

Nothing Happens Overnight

The Big Thing About Small Groups

February 16, 2020

Passage: Acts 2: 42-43; Acts 5:42

What we want people to know: The strength of the church has always come through the power of smaller groups walking through their faith together and influencing and empowering the larger church.

What we want people to do: Consider the role of small groups in their life and the development of their faith; if they are not currently in one to find one to join; you are not alone!

Special happenings: Launch of Virtual Small Group

ACTS 2:42-43 *"All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders."*

ACTS 5:42 *"And every day, in the Temple and from house to house, they continued to teach and preach this message: Jesus is the Messiah"*

We've been talking in this series about some of the things that we need to do as Christians to grow in our faith. These things are the hard work, the workout routine, that we do as believers to ensure that we are healthy spiritually. Pastor Dave started off this series talking with us about prayer and the importance of having a prayer life. Last week Pastor Naomie talked to us about having a personal devotional life where we spend quiet time with God in reflection and prayer. Those are two very important spiritual workouts that we can do alone. Today, we're going to talk about one that we do together – small groups.

I am a basketball player, semi-retired 😊, and now a basketball coach. As a coach, I need each of my players to continually improve and grow as basketball players. If they come in next season with the same skill level as last season then they are not improving, they are going to get less playing time and they are selling themselves short. They constantly need to be doing the work to get better. If they don't want to fall behind other players, they need to constantly improve their skills.

The workouts they need to do to improve are done on several levels. There are things that they do by themselves to get better. They can always work on their shooting and ball-handling by themselves. They can work on their shooting motion; they can practice dribbling between their legs. They can even practice passing with a wall to bounce the ball off. They can practice free throws and three pointers all by themselves. They can become a pretty good player all alone, but they can't become the best player that they can be.

To be a great basketball player you need to also be able to play with others. You need to practice with others in order to go to the next level as a player. Knowing how to throw a bounce pass and knowing when to throw one in the middle of a fast break down the court are two very different things. It's hard to practice defense alone too. You need people to practice that with to be a great player. Most people who have coached basketball for a long time can tell you of players who are really good in warmups but terrible in the actual game. These are the players that only work out alone and never work out with a team.

Our spiritual life is a lot like a basketball player in this way. We can do some things alone to grow, but to be the best we can be we need to grow as part of a group. There is a limit to how good of a basketball player you can be when you are only working out with yourself. You're not really growing until you are growing with a group of other players all trying to get better together. Basketball is, after all, a team sport and the players who are the best players are the ones who grew together with a team. You learn from each other and from working together towards a goal.

As Christians we can also do a lot of growth on our own. We've talked about the importance of things like prayer and personal devotions. These are skills that we develop on our own that help us to become the kind of Christian that we all want to be. These are like the shooting or dribbling drills that a basketball player does – we can develop some of our skills alone. Small groups, where we can wrestle with our faith and our questions together, are like the practicing with our basketball team. There are some skills that we need to develop as Christians that we can only do together with other believers. **We need each other to become the best followers of Jesus that we can be.**

In our passage for today we are hearing about the early church – this new group of believers starting out something new. From our passages we see that they met with each other regularly and not only in the temple, but also in their homes. If we'd take the time to read through all of this passage, and really the whole book of Acts, we will see that they not only met together to hang out but shared in each other's lives. They shared their resources, they helped each other out with any need – a need of any group members was a need of all of the group members. They lived out their faith together and it changed the world.

The early church teaches us a few things about small groups that I want us to spend a little time on today. Like we talked about with our basketball analogy earlier we are all called, as believers, to continue to grow in our spiritual skills. We have to continue to do the hard work that allows us to be the world-changing Jesus-followers that we are called to be.

We need to be able to grow spiritually. While we can grow spiritually on a Sunday morning here in worship, there is a limit to that, if we're being honest. The majority of us learn best by interacting in some way with what we are trying to learn, right? If I was teaching you how to shoot a free throw, I could stand up here and explain – balance, eye, elbow, follow-through – but that wouldn't make you a better free throw shooter. You would need to try it out, interact with it, ask clarifying questions – and that is what a small group is for, interacting with your faith in a way that helps you ask questions and try things out.

Small groups that are done right are a powerful way to grow spiritually, relationally & numerically. A small group isn't just a glorified Bible study. While it is often an important part of a small group to interact with the Bible together and pull it apart, ask about things and even push back against things to clarify and better understand the Bible, that's not the only thing that we do in small group. Part of how we wrestle with our faith together as believers is to walk with each other as we live out that faith in our everyday lives. A small group done right will add to the Bible study things like hang out time, sharing food, prayer time, fun events and missions and outreach. When we have a good foundation of all of those things together happening in a small group it facilitates our spiritual growth. We are able to learn and grow together with other believers as they are also learning and growing. None of us are in this alone, we shouldn't be – we are in this together!

Being in this together also means that we are investing in relationships that will help us in our faith. We can get to know how others live out their faith in their daily lives. We can talk through our struggles and celebrate our successes together. We can keep each other accountable to do the things that we say that we are going to do. We can lift each other up and help each other out when we are struggling to live up to our faith. Like I said, none of us are in this alone and a small group is one of the best ways to make sure that we don't end up out on a limb alone trying to navigate our faith. We are made for relationship with God and with each other and that's really hard to get just on a Sunday morning.

Bill Wilson, who founded Alcoholics Anonymous, knew that small groups are what makes the difference. It allows people to not only get together with those with the same issues, but it allows them to share in their struggles together and celebrate their victories together. They know each other and each other's struggles well enough to walk through them together and that has made all the difference in the success of the program.

Not only did the early church work hard to help each other grow spiritually and relationally, the early church increased their numbers from 120 to over 50,000 in just 25 years. That is massive growth!

The core of what they did to make that work was the small groups going out and loving on people. They didn't wait for the whole temple to have a "Serve Day" where they went out to help the poor and the sick. Each and every house group took it upon themselves to go out and love people in Jesus' name. That was the spark that lit the fire! As they ministered to people their number began to increase and the number of groups began to increase, and the number of believers began to increase. It was the small groups reaching out into their communities that was the catalyst for the growth of the church.

We are in a spiritual war, but you don't have to fight that war alone. We have this idea that permeates our culture of "rugged individualism". We have been taught about pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps and making our own way and that anybody can be anything they want to be and it's just up to hard work. Now, we can have differing views about if any of that applies to other areas of life or not, but one place it does not work is in our faith. We were not made to do this alone and from the very beginning God made it clear – He created Eve for Adam and they had all sorts of babies. Jesus kept it going because when He got started, he did so by creating the first small group – the disciples. We were made to do this together.

We're always in some sort of spiritual battle, aren't we? We are always being tempted to do things that are contrary to our faith and we have the internal struggle of fighting off the temptations and doing the right thing. If we try to fight the war alone, we are going to lose. We don't need to do it that way, we have each other to encourage and walk alongside of us through the struggles. Small groups are how we create the army of believers around us to fight the battles we need to fight to grow in our faith.

In 1974, 29+ years after the end of WW2 the final Japanese soldier surrendered. Hiroo Onoda had been sent to a small island with 3 other soldiers during the war and was told not to stop fighting even if he heard rumor of surrender. Onoda took that seriously and continued to hold his position for almost three decades all by himself. The other 3 soldiers died at some point over the years, but Onoda survived. They tried to tell him the war was over time and time again, but he didn't believe anybody. They dropped fliers, they broadcast radio reports and friends and family telling him it was over. He still didn't believe them. He survived in the jungle, he snuck into town to steal supplies, he kept holding his position – fighting a war that was long over. Japan spent over \$500,000 and the time of over 13,000 soldiers trying to find him and tell him to stop – it took almost 30 years. With the assurance of his own personal commander, Onoda finally surrendered. He entered that jungle at 22 years old and walked out at 52 years old – having wasted nearly 30 years fighting a war alone. By his own account "nothing happened in those 29 years in the jungle" – he fought a war by himself that got him nowhere because he went at it alone. He didn't listen to anybody else. He didn't believe anybody else. He thought he could do it alone. He held his ground but never moved forward. He fought the same battle for 30 years because he wouldn't let anybody else help him move past it.

We can all be a little like that in our spiritual lives sometimes, can't we? We think that we can do it ourselves with our own Bible reading and that we don't need anybody else. We think that we should be able to be strong and grow on our own, as if it is a competition or a sign of weakness to need others to help us along the way. We fight these battles alone because we don't trust anybody else and, like Onoda in the jungle, we just waste time holding ground and not gaining any. We are not made to be that way; we are not supposed to do this alone. **Your faith is yours alone, but to grow in your faith takes walking alongside of others and growing together.**

Here at CrossPoint we have a variety of ways to get involved in Small Groups. Here we actually call them LifeGroups because we believe that in these groups, we walk through life together. I want to give you an example of how that has worked out in the life of one member of our church...

JOANNE STONER