

Elmview Court. Saginaw, Michigan. Late 1960's. Little Markey Schulz boy out with his neighborhood friends playing plastic baseball, with a manhole cover for home plate, and wooden bases placed on Dr. Sheldon's yard, the street, and Mrs. Carlson's back yard. Everybody knew everybody on Elmview Court. Plus, we actually had Elmview Court parties, where neighbors got together to enjoy each other's company. We even had a mayor of Elmview Court. A real closeness and caring amongst the neighbors. Reel ahead to 2011. Some of us here today don't even know our next door neighbor. Of if we do, its just waving at them, or chit chatting briefly. Family members who used to live next door or just down the street, have moved out of state, and we rarely see them. Many families are splintered today by divorce and death. Husband and wife are actively working outside the home, and there is little free time, just to relax, put up your feet and hang out with friends. In fact, close friendships, friends you can really talk too from your heart, seem few and far between.

The church has also been effected by our fast paced times. Many church members today, basically check into church on a Sunday morning, and then quickly disappear right after services. They know a few people at church, but just don't have time to stay for church activities, and develop any lasting-deep seated Christian friendships. Their knowledge of Scripture is basically what they learned as kids, and few extra tibits they have picked up by listening to the sermons on Sundays they have attended. When they end up in the hospital, or have some other family crisis, they wonder why none of their church family cares about them. Where is my church family support unit? Likewise, new members experience a similar problem. They come to church every Sunday after they join the church. But they really don't know a lot of people. As time goes on, church doesn't seem to have as much meaning to them. They start worshipping sporadically. Suddenly, they disappear. Someone once said if a new member doesn't make 8 new friendships within the first six months of membership, they will disappear from the church.

You and I were created for community. That's why our topic this morning is so important. You were made to have intimate relationships, to serve people lavishly, to share the stuff that you have, to build into the lives of the people around you, to have people to whom you can entrust the secrets of your heart and to laugh, praise, pray and cry with other human beings. But, here's a weird truth about human beings. While we long for community, we also run from it. It has been said that when humankind fell from grace, we inherited not only a tendency to hide from God, but a tendency to hide from one another as well. We struggle with conflicting desires. On the one hand, we desire to be close to one another, and on the other, we want to hold others at arm's length. We have learned to be suspicious of other people's motives. At times we've been taken advantage of and we fear being burned again and so we erect barriers. These barriers effectively insulate us from one another, and become an impediment to true community in the Church.

Wouldn't it be great to have a church, where the membership loves studying God's Word, where you really feel connected to people and know they truly care and support you, where you feel that members of this congregation would give the shirt off their backs to help you. Such a congregation existed in the early Christian era. And it can exist again. Let's look at the "Marks of a Great Church".

Our text opens with these words. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." What do you think it means that these believers were devoted to the Apostles' teaching? If you are a devoted spouse you don't want to be married to someone else. You treasure and love your spouse. Many of you know I am a devoted Detroit Lions fan. That team hasn't done anything since a year after my birth in 1957.

And yet I stick by them, through one losing season after another. I regularly read Mlive online about updates on the Detroit Lions. I am focused on them, devoted to them. Devoted employees give dedication to their employer. These post-Pentecost Christians were devoted to God's Word, which the Apostles taught them. They loved it and treasured it. They were in the Word at every opportunity. If we are going to ask the Lord to give us such a church as this we need to take a look at ourselves. Can it be said of us, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer"? Are we devoted to the Word?

Small group ministry at Trinity gives you the opportunity to devote yourselves to the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship or sharing that it brings. In a Sunday worship service, time constraints alone make it impossible for me to open up the service and ask "does anyone have any questions?" and then to allow people to discuss what we had just dealt with. Not going to happen. But in a small group we can do that, we can discuss a topic, we can ask questions we can offer opinions. In other words we can learn from each other. Stuff really sinks in. Our Lord wants us to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Small group provides that opportunity.

A small group is where you meet over at someone's home twice a month for two hours to discuss parts of God's Word and how it applies to your life. A typical small group has a few icebreakers, study, prayer time, and then food and fellowship. Your small group might take the form of a Sunday school class, or it might be a youth group, or a home Bible study group. The point is, the smaller size will enable you to better know one another's needs, know what to pray about, how to be an encouragement. You'll have someone with whom to share your hopes and dreams as well as your hurts and pains. Involvement in a small group is one of the ways you can help keep yourself from burning out as a believer.

Large group meetings, like when the church comes together for corporate worship, are needed too. But large gatherings can't do everything that small gatherings can do. Small groups create an even greater sense of caring and belonging.

One of the primary reasons that Alcoholics Anonymous is so successful in helping people is because it utilizes the small group approach. Bill Wilson, one of the founders of AA, and his friends found out that when they met regularly to talk about their weaknesses, downfalls, and near-downfalls, that it gave them a sense of strength to overcome their temptation to drink. Where did Wilson get the original idea? From a minister named Sam Shoemaker. Where did Shoemaker get the idea? You guessed it - from the Bible!

Being in a small group and being in the Word will have a dramatic effect on your life. Listen to our lesson: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need."

Now these words do not mean that you will be selling all your possessions in a garage sale, if you join a small group, and then give the proceeds to people in Bay City who are in need. Rather, these words speak about how Christians have been transformed by the Holy Spirit from being selfish to being generous. By nature, you and I are selfish. Think about it. Someone at church asks you to help out in some way. You are quick to give a no answer. Why? Because it will interfere in your life, your happiness in some way. We are many times quick to say, we care about people, but if it involves a time commitment, we find excuses as to why we can't help. For our sins of selfishness, we should be cast aside by our God. But instead, Jesus, in his self-giving love comes to our rescue. The Bible tells us, "Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." What made Jesus great was not his power. What made Jesus great was that placed himself below everybody – the slave of the world

– and gave his life as a payment for our sins. Totally unselfish. A servant. Being a servant makes for greatness. Jesus is telling us this morning that if you want to achieve greatness in whatever you do, then be a servant, to all the people in your life. Rather than striving for power at work, strive to serve all of your fellow employees and customers. That's greatness. And at home, you're not there to experience comfort and ease and to be waited on, you're there as a servant to your children, your spouse, your parents – you put yourself below them. That's greatness. Rather than think about your needs and your wants, you will put that aside and use your talents and abilities for other people's needs and wants - that's greatness. "Whoever wants to be first must be your slave. Small groups give you an opportunity to be a servant. However, if you are locked in your home, at work, or in special activities for your kids, how will you be able to serve others and actually see who is in need. Its time to leave your private world and serve others. A small group provides you the opportunity to serve others, as their needs and the needs of others are brought to your attention.

Ever wonder why Jesus only chose twelve apostles? There were several reasons, but one thing this small group approach did was give the members a greater sense of accountability. If you knew there were others keeping up with what's going on in your life you would be more conscientious about how you live as a believer. Some of you are "lone ranger" Christians. You've bought into the "rugged individualism" concept so much that you've forgotten you're not alone on the planet. You have unhealthy hangups about not opening up to other people. You don't want to share your struggles with others because you don't want them to know you don't have it all together. Here's a revelation for you: we already know you don't have it all together. None of us has it all together. We need one another. You may think that if you open up to a small group that you won't be loved. Something you should consider is that, if you don't open up it will be more difficult for others to love you.

Listen to what the Bible says in Ecclesiastes: "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: (10) If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Maybe there have been times in your life that you felt sorry that you didn't have any close friends. Let me ask you, what have you done to make friends? Are you too busy to take the time to get involved in a small group? Are you too self-sufficient? You need the accountability of a small group.

Finally, a small group provides an opportunity to help an unchurched friend get to know Jesus, and oneday join the larger group of believers in the church. At a small group there is always an empty chair in the living room. This chair reminds group participants that they are to think about inviting a friend who doesn't know the Savior to the small group. In our lesson, we are told, "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." The Lord wants to add to the numbers at Trinity. But first we need non Christians around us, and then we need to share the reason of the hope we have in Christ. A church can be a scary place for an unchurched person to visit. But a home with friends getting together is a less threatening environment. A small group gives an opportunity to witness our faith.

My friends, don't live in self-imposed isolation when God has a plan for your life to be interwoven with the joy and fellowship of others in a small group! I challenge you to personally commit to involvement in a small group today. It will help renew your energy. It will spiritually restore your enthusiasm. If you have a small group already, stay with your group. You don't have to move to a new group. Lord, help us to be a great church, a church of small groups connected to you and to each other. Amen.