

# Practicing the Way

## Session Eight: Life Together

“If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together.” We are not designed to travel the spiritual journey by ourselves. We need community to practice the Way.

And Jesus’ call to community goes far beyond church attendance to relationships of depth, vulnerability, and a commitment to transformation.

To sustain a lifelong journey of following Jesus, to become a person of love in God, we need to key in on one final critical truth: You are meant to follow Jesus in community. Learn how to cultivate a community of depth, vulnerability, and commitment to transformation.

This is the last session looking at Practicing the Way – becoming an apprentice of Jesus. Be with Jesus, become like Jesus, do what Jesus did.

We looked at how we are formed, spiritually and how we can be more intentional about our spiritual formation. All formation in the way of Jesus is counter formation to the way of the world, so its not easy to go against the flow.

We have looked at the spiritual practices that Jesus did and that will help us sustain our apprenticeship and over time transform us and make us more loving. Prayer, scripture, solitude and silence, fasting, sabbath, generosity, service, witnessing and community. But the practices can only take us so far. We have to meet God in our pain and inner journey

We have looked at the wounds and the pain in our lives that can hijack our transformation and also at sin, and how we find freedom and healing from the sin within.

Last week we looked at how we bring all that together to find a rule of life, the daily, weekly, monthly practices and rhythms to give our spiritual transformation structure and support.

This is only a primer for a life long journey of following Jesus. But todays last session is important because that journey is not meant to be taken on your own. If you go on it alone you are likely to fall away.

Jesus said I will build my church and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it (Matthew 16.18). Together we can be strong and prevail. But on your own, you will be picked off.

We started the course with Jesus calling the fishermen: ‘Come follow me’ he said. And Mark in his gospel says they left their nets and followed him. Notice the plural. **They** left their nets and followed him. Jesus did not just have one apprentice. He had many apprentices. Meaning that Jesus’ invitation to come follow him was to follow him in community.

Soon afterwards we read that Jesus went up a mountainside and called twelve to be with him. Why twelve and not twenty one, thirty? This is a highly symbolic act. Jesus is naming twelve to invoke comparisons with the twelve tribes of Israel. Its Jesus way of saying that he is forming a new family.

What we call the church is not a building, or an event but a family based not on blood but on apprenticeship to Jesus.

Just a few sentences later we read:

A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.” “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.” —Mark 3v32-35

The word used for brother and sister is adelphoi in Greek which means sibling. St Paul uses adelphoi over 130 times to describe the church. One of the main ways Paul talks about the work of Christ through the church is by the metaphor of adoption. Through Jesus we have been adopted into the family of God. God has become our Heavenly Father, Jesus our older brother and our fellow Christians our new siblings. We become part of a new family. One that transcends all the lines that divide us. That spiritual family hopefully redeems bad experiences of being part of a human family and transcends all that divides us, race, class, gender, politics, (football supporters?).

Jesus desires not just to form you into a person of love but us into a community of love.

You can’t follow Jesus alone; Not you shouldn’t - but you can’t. Spiritual formation is a relational process. The point is to become a person of love. Love is the greatest commandment. So how you going to do that if you just look after yourself and close the door on the rest of the world?

That is why belonging to a church is so important. But not just coming to church. Usually, growth happens in the smaller groups of a church.

Body of research from social sciences groups relationships into four layers of community based on group size and depth of vulnerability. Dr Robin Dunbar suggest these four layer – called the Dunbar layers:

Intimates: 1-5 people who deeply know and love us – our shadow and our light and who put up with us anyway, in fact love us deeply. Of course, many in the west don’t have intimates due to individualism and the family breakdown. But hopefully you have a few individuals you can bare your soul to: spouse, best friend, mentor?

Friends: 15 people with whom we do life. The ones we do the ‘oneanother’s’ with. We do meals, we go on holidays with them, we drop off groceries and do errands for them, give lifts, help out when people are sick. This is our community.

Village: 150 people, the maximum we can be in relationship with so sociologists say. We are about that size as a church... it's the optimal size for group organisation.

Tribe: The larger group we identify with and belong to. This is where we get a vision of life and a call to meaning and purpose and identity. For many in the secular world this could be a company, a political party or movement or sports team. For us a followers of Jesus this is the church of Christ.

And when it comes to our spiritual formation we need relationships across all four layers.

Think about Jesus, he had an inner circle of three Peter James and John. He had the twelve and others like Mary and Martha. Then he had a group of 120 named in Acts chapter 1 and then the larger church he left behind mentioned in Acts 2.

We need relationships to all four but our deepest growth and change happens in the two smallest layers, intimates and friends.

We all need what Celtic Christians call an Anam Cara, or a Soul Friend. Some one to share our intimate burdens with. CS Lewis said that the essence of friendship could be summed up in the phrase 'You Too?' meaning friends come together through a shared joy like walking, reading, sports. In a spiritual friendship the shared joy is Jesus. And we need a community to do life with. And it is in those two smallest layers that we will experience deep lasting transformation.

Yet it is not always easy. Most of us ache for those deep connections where we desire to be known and to know. And to receive love. But part of us is terrified of connection. Especially if in our childhood we did not receive safe steady love from our parents or caregivers or if we have been deeply wounded along the way.

The therapist Susie Hausch said our deepest wounds come from relationships but so does our deepest healing. These deeper relationships are essential to our healing and growth and yet in our modern world of radical individualism and digital distraction and transience these types of relationships will not just fall on our heads. They will require us to make an intentional effort.

So, Spiritual friendships are marked by three core characteristics:

Depth – these are not superficial relationships where we chat about the weather or our work projects or what show we are watching on TV. We talk about what lies below the surface. We talk about our life with God. Our pain, our suffering, our sin. Where the growth edge is in our formation.

Vulnerability – we come together around our weakness not just our strength. We are raw, honest and transparent with each other about our spiritual poverty and journey.

There are two parts. One is telling the truth or the practice of confession – naming our sin and shame to each other. We can't live without sin but we can live without secrets. The other is listening. Listening to each other's struggles and joys. Neurobiologists tell us that when people feel felt, when they feel listened to in a compassionate way it is indistinguishable from feeling loved. As we share our stories and tell our stories to each other we experience deep healing from sin and shame.

Finally:

Commitment to transformation. When monks join a monastery, they take vows. One of which is 'conversion' or conversion of life. Which is essentially a vow to never stop growing. Many people reach a certain level of spiritual maturity and think 'yes I'm good now I don't need to do anything more'. But as apprentices of Jesus we come together not just to be a safe space to process emotional pain but ultimately to give ourselves more deeply to Jesus.

Spiritual friendships don't work if one member is not fully committed to the transformational journey.

It's possible to go to church for years and never have these transformational relationships. Sometimes you can never let anyone get that close. When you wake up to community - start small. Share a meal, talk, see where it leads. Most of life should be around a table, not a stage or a pulpit.

No ideal of community can live up to it. We are imperfect human beings who will mess up. When it goes wrong it can be very painful. But when it goes right it can be incredible. A glimpse of eternity in time.

If you want to go far in your spiritual journey cultivate community of depth, vulnerability and commitment to transformation.

Ronald Rolhesier in his excellent book 'Seeking Spirituality' (pub. Hodder) suggests a few reasons to be do life together, to be in community as a church:

*Because its not good to be alone.* We are essentially social by nature. To be human is to be with others. Our quest for God is communitarian. Church is a walking to God in community. We wouldn't find faith unless it was for the church keeping it going and passing it down to subsequent generations. Humanity as a family is inclusive enough, but is too abstract. The Church, infinitely more inclusive than blood family and infinitely less abstract than humanity - offers us a place to be with others. To join a church is to give up elitism and humbly accept your position in the family of humanity before God.

*Because God calls me there.* The Holy Spirit is not a piece of private property, neither is God's call. Spirituality is not a private search for what is highest in oneself but a communal search for the face of God. The call of God is double: Worship divinity and link yourself to humanity: love God and love your neighbour. To deal with Christ is to deal with his Church.

*To dispel my fantasises about myself.* The churches are compromised, dirty and sinful but, just like our blood families, they are also real. In the presence of people who share life with us regularly, we cannot lie, especially to ourselves, and delude ourselves into thinking we are generous and noble. Not being involved in the church because of the church's faults is often a great rationalisation and an escape from admitting the pain of one's own faults.

Nobody deflates us more than our own family. The same is true of the church! But if you are committed to grow and mature in Christ this is not all bad.

*Because ten thousand saints have told me so.* I go to church because by far the majority of good and faith-filled persons that I know go there. It is the place where goodness and faithfulness is fostered. The saints of old and today are unanimous in the importance of the church.

*To help others carry their problems and to help them carry mine.* To go to church is to seek the therapy of public life and to be part of that therapy for others. It helps you carry what is unhealthy inside of you and helps others carry what is unhealthy inside of them.

*To dream with others.* 'What we dream alone remains a dream, but what we dream with others can become a reality'. Alone we are pretty powerless in face of the hurts and problems and hopelessness of the world. Together we can make a difference. Together we can continue the work of Jesus: healing, proclaiming good news, challenging injustice, bringing hope.

A while back there was a TV advert for Unison, the Public Service Union. It showed a little ant trying to ask a big bear to get out of the way. The bear looked at the puny ant and laughed. The ant went away and came back with a million ants who picked up the bear and moved it out of the way. Together we are stronger.

Someone once felt as though their dreams and faith had wilted. They had stopped going to church. They went to see a wise old Christian. They sat in front of a coal fire. The old man never spoke but went over to the fire and picked out a red-hot coal and put it on the hearth. Within minutes the coal lost its glow. When he put it back into the fire it began to glow again. The other man knew exactly why he had lost his vision and fervour - a Christian out of fellowship is like a coal out of the fire.

*To practise for heaven.* Heaven, so scripture assures us will be enjoyed by all sorts of people in a communal embrace. A universal heart will be required to live there. Few things stretch the heart as painfully as does a church community. It is a workshop for love, toleration and patience. Going to church is one of the better cardiovascular spiritual exercises available!

*For the pure joy of it!* Why do people have Christmas Dinner? Because they enjoy the ritual, the getting together, remembering the past, being connected to each other and despite everything that is wrong and still is wrong, there is deep joy. A picture of heaven is of the Messianic Banquet. It is no mistake that the church celebrates a meal (communion/eucharist/mass) as its central communal act. It should be a party in the presence of Jesus. Deep down there is joy.

May you find joy following Jesus. May you find deep joy following Jesus together.