

SLD10.22.06 29th Ordinary
EPC
Luke 7:1-10
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Holistic Small Groups - Companions on the Journey”

You know, it's possible to “go to church” for a long time and never grow spiritually. It's possible to attend worship regularly, serve on a committee, show up for Wednesday Night gatherings, even go on the odd mission trip, without ever really deepening one's personal relationship with God. In fact, in the structured universe of institutionalized church life, it might not only be possible, but common to do all the so-called “right” things, make all the responsible choices, participate in all the community events, voice all the correct doctrine, contribute all the biblical tithe, and still feel dead inside. Or numb. Or disconnected.

Truth is, the structure and rhythm of institutionalized church life is dangerously capable of, even skilled at, offering the seductive illusion that since we're showing up and doing the right thing, we're pretty much doing all we can to be solid, upstanding Christians. Yawn.

But the other side of that illusion for many thinking, feeling Christians is that something's...missing.

I'm not talking here about the wilderness of discontent so much as the wilderness of *disconnect*. A disconnect we may notice between what we hear in worship versus what we observe in our lives; between what we mouth in our confessions and what we really feel in our hearts. Between the doctrines of holy scripture and the doctrines of hoary reality. That disconnect goes on long

enough and it'll land us smack in the middle of the Region of Numb, that liminal zone between stress and self-medication so accessible in the landscape of mindless habit.

We keep coming to worship because we're seeking something (it's God, of course, but don't let it out or I'll be unemployed) but maybe we don't find it. We can't, or don't, make the connection, so nothing changes, in our hearts, in our lives. And we're left with carrying around a personal, private sense of disconnect from God and each other.

It happens.

Now I'm not talking about doubt here. Doubt about faith, about church, about the nature, or even the existence of God, that's a lively, feisty feeling, full of independent thinking and pugnacious spunk. I imagine God enjoys a good doubter; welcomes the joust. If only through resistance and denouncement, at least they're engaged.

But what about the disengaged? The disconnected? The habitual worshipper whose expectations have died. The numbed-out worshipper who comes for the kids. The fearful worshipper who comes as insurance. The committed worshipper who comes out of duty. The desperate worshipper who reckons this is better than nothing. Sadly disconnected, all, from the life-giving, trust-building and transforming presence of the Holy Spirit.

So how do we go about re-connecting? If we don't like our current state of disconnection, how do we go about opening ourselves to the presence and working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives and community?

If Christian Schwarz of Natural Church Development were here, he'd say the answer to that question is "engagement." Authentic, intimate, heartfelt engagement. Not just routine busyness or competency, not just getting the job done in the church, but genuine, personal, and practical engagement – with God and with one another (between which I'm not sure God actually distinguishes.)

And where in the church does authentic, personal, and practical engagement take place? During worship? Perhaps somewhat. But the thing is, with a 90:1 ratio, in which I'm doing all the talking and you're doing all the listening, or enduring, well, it's not exactly a natural venue for cultivating personal relationship.

And anyway, news flash, we're not here in this sanctuary on Sunday mornings to build personal relationships – we're here to worship God. Easy to forget that in this consumer society, that worship is not all about "us," about what fills and nurtures and inspires *us* – even if that's the real reason most of us show up. What worship is meant to be about is turning our hearts in obedience and penitence and gratitude and praise to God. In short, worship is about worshipping...God.

All right, so if not in worship, where *else* in a church can a numbed-out, dissatisfied seeker experience authentic and intimate engagement?

Well, if you're fortunate enough to have a reasonably good voice, you could try the choir. Here are people who share in common a love of music and God and who, over time, develop some very real and personal relationships. Only I don't know that the size and task-orientation of the choir necessarily

provides the best forum for engaging personal faith questions and issues. Plus, not everybody has a good voice.

But then there's our fellowship on Wednesday night when we gather for a meal and some sort of program or study or discussion. That's a good place to be engaged, only there's a lot of us and it's noisy and the lighting is very bright and, frankly, it's hard to sustain an intimate conversation for long.

Then, of course, there's our adult Sunday School classes. The Questers class is topical and very popular, tackling interesting books and controversial subjects. And they pray together, too. But its size and focus can't possibly allow very much time for conversation about personal spiritual dryness, delight or dilemma. Libba's class on prayer probably better accommodates spiritual engagement and exploration, though Sunday morning may not be the time when many are up for that.

Or maybe there's no time when many of you are up for spiritual engagement and exploration. I'm well aware that some of you loathe the prospect of personal engagement in small groups. But it might interest you to know that according to Schwarz's world-wide study of churches, the very *best* way to engage in intentional spiritual growth is in the particularity and intimacy of what he calls "holistic small groups," in which individual Christians can find intimate community, practical help and intensive spiritual interaction. Says Schwarz, "in these groups people do not only discuss Bible texts or listen to interesting explanations by experts, but are able to bring up and apply biblical

principles to those issues and questions of immediate personal concern.”¹ In fact, he says, “if we were to identify any one principle as the ‘most important’ of all the basic elements of flourishing churches, then without a doubt, it would be *the multiplication of small groups.*”

And why is that? Because, as another person puts it, “in holistic small groups, people feel connected to each other where the rubber hits the road. Holistic small groups don’t just exchange polite chit-chat or do formal Bible study, though these can be valuable. Rather, what makes these groups holistic is that they scratch what most itches. People can’t wait to meet in these groups because – and here’s the key to me – *there they feel safe enough, supported enough, loved enough, trusting enough, to be more and more themselves.*”²

And guess what. It’s not just Schwarz’s international study that reveals the importance of holistic small groups. Just the other day I got an e-mail from some folks in this church saying they have a hard time connecting the worship message with what’s going on in their lives. And where better to explore that connection than in a small group discussion?

And Friday night at James’ and Carrie’s soiree, I got to spend some time with Christie and Joe, the cute young couple over yonder who’s just started visiting this church. And Joe remarked, unprompted, (and gave me permission to repeat from the pulpit) how he misses the small group interaction he had at the Taiwanese Presbyterian Church he used to go to. How it was in their small

¹ The ABC’s of Natural Church Development, Christian A. Schwarz, ChurchSmart Resources, 1998, p. 15.

² The Rev. Mike King, “What We Need When Arms or Legs Break,” www.netreach.net/~pandoraus/smmc/sermon/holism.htm.

group that he and Christie got to know people well and explore their faith and grow their discipleship. How he notices that a lot of American churches don't seem to bother much with small groups. And how that's too bad.

So here's the deal: we here at Emory Church are going to divide our membership, friends and visitors into holistic small groups of 6 to 8 people which will meet weekly, grow and deepen relationally with God and one another, and subdivide into new groups every 6 months or so. Would that be okay with everybody?

I'm thinking maybe not, this being a church that doesn't much like to be told what to do.

But I'll tell you what, when I was serving up in Marietta at John Knox Church, we had some new members come to us specifically because the church where they had previously worshipped did just that: required every member to participate in a small group. Programmatic imposition of small groups wasn't a good idea in that church and it sure wouldn't be a good idea here. But I still each of us would at least consider the possibilities for small group participation.

"Even our text today hints that people need various levels of support. The centurion wants help but doesn't seem particularly to need or want Jesus' actual presence. Maybe he's like those of us who want care but also cherish privacy and distance and prefer the freedom to decide when a person will enter our home or our deepest needs. The centurion connects with Jesus entirely through other messengers. And Jesus heals the slave from a distance. Still, the

messengers connect Jesus, the centurion and the slave – you could call them the centurion’s small group.”³

There is no way I or anyone else in this congregation would, or even, could, impose a system here of flourishing small groups. But I really am convinced by Schwarz’s arguments and the needs expressed by various visitors and members of this church, that small groups could make a huge contribution to the spiritual engagement of specific individuals, as well as to the overall health of this congregation.

Neither I nor anyone else could effectively impose a plan, but here are a few beginning steps I’d like to offer:

Let’s all simply be aware of the small group question and open ourselves in prayer and conversation to whatever God tells us about the sort of group that might fit us.

Secondly, let’s all touch the parts of ourselves that are vulnerable or wounded and ask where we turn with our hurt or broken parts. Might we be ready at some point to find a “group home” where these parts could be shared, splinted, healed, where we could be for one another messengers who let Jesus know who needs what?

And finally, let’s regard our current groups as resources. One group that includes Sue and Cliff and Yvonne and Allen has been meeting for years, decades, doing many of the things Schwarz envisions. Maybe its members have insights to share. Then there’s the men’s prayer group that gets up before God and meets at 6:45 a.m. on Tuesday mornings here at the church – ask Tom,

³ Ibid. p. 3

Stewart, Bill, or Scott about that one. This Tuesday evening Karen and Rose are starting a new group that's going to start out reading the book The Spiral Staircase by Karen Armstrong. Judy and Ann keep the Day Circle and Lunch Bunch going. Libba faithfully leads and hosts the Night Circle. Elise, Cindy, and Cathy get together on a regular basis to drink coffee and talk about men and other spiritual pursuits. The Sunday morning Questers is a group that could grow in the directions Schwarz describes. Or maybe there's even a small group waiting to be split off from Questers, as new leaders or interests are discovered. Libba's prayer class has great possibilities. Regard all these current groups as resources.

I realize there are those of us who would rather clean moldy grout in an old shower than be subjected to a small group interaction; to you I give this promise – no one going to require, coerce or otherwise manipulate you to join a small group. However, to those of us who hunger for a deeper connection to God, and wish for more companions on the journey, I say let me know, and I will help you discover others who are hungering for the same thing.

Whatever route we choose, may each of us one day know the wonder that filled the centurion's household when, on the messengers' return, they discovered that connection with Jesus even through them was enough to restore the slave to good health.

To the glory of God. Amen.