

NEW LIFE THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

Acts 2:42-47

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The little girl was born on Mother's Day. She had been long anticipated not just by her parents but by the entire church family. It's not that there weren't any other children in the church, although there weren't as many as there are here. But her parents, Bruce and Kelly, had joined the church when they were in their early 20's. They were newly-married, new college graduates, new residents in the community. They joined the church because they'd both grown up in church and it was important to them. They became very active, serving as youth group volunteers, and they were beloved by the whole congregation. They seemed to represent the next generation of leaders. When Kelly became pregnant, the entire church rejoiced.

There was an elderly man in that church, a real character, a man named Bob who served as a part-time night watchman. He was an odd guy, half toothless, his clothes were usually dirty, but he was also a beloved part of the congregation. He had befriended Bruce and Kelly and they him, and he was excited for their baby just as much as the rest of the church was.

Tessa was born on Mother's Day, but there were complications. She had to be rushed to Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital, where she could be given specialized care. We announced her birth in church and we announced that she needed prayers.

Just like in this church, that church also had a flower sale. Bob had picked up several flats of bedding plants to put up around his yard. Mother's Day was a beautiful day and Bob spent the afternoon planting his new flowers. First he prepared the soil. Then he pulled out his small gardening trowel. He got on his knees in front of his flower bed. He would dig a small hole with his trowel, loosen one of the flowers from the container, and gently place each flower in the ground, patting it down with a little potting soil. With each flower he placed in the ground he said a prayer for Tessa.

I can't think of another situation in which Bob, the messy guy with half his teeth missing, would have become entwined in the lives of Bruce and Kelly, the up and coming successful young couple.

They cared deeply about each other, and that afternoon their relationship was rooted deep in the ground. Prayers were spoken for Tessa as each flower was planted.

Four days later, Tessa's health problems had been resolved, and she was on her way home. She's now an honors student in college, Bob has since died, but the ties that bound them together have survived.

Human life isn't meant to be lived in isolation; the Christian life is a communal life. Certainly that was true in the early church. Listen again to our scripture for this morning: ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,

⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

When Christian community is at its best, there are few things in life that are more meaningful. Relationships formed in the church can be deep, long-lasting, and transformative. It's one of my fondest hopes for each of us, and certainly for those who will be joining the church as new members next week...that this congregation becomes a place where you make friends. Friends who share common interests, so that you have someone to read and discuss books with, or go to Crushers games with, or play cards with. Friends who are going through similar stages in life, so that you know you're not alone when your toddler drives you crazy or when you worry about your teenager or when you're facing retirement. Friends who will drive you to your chemo appointment, week after week and bring you meals. Because life is hard and we need one another. And because it's hard to live out our Christian commitments and we need to be around folks who share our values. And because loneliness is a part of nearly every life.

The myth of American rugged individualism is still alive and well. Many people seem to think that asking for help is a sign of weakness, that an even occasional reliance upon others means that you aren't strong enough or working hard enough yourself. The truth is that people who are the most successful are those who have built interdependent lives. They have a team around them, different people to whom they can turn for various kinds of assistance, and people whom they help as well.

As I observe people in this congregation, I see some beautiful examples of interdependence. I see families who share babysitting duties with each other. I see

strong marriages with this common denominator - those couples have other couple friends with whom they socialize; they're not trying to live healthy lives in isolation.

It may seem daunting to try to build those relationships. Don't think you're the only one who struggles with friendship. In a book entitled, The Lonely American, the authors contend that the busy frenetic pace of contemporary life has made it more difficult for people to form meaningful relationships outside of their families.

Researchers tell us, though, that having a network of friends is not only psychologically helpful but can actually improve health and longevity.

Last week, Kevin Durant of the Oklahoma City Thunder won the National Basketball Association's Most Valuable Player award. He beat that player from South Beach in a landslide. His acceptance speech was remarkable. He thanked dozens of people by name. He thanked them slowly and sincerely. He thanked teammates, friends, family members, his father and, very eloquently, his mother. It was obvious that Kevin Durant knows that he didn't achieve his success alone.

Ask people to name a time in their lives when they were happy and many people will talk about their college years. In a college commencement address, the author Barbara Kingsolver talked about this. She said something that makes sense, but something I hadn't thought about before. Here are a few quotes: "You've spent the last four years living so close to your friends, you didn't have to ask them about their problems, you had to step over them to get into the room. As you moved from dormitory to apartment, you've had such a full life, surrounded by people...and now you're told that's all about to change. You're told that you should strive for the big,

lonely house as a metaphor for success. You're told that growing up means leaving the herd, starting up the long escalator to isolation.

Well", she continues, "not necessarily. As you leave here, remember what you loved most in this place...the way you lived, in close and continuous contact. This is an ancient human social construct that once was common in this land. We called it a community. We lived among our villagers, depending on them for what we needed. If we had a problem, we discussed it, face to face, with our neighbors. We acquired food from farmers. We listened to music in groups, in churches or on front porches. We danced. We participated. Community is our native state. You play hardest for a hometown crowd. You become your best self. You know joy. This is not a guess; there is evidence. The scholars who study social well-being can put it on charts and graphs. In the last 30 years our material wealth has increased in this country, but our self-described happiness has steadily declined. In many places in the world, the happiest people are those with the greatest sense of community."

On this Mother's Day, let us acknowledge that this is simply a happy day for many people, for people who treasure good relationships with their mothers, or good memories, or for mothers with good relationships with their children. This is also a difficult day for those who have recently lost their mothers, for women who want to be mothers, for those who have lost children, for those whose relationships with their mothers were problematic.

It's also a good day to acknowledge that none of us should expect that our relationships with our nuclear families will supply all of our needs for community. That's simply too much pressure to put on our family units, and besides, it keeps us isolated.

The more diverse people we introduce into our lives, the more interesting our lives become.

If you look at the patterns of relationships in the Bible, you see a picture of interdependent community, of people relying on each other. And in the early church, the sense of community was so strong, so attractive, that it drew others to it. Those early Christians didn't have to advertise their faith or shout about it; people were naturally drawn to them because of the way they loved and cared for each other. May it be so for us.