipline of hospitality. This can look like having people over for meals, inviting someone out for a coffee, being willing to make new

⁵ Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, vi, cf. Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, IV.1.1

⁶ Quoted in Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, IVP 2005: 129

⁷ Hebrews 13:1-2

friends with the newcomers at church. Now I know not everyone will be able to open their home, but hospitality starts with an attitude. It is the desire to be a safe person who offers others the grace, shelter and presence of Jesus. It's about creating an open space where a friend or stranger can enter and experience the welcoming spirit of Christ in another. Maybe that just means being willing to say hello, show an interest in the other and give them the gift of listening. It doesn't mean entertaining guests where everything has to be perfect, but loving them and welcoming them in, and sharing what you have. Let them help with the cleaning up. We try to do this by having a pot luck, or bring and share. If you want tips, just ask the Dallahs or Maskells. They are very intentional about how they do this. How can you be on the lookout for newcomers at church? What steps can you take to welcome someone? Who can you plan to have a cuppa or a meal with? Our world desperately needs safe people and safe places. Hospitality is one way become God's welcoming arms for a hurting world.

2. Witness

The second spiritual discipline for us to grow in is Witness. The second survey we did last year was the National Church Life Survey. That 7% of us feel at ease talking about faith with others and look for opportunities to do so. Not all of us are evangelists, but we're all called to be prepared to give a reason for the hope that we have. I wonder whether this needs a reframe for us too. Imagine your favourite thing, maybe your footy team, a book you love, a holiday destination. When you bump into friends, you want to share about it with them so that they can enjoy it as much as you. Don't ask me about Lord of the Rings, or you'll get a taste of what I'm talking about! We naturally praise the things we love to our friends and want them to share our joy in that. Well, why not Christ? Is he not our highest joy, our deepest hope? I think this is what the apostle Peter is getting at when he says that we've been made a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, so that we may declare the praises of him who called us from darkness to light.⁸ A couple of years ago we had the UK evangelist J John speak here. He had a very simple process for witnessing, sharing your faith with others. PRAY. CARE. SHARE. Who of your friends and family are you praying for, regularly, that they might experience the wonders of God's love in Christ? How can you care for them, and for those you meet? When it comes to sharing, my hope is that we can do some training later this year, but why not talk about it in your Bible Study groups, or have a read of some great books like *The Reason for God*, or *Making Sense of God*, both on our library up the back. Or maybe as you read the Gospels think, what questions that my friends have does this passage answer? You could rehearse the conversation. And if you're in a conversation where you don't know what to say, just say, "I don't know. I'll get back to you." and go and find out. Or, invite them to have coffee with me or someone you know can help them along.

The truth of the matter is this: we love, because he first loved us. We are the strangers whom Christ has welcomed through the cross. Our world needs the love of Christ. We're called to shine his light. May each of us grow in sharing our life with others that the love of Christ might flow through us.

⁸ 1 Peter 2.9