

Series: **GROWING ROOTS / AS WE LOVE GOD AND LOVE OTHERS**

November 13, 2011

LITTLE PLATOONS

Ecclesiastes 4:10-12; Acts 2:42-47

Speaker: Ken Davis

1. I think you'd like my friend Bill. Big. Friendly. Down to earth. When I first met Bill, he ran a drag line in the coal industry and also had a small engine repair shop on the side. That's about all I knew about Bill for several years--until he let me into his life. I found out that he worked with a special operations unit in Vietnam, run by the Navy Seals--so I asked him one day what happened to soldiers who were wounded and isolated in battle.

-Bill looked at me quietly for a few minutes--and then told me a story. One night in his tour of duty, he got a frantic radio call from his best friend, his follow platoon leader. He was desperate; their team had been ambushed—and he'd been left wounded and alone. Bill and his team left immediately—and ran through mine-infested rice paddies in the middle of the night to get to his **brother**—as he called him--before the enemy did. But he was too late. The VC had gotten there first and literally cut him to pieces.

- a. The memory of that horrible night festered in Bill's mind for 20 years; filling him with guilt and regret that he'd been too late to save the closest friend he'd ever had. Like a lot of Vietnam vets I know—the overall horror of what Bill had experienced left him wounded and emotionally isolated.

-Bill and I just talked over the next weeks—and something broke loose in his heart; he began to heal. He stood up one Sunday and told his story--warning people about isolation. You could've heard a pin drop that day.

- b. The transformation in Bill Bishop was amazing. He started a little platoon of another kind--a small group for Vietnam vets--just like him. It was called, **Welcome Home**--a safe place where guys just like Bill could come home from the war—for the **first time!** The last I heard, Bill had started somewhere between 15 and 20 of these groups all around Western Pennsylvania—now helping the **brother** he was once too late to save.

2. Has anybody been watching any of the Remembrance Day footage this past week? When I hear these guy's stories—I'm devastated at what humans will do to each other—and **amazed** at the courage. And I'm **so** grateful for the sacrifices that have been made. But one thing is clear; to be on a battlefield is **very** dangerous; to be there by yourself is **lethal**.

-We weren't ever meant, by God, to be alone. God is a community—and we were **made** for community; for being with others where we know and are known, accept and are accepted, love and are loved, and serve and are served. It's in places like that where we **flourish! Come alive!**

-But we do have a choice, don't we? Our culture tells us that rugged individualists are really cool! What's actually happening is that, like Bill's friend, we are isolating ourselves in a warzone! It works in **Rambo** movies—but not real life.

- a. And you can't survive without a platoon--a little community of people you do life with--either. The stories of Jesus and his disciples are clear on this; He **never** sent them out alone. They always traveled in pairs. If you read about the earliest missionary, Paul, you'll note that he always had a traveling companion—either Barnabas or Silas or Timothy—plus others, like Luke, who traveled everywhere with him.
- b. Remember the passage from last week?

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not easily broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 NIV)

- c. This isn't brain surgery, is it? We instinctively know that we need others, that connectedness is good and aloneness is bad. I just think we sometimes **resist** community because we don't fully understand how dangerous isolation is. Also, we know that it will take some courage and effort on our part to get out of the rut of aloneness we're traveling in.

-We've been talking about our need for others around us. I am going to be saying one thing over and over: **It's not safe to do life on your own—not with the enemy we face!** That's my message. When I'm done, you'll have to decide whether or not, for your own sake, you will intentionally **pursue** the gift of community God offers. Will you? Will you do that?

3. Some of you may remember Andrea Yates **[pic]** who was convicted of drowning her 5 children in 2002. Right after that, **Time** magazine had a article entitled, **The Devil and Andrea Yates**. Listen to what it says:

Through bouts of post-partum psychosis, the images and catchwords of the Bible became ways for Andrea to express her mental darkness. She received no guidance from established religious institutions; she and her husband Rusty chose to HOME CHURCH their family 3 times a week.

-That's called **isolation**. And in her isolation, the mental illness Andrea struggled with twisted her thoughts. She actually believed that she was **saving** her children by **killing** them.

-Now, that's an extreme case—but think about how often tragedy is associated with people who are described as **loners**—pretty much left to struggle by themselves with dark thoughts and paranoia. It's **very** easy to get off-track when there's no one to balance you, correct you, love you, or pick you when you fall.

- a. And that brings us to the enemy Jesus spoke of in his prayer, "...**deliver us from the Evil One.**

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8 NIV)

-Any of you ever watch the Discovery channel? I was watching something recently about lions stalking wildebeests. [pic] It's interesting—they creep in close, and attack. But they don't go after the whole herd or they'd get trampled. They go after **stragglers**--the one that, for some reason, is separated from the rest. That's the one they chase and bring down.

-At the core of who he is, Satan is a **predator**. And he doesn't have a shred of compassion or decency; he is **not** a gentleman. He goes after the weakest, the smallest, and the defenceless—just like human predators, only worse.

- b. There's no Dad I know of who would send his daughter or his young children out by themselves—knowing that a predator is on the loose. And our Father doesn't want **his** kids out there alone, either! Your best bet—and **my** best bet for staying emotionally and spiritually safe—is traveling with others. That's just **true!** The problem is that, as Robert Putnam says in his book, **Bowling Alone**--isolation is **fact** of our culture—and it's not getting better. Just out of curiosity—how many of you have extended family close by--like close enough to go to their house for dinner after church? How many of you are glad you don't?

-More and more of us are separated from extended family—and we live **next** to people who, for all practical purposes, live on another planet. You can even see it in the architecture. Houses used to have front porches and garages in the back. [pics] Now they have fenced in yards and patios—and garages out front.

-Our cars are a kind of extension of our homes—and sometimes our personalities, right? Cushy seats, sophisticated sound systems, built in cell phones. And that's probably good—some of you have **long** commutes. Up hill. Both ways.

-The final blow to living in community with others is busyness and our big city suspicion that if we let others get close, they'll take advantage of us. It's actually considered normal to work ourselves to exhaustion and then hibernate or cocoon. How many of you think this is a healthy, soul-satisfying way to live? In the words of the great theologian, McCauley Caulkin, **I don't think so!**

- c. Another factor is our **natural** response to a relational breakdown. How many of you would say, "Well, I intuitively want to get together with them, humble myself if necessary--work things out!" I would say, in a world like ours, our intuitive response is **distance**. The Hollywood Exit: Stomp off, slam the door, burn rubber--ride off into the sunset.

-Our tendency, when we're confused or angry or upset is to go off by ourselves and sulk! Lock ourselves in the bathroom! Separate ourselves--stay away. What do teens sometimes do when they feel pain and disconnectedness in their homes? They run away—usually to the very places where the predators of our world troll for victims.

-And the natural tendency in marriages when things are tough? One person moves out—there's **more** isolation, higher walls—and then both husband and wife start lobbing hand grenades over the wall! And they're **both** isolated—and vulnerable!

- d. Now, think about these scenarios. If you were Satan—the ultimate predator—where would **you** patrol for stragglers? You'd frequent the places where people are in pain; where they are at their lowest and loneliest point! And it's not like he cuddles up and says, "Awww—they're hurting right now. I'll wait until it's a fair fight!" Nope! His plan is to take out the stragglers.

-Something else—when we've been hurt by others, guess what's usually lurking in our hearts? There's anger and resentment—and even hatred. Know what the Bible calls that stuff?

And “don't sin by letting anger control you.” Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a *foothold* to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26-27 NLT)

-Do you understand what this is saying? Anger and hurt gives Satan a **foothold!** To be alone, wounded and **angry** is a set-up for a spiritual ambush! You need community for the sake of your soul.

4. The enemy's plan Followers of Jesus is to **divide** us--then scatter, isolate, discourage and ambush us. But God has a plan too—to gather and strengthen us. Community—belonging, knowing and being known—loving and being loved is one of God's best gifts. And that's what God has **always** been up to.

*Jesus, the Son of God, started his ministry by choosing 12 men who would stay close to Him and be His closest community. And when he had finished loving them, and teaching them to love one another, He put His Spirit into their hearts and made them apostles or "sent ones"--and sent them out to do the same for others.

*Right before he ascended to the Father's right hand, remember what He prayed? Well, He prayed for **oneness**—that the love and connectedness they shared would make it clear to the world that these little churches or gatherings were supernatural.

*When those first followers multiplied to 3000 in Acts 2, you see that the Disciples had passed on the DNA. The key characteristic among them was a deep connection of both love and unity—something the world had **never** seen. **No one** stood alone; **no one** traveled alone; **no one** got left behind! Listen to the record in Acts 2:42-47:

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. And all the believers *met together* in one place and *shared everything* they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They *worshipped together* at the Temple each day, *met in homes* for the Lord's Supper, and *shared their meals* with great joy and generosity—all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47 NLT)

-The overall record throughout the New Testament is pretty clear. Read it for yourself. When the church loved as Jesus called them to—and did life **together**--they thrived. When they didn't, they got whacked. It was that simple.

- a. Let me be as clear as I possibly can here; it **was** never and **is** never God's plan for a follower of Jesus to be isolated—looking for Him—alone—in the wilderness, the city or on some pilgrimage! Faith in Jesus is a **team** sport! We are called the **Body of Christ**. And, as I mentioned last week, body parts **need** to be connected to the rest of the body.

-I remember visiting a guy in the hospital once who'd had his finger cut off and re-attached. He had this big foam thing supporting his whole arm--and his finger, which was dark purple was sticking up with a wire coming out of the end of it. So, I'm talking to him and the room started to spin. I prayed the fastest prayer I've ever prayed.

-We need to be **connected** or we die! And when we are—when we depend on each other, love each other, lay our pride, money, tears and time on the line for each other—**God smiles!**

- b. Now, this differs a **lot** from what you hear in our culture, doesn't it. In our world, how do people tend to pursue spirituality, worship and the health of their souls? It's **private**—and it's about **you!**

-Now, that may be cool in our world—but Jesus **never** taught that! According to Jesus we, as His Followers, are at in an all-out assault on the Kingdom of Darkness—headed by Satan and his angels.

- c. Here's the deal. If you want to follow Jesus—it means that you are on a mission. **His** mission. And **His** mission is to use your influence out on the fringes of where you live, play, work and love—to help make God visible where people can't see Him. To just be honest, **it's not about you!**

-You **will** flourish, you **will** find strength, God **will** meet your needs and fill you with hope and forgiveness—and heal as you give yourself away. But the **core of the Mission** is about God using us to live out the Good News of Jesus—and help others find Him.

-Know why I'm telling you this? Because being part of Jesus' mission makes you **dangerous**. Following Jesus—and being part of what He's up to in reclaiming this world puts a target on your back! Listen to what an early leader, Paul, says to the Church:

A final word: Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on all of God's armour so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:10-12 NLT)

-In this letter, Paul has already given the **good** news;

I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honour at God's right hand in the heavenly realms. Now he is far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else—not only in this world but also in the world to come. (Ephesians 1:19-21 NLT)

-And we—as followers of Jesus—are seated **with** Jesus in that place of authority! And the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead lives in **us**. And I would emphasize—**US!** We are at war—and it is **dangerous**. This is **not** a battle you want to be in on your own! Not this one!

5. I want to talk to you for a few minutes in closing about how being on a team or in a group—helps protect you.

a. First—I need a **keeper**. At the beginning of the story of humanity is the story of two brothers; Cain and Abel. After Cain murdered Abel out of jealousy, God confronted him--and asked, "Where's your brother." Cain's sneering response was, "Am I my brother's keeper?" And God's silent answer to that question was, "Yes. You are." See, because everyone needs a keeper. You need a keeper, too.

-Want to know why? It's because I have a deceitful heart--and so do you. Jeremiah said:

The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? (Jeremiah 17:9 NLT)

-When I was in Pennsylvania, I had two friends—**close** friends—pastors—get deceived into doing things that totally contradicted **everything** they said they believed and taught their kids. Know how that happens? No one is close enough to stop us; to say, **Don't believe that—it's a LIE!**

-See, Satan knows my weak spot, and he knows yours. He will never tempt us to make huge leaps into some cesspool. He just tempts us, out of curiosity, to stick our toe in it. Know what keeps us from diving? In **that** moment, we need a truth-teller who'll grab us by the shoulder and say, "What are you thinking!"

-The Roots groups and ministry teams and support groups here at TOB are not just about finding a few friends. They are about equipping us for ministry and building our character.

Others get to know us and **see the things we're blind to!** Can this be painful? Of **course** it can! But every serious sports team I've ever heard of has a post-game evaluation—not to humiliate each other—but to **improve**. And that's just a **game!**

-Doesn't it seem strange when, as followers of Jesus, we have the **most important mission on the planet**—yet, when someone tries to correct us, we get all weird, "Didn't Jesus say not to judge?" Is that what you want? It's in a little community, see, where over time we find out that people really do love us and have our best interests at heart. I need a keeper; I'll bet you do too!

- b. Something else a Roots group or ministry team will provide for you besides a keeper--and that's a team of advisors. One of our favourite verses in the Bible is,

Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take. (Proverbs 3:5-6. NLT)

-Think about. We **believe** this—but how does God give us the information we need? God uses **lots** of ways—through the Bible, through circumstances—through messages. But many times he speaks through those who are closest to us. God has spoken to me through my Dad—and sometimes through Lori. "Lori" and "Lord" are pretty close. Sometimes she talks fancy to me and I get confused! Actually, God has used her a lot to speak to me.

-Think of the wisdom that's available in a small group of people who know you, know your strengths.

They know your history, know your desires--and want you to win! Proverbs says, **Many advisors make victory sure**. It's like having your own team of advisors.

-See, one of Satan's **best** tricks is to take us on little detours; you know—an investment that is **sure** to make money; or the vacation of a lifetime—that will sink you financially for **2 years!** Sometimes we are so immersed in tough situations with our families—that we can't see their real needs! We **need** the wisdom of a team!

- c. There's something else that both you and I need. An **encourager**. Remember the passage I read at the beginning from Ecclesiastes?

If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up. (Ecclesiastes 4:11 NIV)

-Remember the commercial that was out several years ago. Help! I've fallen and I can't get up! Comedians sure got some mileage out of that. **[pic]** When we think of someone falling like that—we think of people who are old and sick. A **lot** of people think, "Hey, I can manage on my own. I'm cool. I'm making it okay though this life. I don't need any crutches; I don't need anyone patting me on the back or holding me up."

-That works pretty well—until something sailors call a **rogue wind**—hits them. This is a powerful gust of wind that comes out of nowhere. It can flip big boats over—sheer masts right off! You **never** suspect its coming. If you live long enough—you'll hit one. All of a sudden, your life is changed forever—and it's **too late** to go hunt down some friend for support.

-Rogue winds never warn you. It's the phone call that leaves you sick and staggering. It's the financial earthquake that hits your business; it's the child that makes a sudden 180 in life and leaves you gasping. It's the chest pains you feel at the gym. It's the call from the lab.

-See, there are people who, when big chunks start to fall off their lives, are isolated--and further isolate themselves. They defect from truth, drop out of church--and they multiply their pain. People who love you don't let that happen. They are there. They listen, they intercede, and they hold you. Do you have someone in your life like that?

6. Now, there may be some of you who are thinking right about now, **Hey—I'm just FINE!** I don't need or want anyone like that in my life! I'm not interested in going deeper with God or others. I'm an island, man. I'm good! I'll look out for myself. I don't think there are many here—but there may be a few.

-I don't think that's what most of you want--and I think you know it's not emotionally or spiritually safe to live in that kind of isolation. So, here's the question: **Who is responsible for you living in relational depth? For getting connected with others at that level?**

How many of you think it's someone else's responsibility—like maybe the church's—or God's? How many of you think it's your responsibility?

-Okay, to emphasize this, I want you to point a finger at your chest and say, **"I am responsible for finding a little platoon to serve others and do life with."**

- a. Now, this is the question of the day. If isolation is so dangerous to your emotional, spiritual, and even physical health--and it is--that's a fact. If isolation sucks the pleasure and joy from life--if most people in our world crave connectedness, relational depth--why are so many people still paddling around in the shallow end of the relational pool?

- b. Well, **pride** plays a part--especially when we're wounded. Our egos won't let us go to the other people in our lives when there's a wounded relationship and say, "You know, I don't want this. Truth about me is I can't afford to let a single friend slip away. What can we do to repair the damage?" And if our **ego** is too important to us to allow us to do that—we need to seriously ask, **Why?** Because, see, the Bible says that God helps the humble, but opposes the proud.
- c. Something else plays a part that we've talked about a **lot**. It's the fear of...**rejection**. Our culture gives us the stuff we need to do an **amazing** job of **image management**. Packaging ourselves--at least on the outside. The latest in clothing, accessories—dye, padding, spackling. But down inside, we know that as **valuable** as we are to God—we've **all** screwed up and fallen short of what God wants—and what **we** want. Every one of us.

-We think, "If someone sees the real me under all this packaging—will they still want me? Or will I get discarded like all the other defective things in our culture?" So we're sometimes afraid for people to get under the packaging. We think, "Will they still like me and want me around when they really know me?" Or will I get discarded like damaged goods?"

-Truth is: Closeness, connectedness involves risk, it involves trying and failing. But I'm telling you--it sure beats the heck out of isolation! But you have to pursue it. You will have offer your friendship to others--and take the time and effort to slowly move deeper and deeper. You'll need to remember—**Satan** is the author if fear—not God!

- d. The final barrier—the one I've talked about a lot--is the **busyness** of our lives. In this part of the world—we've flying at Mach 3, hair on fire. Here's the thing we **don't** understand; in our isolation—**we're flying blind!** So, I want to ask. Is that what you want? A marginless existence that leaves you wide open to isolation—and the damage it causes?

-If you could fast-forward your life to and look back--is this what you'd choose? "Yeah, I could've had close friends-- but it was actually too much of a hassle. So I chose busyness—and my crazy life has been worth it all!" It would be sad, wouldn't it, to be too proud, too fearful, too busy to receive and give one the gifts that God in his wisdom has made available: **Community!**

Q & A

7. Our dream is for this church, **The Olive Branch**, is to make the biggest and best difference we can in our community—and our world. To do that, we will have to do it God's way—in community. Where **no one stands alone**. Where **everyone** has a friend—and is loved, accepted, encouraged and supported. Just remember; God's enemy and ours goes after the stragglers. You don't have to be a casualty!