

Series: GROWING ROOTS As We Love GOD and Love People

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WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED...

Matthew 18:18-20

1. How many of you occasionally just like to be alone? Has anyone here ever been alone when it was just creepy? In university I worked security for 4 years at this old mansion—called *Montibello*--that had been turned into the financial HQ for Phelps Dodge, Inc. I was there alone until 12:30 a.m. About 10 p.m. it started getting *really* weird—you know, all these creaks and groans.

-There are times when, if I had been alone, I probably would've died. Like the night I've told you about that my Dad, brother and I spent in the woods in the middle of winter. I wanted to just go to sleep—which would've been sure death. Instead—we huddled together—wrapped our coats around each other—and lived to tell the story. And it makes sense of something Solomon wrote 3000 years ago:

Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone? A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 NLT)

- a. I'll tell you what contradicts this; it's the story of the *rugged individualist*. Can anyone imagine the likes of John Wayne or Clint Eastwood saying something like, "Would you stay with me? I feel so *alone!*" Not on your life! They don't *need* anybody!
- b. Now, you *know* that's myth, don't you? God didn't make us live like that. Even God doesn't live like that! I mean, if *anyone* could pull that off—He could. The single most startling revelation in the Bible is that God is not this isolated being who created angels and humans so he would have some friends. He is a community—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That's why the Bible can say that **God is LOVE**—love takes *more* than one, right?
- c. When God came to rescue and restore us through Jesus—He didn't morph into this Superbeing in some desert. He was born into a *family*—a tiny, crying baby that needed comforted, nurtured, fed—craved attention—and *needed* a Mom and Dad. He was born into a Jewish family where family context, family gatherings, family meals, family Sabbaths, bar-Mitzvahs—with a much *larger* family was important.

-Jesus *could've* just said, after his baptism, "I'm gonna keep this simple. Just me and the Father can take on *anything!*" And He could've. But he chose to gather a group of ordinary, flawed people around Him as His disciples—and

friends! And whenever he did anything—except going off to pray by himself—he always had 2 or 3 guys with him.

d. Here's what I want to say. The summary of all the Bible teaches is that it is **not** good to be alone. Yes, God chooses individuals to do his work—but they **aren't** superheroes—and they **rarely** work **alone**. God calls us and gathers us into communities as **His** followers--**His Body** in this world. If you want to do something great with your life—and want God's power and blessing on it—it will almost certainly happen in a **small community**—not as the Lone Ranger!

2. Now, the natural question is, “Well—what about Moses? What about David? What about Esther?” The truth about Moses is that he refused to lead the Israelites until God told him his brother, Aaron would help—and then threw in Miriam and Joshua to round out the team. David always had a team around him; in fact, it was when he was by himself that he got messed up with Bathsheba! Esther had her uncle Mordecai—who prompted her to do the right thing. Ruth had Naomi—remember?

-In fact, the examples of the rugged individualists in the Bible are not good ones. Sampson fit the bill of a classic superhero--I mean, he had everything but the cape! But **because** he was a loner—his appetites took him down.

-Anyone remember Elijah? **Amazing** guy! Immediately after his most **amazing** moment as the lone prophet of God in a face-off with **hundreds** of false prophets, you find him alone, sitting under a tree, moaning, “God, just kill me! I'm the only faithful follower you have left!” God met him by revealing that he **wasn't** alone—and by giving him a friend and companion who would stay with him to the very end.

-Jesus' coming clinched the deal when it comes to the power of a **team** working together. After his baptism and time alone in the wilderness—he was never alone again. He chose 12 men to stay close—and three of them to stay even **closer**. When he sent them out on mission—they went in pairs. Always.

-The single most **vivid** example of Jesus commitment to being with others is seen in how he spent the last night of his life. He's in the Garden known as the **Olive Press**:

He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”
(Matthew 26:37-38 NIV)

-How many of you are a little puzzled, because that sounds like something out of a Clint Eastwood movie? Maybe not! See, I don't think Jesus is afraid of pain—or of dying. But the thought of being **isolated** from the Father and the Spirit—for the first time in eternity—made him fall on his face and sweat blood!

-See people get all cool and stuff and say, “Hey—I think I'd like to go to hell and party with my friends!” What people don't understand is that **hell** is isolation from God—and isolation from others. There is **no way** that anyone can read the story of Jesus' life and think that playing **Lone Ranger** is an okay way to live.

- a. This also gets at a myth that is **very** common in our culture. People say, “You know—I don’t need others or some form of organized religion to worship God. I can do that **just fine** out in nature—or riding my motorcycle—or **fishing** (which would be my preferred church, you know—**First Bassfishing Baptist!**)

-That thinking has actually been around for over 1500 years! It came out of a bad time in history—a time of transition—kinda like ours--when everything seemed to be collapsing and people didn’t quite know what to make of it. It was at the end of the Roman empire, there was political chaos, moral structure was disintegrating—and Christians were being persecuted.

-Some believers decided that they were just going to escape by isolating themselves from this chaos—and just work on enriching their personal relationship with God. One person, by the name of Simon Stylites, came up with a novel idea. He found a 60 foot pillar in the middle of the Roman ruins—built a ladder to get him to the top—and **lived** there for the next 30 years. He would lower a rope—and have people bring him food—you know, order in Pizza Pizza, Swiss Chalet—and then lower the garbage and waste in a bucket.

-Other people followed his example—so they could display how devoted they were to God. And there **is** something very essential to building a personal relationship with God. There are things that only you and God can figure out. That’s why Jesus often went off by Himself to prayer.

-It’s in **that** privacy that you answer questions like, “Who **am** I?” Why do I have these huge contradictions within myself? What’s the hostility and anger about? Who can help me resolve the basic mysteries of my soul and my heart? Who will deliver me from my sense of lostness—accept me, forgive me and restore me?

-This fits with what Jesus said is the **first** command; to **love God—with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind**. No one can do that for you. See, other’s can **inspire** you—but no one can **love God and surrender to God** on your behalf. **You** have to do that. And it’s the single most important relationship in your life—whether or not you treat it like that.

- b. That’s where people like Simon—and some of the others in the monastic movement got stuck. It was almost as if they said, “I am the most important person in the world; everyone else can just go to hell—literally.” **That’s** not how Jesus lived—and **that’s** not how Jesus said to live. Remember—there are two parts to Jesus core love command—love God...**and** love others as you love yourself. How do you love others—when you’re sitting on top of a pillar—asking them to send food up to you—but what you send back stinks?

-In essence, Jesus said, “Life is **not** just about you and God getting along great! That’s just the **vertical** part of the cross. For it to be a cross—and even fit the meaning of the word **cross**—there has to be a horizontal part. Love others. Include others. Help others. Depend on others. Serve others. Encourage others. Accept others. Be vulnerable with others. Forgive others.

3. Jesus did **not** come to establish pillars of faith—separate from each other—all standing straight and tall, connecting **only** with the Father. Jesus came to gather a **community**. Why? **Because that's who God is! We find our identity in Him.** -Did you ever think about the fact that, according to Jesus, you can't have the Father without the Son? People can't pick and choose—and say, “Well, you know—I **love** Jesus—but I'm not crazy about His Dad.” Or, “You **know** I love God—but Jesus? God in flesh? **Come on!** And the **Spirit?** Weirds me out!” Jesus was pretty clear, “To reject **Me** is to reject the **Father!**” And we can relate, can't we? What if someone said, “I think you're cool—but I can't **stand** your husband!” Or, “You know, I love your oldest daughter—but can't stand the other two!”

-You see this team concept—this **gathering** concept all through the stories of Jesus and the Church. Jesus traveled with groups, spoke to groups—never alone. When you read what Paul wrote—it's all written to **groups** of people. In the book of Revelation—the Spirit speaks to **churches**.

-Maybe the most fascinating reference to small teams comes from Jesus. The context is reconciliation. He says that if you or I have a broken relationship—we are to go to the person and talk about the problem. If that doesn't work, you take 1 or 2 others with you. If that doesn't work—you bring it to the attention of the faith community—and what that community decides will be backed up by Heaven—by God Himself. And then this **amazing** promise to His followers:

“Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” (Matthew 18:19-20 NIV)

- a. There's a lot packed into the context of this promise—but what seems to be clear is that God—a **community**—offers His power and authority to **communities**.

-This totally contradicts how most of us think and live, doesn't it? Anyone remember the spiritual fad several years ago called, **The Secret?** The thought behind this was that if you send positive thoughts and wishes and dreams out into the universe—that the universe will give you whatever you want! No matter how outrageously self-focused that is!

-Here's the problem; that thinking reflects how **believers in Jesus** sometimes think. In other words, “My faith is all about me, my health, my finances, my needs—how I'm feeling!” Does God come to individuals, work with individuals, love individuals? Of **course** He does—but His Power and Authority flow to individuals in **communities**. Jesus said, “even if it's only 2 or 3!”

-I'll tell you why I say that. It is **very** easy to make our prayers—our **lives**--all about ourselves. It's easy to come into a community gathering like this as a **cluster of individuals** in one place—kind of like spectators in the stands at a Leafs game. Let me say it again: Jesus' promises come to **communities**.

- b. Why? Let's get back to the context. If someone has a broken relationship with another person—they will be focused on what the other person has done to them. It's **personal—biased**. If they're angry enough, they could pray something like, "God, **nuke them! Make them pay! Fry them! Hurt them! Ruin their reputation—because, see, I'm angry. So bring on the big stick you carry to protect your sheep!**"

-A little community—even 2 or 3--would say, "So. What part do **you** play in this?" A community would think, "We want to see healing, not revenge!" Communities, together, have a better sense of what God is up to. Communities of people tend to see **way** more broadly. In fact, to be honest, it's more difficult to be self-pre-occupied in community, isn't it? "Would you gather and pray with me that God would give me a big house, a big car, and make me outrageously successful and well-loved!"

4. Now, just in case you think I'm exaggerating these words of Jesus to make a point about Roots or living in community—look at some of what the New Testament teaches.

- a. Did you ever notice that the coming of the Holy Spirit always involves **groups**? On the Day of Pentecost, all 120 people received/were baptized by the Holy Spirit—at one time. In fact, when the Spirit comes on people in Acts—it's almost **always** to whole groups at a time. This happened when the first church prayed for courage and when the Good News came to the Samaritans, the Gentiles and the disciples of John the Baptist.
- b. When it comes to healing, Jesus healed a lot of people individually—as did Peter. These were signs that God was at working—bringing his Kingdom, which will eventually wipe out all disease and pain. So, you'd think that the New Testament instruction on being healed would be something like, "Well, go find someone who has a healing ministry—and have them pray." But it doesn't. James, an early church leader and earthly brother of Jesus writes:

Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven.
(James 5:14-15 NLT)

-You almost get the feeling that God wants to disguise healing prayer in a community—so no one person get the credit and goes on an ego trip. Healing happens in a community!

- c. The most **profound** illustration of community—is the Body of Christ. It's **very** clear all through the New Testament that we—together--as followers of Jesus—form a body. Paul, an early leader, is quite specific about this—that each of us are **very** different, just like a liver is different from a finger. The **reason** for that is because it takes a **lot** of very different parts to accomplish what God wants in the world.

-Now, tell me what you would think if you saw a human hand laying on the ground someplace? That would be **gross!** What would be worse is if it were still **moving**—motioning for you to come, playing a piano, pointing to someone. Why? Because we know that a single hand, separated from the human body is useless...and lifeless!

-And that makes sense. I am **so** glad I get to work with a team—an entire staff, a Governing Board, an operations board—and a whole group of people—who do everything from leading worship and playing instruments—to teaching children and baking cookies. BTW, did you know that there is a group here who bakes **hundreds** of cookies every week?

-It's a **good** thing that there's a team. See, I've been given a couple of gifts—and I use them as best I can. But I'm **terrible** at some things! I'm not a good manager. I'm not a good detail person. I'm not good at doing inner city work or helping homeless people. And **that's okay**—because, see, The Olive Branch is a body—connected with Christ's Body which spans the entire earth!

-Let me just say it: ***I need you! You need me! We need each other!***

- d. Here's the deal. God **loves** individuals; God **works with** individuals; God **calls** individuals to serve Him in particular ways; God **meets** with individuals—that's clear; God **inspires** individuals. But God's Spirit, dwelling in individual hearts, will **always** be drawing individuals, in unity, into a **body**.

-To put it simply: **Jesus prefers small communities, promises to meet with small communities—and lends his power to communities. *That's the way He works!***

5. There's a community that **needs you**. You're the missing part in a smaller group of two or three. Or five or six. Or eleven or twelve. **You** may not know it—and **they** may not know it—but **you** need them/**they** need you. Let's just be honest. When we think about investing our lives with others—that's the **first** thought? The first thought is...**ME!** I don't have time. I don't want to. I don't feel a need. I may not like it. How many of you think this sounds like something Jesus might say? The most disturbing thing about Jesus' teaching is that **your life is NOT about you**—and if you **make** it about you—your needs, your interests, your convenience, your money—you will **screw it up!**

-Is it inappropriate to consider your own needs? Absolutely not—but the definition of love and maturity is loving your neighbour **as** yourself; thinking about someone **beside** yourself. And the strangest thing happens. **You find life and joy and help and community**. Want to know why? Let's go back to the original quote from Ecclesiastes.

***Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labour:**

In other words, two people, together, can accomplish more **together**.

***If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.**

The deal is—***we fall down in life!*** We make dumb decisions, we take hits from circumstances, we get discouraged. It's not a matter of ***if*** you'll fall—it's when. And you'll want to have someone there to help, to comfort, to listen, to help you get restored.

***Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?**

The weather isn't the only thing that makes us cold, is it? Toronto can be a ***very*** cold and heartless place in the middle of a heatwave. You weren't made to do life alone!

***Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.**

See, sometimes you need someone watching your back—so do I. Sometimes we're prone to overreact and create problems where we don't need to. Sometimes we're prone to just cave in—and say yes when we need to say ***No!*** Do you have someone in your corner?

-There are a ***whole*** bunch of reasons why I think God wants us in smaller teams; groups, clusters—whatever you want to call them.

- a. First, it's a ***lot*** safer. Ask anyone who's involved in safety—whether it's diving, adventuring—or even walking at night—and they'll tell you: ***Don't do it alone!*** Now, think about it from a spiritual perspective. The Bible makes it clear that our ***real*** enemy isn't people. It's forces of wickedness in high places that are both powerful and deceptive. Jesus has overcome these dark powers—but He says, "When ***two or three*** are gathered, ***that's*** when I'll be there!" Jesus ***never*** sent his followers out alone; ***always*** in twos or threes.

*Doing life with others is more fun. You get to share the experiences with others!

*Doing life with others is ***humbling***—in a good way. See, when you're with others—you find out that you're not as good or complete as you thought you were. But you also find out that you're not a ***weird*** as you thought you were! Other people give you a perspective that your ego never even let you ***think*** about. Humble is good, right?

*Doing life with others is ***sustainable***. Think about life as a kind of one-man-hospital. How many of you would like to go in for by-pass surgery—in a one person hospital—where one woman does the angiogram, diagnoses, anesthetises, cuts, saws, suction, grafts, closes—then takes care of you in ICU, changes your bedpan, gives you painkillers, and changes your sheets. There's ***no way*** that's sustainable!

-Let me put it another way. Our family—mostly my daughters—have been watching the NFL games. What are the odds that a high school football team

could take on an NFL team? Wouldn't be pretty. What if an average high school team took on a single NFL player? I'd put my money on the team—not the star player.

- b. And that brings us to the main reason why Jesus shows up and offers His power and His Presence to teams—why He would make an offer to teams—that He **never**—not even **once**—made to individuals; “Ask for what you need in my Name—and I'll give it to you!”

-Jesus' mission is **so** big—it will take thousands upon thousands of teams to accomplish it! It's the most important thing happening in the entire universe, right now. If you try to live out your faith and do something worthwhile on your own, one of two things will eventually happen; Either you'll get overwhelmed and discouraged—or your faith will become about you and your family. And you'll become a consumer—shopping around trying to find the **perfect** church that will meet your needs—instead of engaging and loving and giving. In life, you need a team made up of people with different strengths and different gifts than you.

6. Our goal here at The Olive Branch is to help **everyone who wants community**—to find one. What we'll do is keep encouraging you to be a part of **some** kind of smaller gathering. We won't force you—or guilt you—we will simply do our best to make sure you have an opportunity—and understand how important it is.

-We are planning a couple of departures from normal to “stretch” the funnel on this. **Roots** groups have typically been defined as small groups that meet in homes every week—or every other week. We've realized that they don't need to be defined so narrowly. What we'd like to **try** is defining a Roots group and defining community as: **Where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name.**

-Now, some of these **Roots** may be 10 people who meet together in someone's home—or at a restaurant after a service. But we're hoping that these teams will morph in **lots** of creative ways: teams that help Pathways, or work with Light Patrol, or bakes cookies—or build homes—or fix cars for single Moms! It could be a group of you who golf together every other week; or go fishing together—or **talk** about fishing; or make meals together for someone who's sick. The important part is the **one another** part. It's taking the time to serve each other, love other, help each other and encourage each other. **In Jesus' Name!**

-In fact, we are planning for a Roots Initiative—where, hopefully, a number of groups will make serving together the focus of what they do—with time to talk, debrief and pray afterwards—or, perhaps, the next week. I'll tell you what we need to move forward; a few courageous people who will say, “I don't see myself as a leader—but I'll at least give it a shot!”

-Want to know what my dream is? My dream is that maybe 10 or 20...or 30 or 40 people would say, “You know—what **I** want is to love, build, help and influence a cluster of people who would **never** come to a church—but **would** be interested in doing life with others in a faith community where we talk about life...and spirituality!”

Maybe God would ask **you** to do that? If you'll try, I'll bet God would do something **really** cool!

Q & A

7. Let me close with a challenge...and a commitment to you:

*First, the challenge. Don't make your life about yourself - and don't do life by yourself. That's not how God himself lives - and, as someone made in His image, you weren't meant for that. You were meant to be nurtured, to flourish and to stay standing when the winds and storms come...and they will. I know you want to build a strong, magnificent, growing life - and you can't do that without **Roots!**

*Here's my promise. We are going to give our **very** best here at this end to,

- 1) make sure that **no one stands alone;**
- 2) give everyone an opportunity to either live in community or create community and,
- 3) to work like crazy to equip everyone to live out their calling out at the edges of life!