

*Tending the Vine of Christ- Keys to
Healthy Church Life (VI):
Believers Linked Together*

Bible Reading:
Exodus 18: 13-26

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They're a common sight around the city these days, moving between the corn fields of the experimental farm and the Ottawa River, preparing for their migration south.

Canada Geese - *Branta canadensis*.

Folks say that there are some lessons we could learn from these geese.

Fact #1 – As each bird flaps its wings, it creates uplift for the bird following. By flying in a "V" formation, the whole flock adds 71 percent greater flying range than if one bird flew alone.

Lesson - when we work together we'll get where we're going quicker and easier, traveling on the strength of one another.

Fact #2 – When the lead goose gets tired, it rotates back into the formation and another goose flies at the point position.

Lesson - don't do it all alone; share the leadership.

Fact #3 – When a goose gets sick or wounded or shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with it until it is able to fly again, or dies. Then they launch out on their own, with another formation, or they catch up with their flock.

Lesson - in difficult and strong times, we need to stick together.

Seems that there weren't too many *Branta canadensis* flying the skies of Palestine in Moses' day. All that stuff about sharing the load and working together, well -

Moses' father-in-law came to visit. Here's what he found.

EXODUS 18: 13-26

Moses was flying alone, with all the others gathered in some big blob, honking along behind him, tugging at him.

He was totally exhausted.

One on thousands. Not exactly a pretty ratio when it comes to people and relationships. Moses doesn't get it. But Jethro sees it right away. Which is sometimes the case. You can be so close to a situation that you don't see when something's broke.

Jethro tosses a bucket of cold water into Moses' face and gives him a quick 1-2-3 on effective group dynamics. Break that big crowd down into manageable size units. Get some helpers - fly together.

Voila! No more problem.

It's a basic reality of groups - you can't expect that groups will be able to function simply as one large collection of individuals. It doesn't work. Never has. Never will. For things to function well, there need to be smaller groupings within the larger group.

Thanks, Jethro for getting that.

Thanks for teaching Moses.

Thank you, Holy Spirit, for passing that teaching on to the rest of us.

Over the last few weeks, as the bulletin indicates, we've been looking at some biblical indicators of health in the life of a congregation. It should come as no surprise to us, when we consider Moses' situation, and the teaching that came from his father-in-law, that having a network of smaller groupings within the larger congregation is a factor in the health of a church community.

Healthy churches do not leave their people to fend for themselves as individuals in a large crowd. Healthy churches don't expect one leader to do it all - provide all the care, give all the instruction, do all the teaching.

You don't ask one bird to fly lead for the whole trip, or to provide the lift for the entire flock.

Go back to Moses.

He functioned as freedom fighter for the people of God. He was their mediator before God. He was their teacher. He was their judge.

In that way Moses pointed forward to one who would come later - the ultimate fighter for the eternal freedom of the people of God, the great Mediator, the perfect teacher, the holy Judge.

Moses pointed forward to Jesus.

Jesus - Son of God, Saviour from Sin, founder of the Church. He is the reason for the existence of Calvin Church. He established what we live and celebrate. He is our reason for being together this morning. Where He directs, we go.

Consider, then, how Jesus structured his life and ministry.

How did He relate to those around Him?

Do you know?

It, too, reflects Moses.

The bible describes it, telling us that Jesus didn't work strictly one-on-one, though he had lots of time for the needy, the blind, the sinner.

And he didn't only work by teaching the crowds, though there was time for that, too.

The vast bulk of Jesus' work came in the context of a small group - the twelve.

We must note carefully that the gospels often speak of Jesus' disciples. While sometimes "*disciples*" was a term for the twelve associates who were closest to Him, that's not always the case. For example, read with me:

LUKE 6: 13-17

There is time that Jesus spends in solitude - just him and God.

Then He comes into public.

A crowd gathers.

Within the large crowd of disciples was the small group of the twelve.

They got more of his time and attention than the larger gathering of disciples.

And then - one more layer, a smaller group yet - "*the three.*"

Walk with me through the book of Mark and notice something with me:

In Mark 5 we read about Jesus going to raise the dead daughter of Jairus. As he prepares to enter the home, we read:

7 He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John

In Mark 9 Jesus goes up on a mountain and is about to be transfigured – the passage Pastor Daryl spoke on last Sunday. And, again - who did Jesus take with him to this experience?

Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone.
(v.2)

In Mark 13 Jesus has just completed a time of teaching in the temple. He takes a break and three disciples come up to dig a little deeper into the matter. Guess who it is? Peter, James and John.

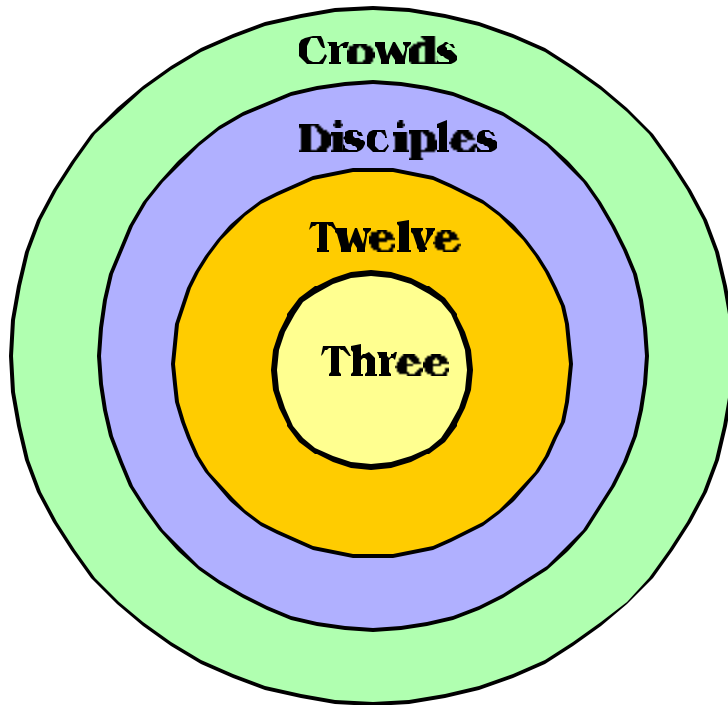
In Mark 14 we read about the struggle and suffering of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before his arrest and murder. All the disciples accompany him to the outer edge of the garden. But then he moves deeper into the garden without bringing the whole bunch -

33 He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled.

34 "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."

Jesus not only poured himself into this small group. He looked to them for support, as well.

The ministry of Jesus can be pictured like this:



His most intimate time and energy was directed to the three.
Beyond that, the twelve received special training and care.
In still broader ways, Jesus gave teaching to all his disciples.
And then, as occasion allowed, Jesus healed and spoke to the crowds.

Really - it's the same pattern that Moses followed.
It's a basic dynamic of human life - smaller groups leaning and depending on each other, and so making the larger group function well.

It's a pattern that the early church picked up and worked with.
Listen to the Bible's description of activity

among the first believers:

"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, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people." (Acts 2:46-47)

The new community that formed on the Day of Pentecost did two things:

1. They took time to gather as a whole assembly in the temple for worship.
2. They split up in smaller units, gathering in their homes. In these smaller groupings they devoted themselves to spiritual growth through teaching, through fellowship, through worship, through prayer.

That's how the Church of Jesus began.

That's its roots.

That's the context within which it became a great missionary force, impacting the world and turning the Roman Empire upside down.

So - when people come along today and suggest that a healthy church, an effective congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ, is one that works deliberately at having some form of smaller groupings within the larger context, they're only picking up on a history that goes back to the early apostles, and beyond that back to Jesus, and before Jesus back to Moses.

It's a structural thread that is woven clear through the history of the people of God.

Understand that context, then, when you hear these words:

Hebrews 10:24-25: *"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching."*

You can't be a believer all by yourself - any more than a goose can fly south alone. You need other believers.

Even Jesus brought his best friends into the corner of Gethsemene where he struggled in his darkest hour. You need other believers.

And it's naive to think that simply showing up in a large crowd setting such as what we're doing here this morning - corporate worship - that this is going to do it.

It won't.

Every believer needs a smaller group of fellow believers that can be counted on for support, encouragement, correction; a group with whom work can be done for the Kingdom of God.

Someone put it this way - the Christian life is lived in three layers:

Cathedral,

Cell,

Closet

The large group gathering, primarily for worship

The small network that becomes your faith family

The quiet, alone moments where you and God meet privately

Jesus had all three.

If He practiced that, why should we expect that we will be able to thrive with anything less?

You need the encouragement of the large group - a chance to celebrate in worship together. There's an energy and power in the large group that you don't find elsewhere. But it's **also** very possible in a large group to be very lonely. You don't come to a large group to get specific advice on a situation you're wrestling with. You don't get too many hugs from a large group.

Those things come in the context of a small group. People in your small group are the ones who pick up the phone to see how you're doing. They bring soup when you're sick. They help you talk through ideas that need developing. They come to your parties. They call you on behaviour that's out of line.

In a small group you dare to say - "It's not going so well. Here's the problem..... Can you help me?"

And they do.

In a small group you learn how to pray out loud in front of others.

Finally - the smaller group setting is the best place to introduce someone to the Christian community. You probably don't realize it if you've been in a church your whole life, but for someone who's new to the faith, or wants to find out what Christianity is all about, coming into a church is an overwhelming experience. It can be very intimidating. To the point where they may not want to come back.

But if they're invited to a smaller gathering, it's much safer. They're more likely to stay. Much easier to introduce them to others. And from there you can build bridges to draw them into the larger community.

Over fifty times in the New Testament the phrase "one another" is used to describe our relationship to other believers. We are instructed to love one another, encourage one another, pray for one another, accept one another, bear one another's burdens, and build up one another.

Most of that happens **not** in the big gatherings, but in the smaller and more intimate group settings.

Fact is that human beings are created in a way that allows them to have significant, intimate relationships with only a limited number of people; with a small group of people.

Small group ministry in a church can take many different forms:

- fellowship groups of people in the same life situation (seniors, young parents, students)
- prayer groups

- women's or men's groups
- topical groups (like reading club, bowling, hockey)
- service groups (counting, catering, officebearers, ministry committee)
- bible study groups
- support groups (exercise, grief recovery, 12 step)

Have you crossed the Champlain bridge since they opened the third lane? It's a high occupancy lane - multiple passengers required in those vehicles. Using that lane gets you across and through the bottleneck much quicker. Traveling with others avoids most of the jams you would have gotten into if you traveled alone.

It's true on the bridge.

It's equally true for your spiritual life.

That's why a healthy church is one with a network of small groups.

So here's the challenge for our congregation -

Some of you are already in such a group. Perhaps you've been part of a small gathering of friends for quite some years - gone through many phases of life together. Hang on to that. Treasure that. Intentionally.

Make sure that in this grouping you share your faith, and provide spiritual support and nurture for each other. Don't allow it to merely be a social gathering. Make sure that it is truly a gathering of brothers and sisters in Christ.

Others of you serve in a smaller committee or work group in this congregation. I want to challenge you to take things to a deeper level this season. When you have your next meeting or gathering, will you please take a few minutes to talk about this morning's theme - I encourage you to deliberately to set a bit of time before you get down to the business at hand. Use that time to pay attention to each other, see how each other are doing, pray for each other. Take time to enjoy each other, have coffee with each other, invite each other into your homes.

Some of you gather around a shared activity - a sport, a hobby. Please make sure that you inject an element of caring, support and Christian accountability into your gatherings this season.

I have 3 other pastors with whom I meet regularly. I want to acknowledge these brothers publically. They have, over my eight years here in Ottawa, been a solid support and a lifeline - as well as wonderful friends.

It is my hope and prayer that each of you would come to be able to say the same of some small group.

I know that not all of you are in such a group. In fact, the majority of you are not.

Would you be willing to consider it?

Outside of the gym, on tables in the cafeteria, and on the bulletin board in the hallway, are sign up sheets.

If you'd be interested in taking part in forming a small group to do bible study and learn together, or a prayer group, please sign up.

If you'd like to be part of a men's group, sign up.

If you'd like to take part in a women's ministry, sign up.

Put your name down - and fill in the space that asks you to say what sort of group you'd like to join.

And - if you'd be willing to help host such a group, to put on the coffee and get things rolling, if you're willing to step out in faith and offer to help facilitate a small group - we will provide training for you. I commit to that. We'll walk beside you and work with, provide you the resources you need.

You may well have never done this before. I'm asking you to step out, and take a risk in faith, trusting that the Holy Spirit who provided for the first men and women of the Church -

- who **also** had never done anything like this before!! -

will provide all that you need..... and then some!

Of the different indicators of congregational health that we consider - this is one of the weakest here at Calvin church. One of the areas where we are out of step with the witness of Scripture.

So here's the challenge.

Will we respond?