

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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Discipleship Series
Philippians 1:1-11

No Solo Christians

There is no such thing as a solo Christian. Christianity is ALWAYS lived in community. If you take away nothing else from this morning's service, let this be what you hear: you can't do Christianity as a solo act.

Over the last four weeks we've been rehearsing the basic marks of Christian discipleship, the practices given to those who seek to follow Jesus in order to help us do that. Daily prayer, weekly worship, regular Bible reading, and service in church and community were the first four. Today's emphasis continues the movement from the personal to the corporate, from the individual's discipleship to community. Today we're letting the Bible remind us that an important mark of discipleship is being in spiritual relationships which encourage growth in faith. We learn love, we share faith, we serve people, and we celebrate God in COMMUNITY.

And that can rub against the grain of American individualism, can't it? Our culture celebrates the individual. The rugged Western cowboy who sits astride his horse with the setting sun behind him; the self-made man who pulls himself up by his own bootstraps; the soloist whose voice or instrumental gifts sets her apart from the choir or orchestra; the all-star player who wins the Heisman Trophy or pitches the perfect game. The accomplishments of individuals inspire us to perform our best ourselves, but we tend to idolize the stars and follow the charismatic figures, forgetting the team that's behind them. It's been a few years since Robert Bellah published *Habits of the Heart*, but in that book he identified this individualistic strain in American culture and its impact on our religious life. The person he interviewed who exemplified religious individualism was a woman named Sheila. Sheila said that she followed her own religion, a little bit of this and a little bit of that, a faith she called "Sheila-ism." I've known people like that, and I bet you have, too. Maybe they say they are "spiritual, but not religious." Maybe they say they can worship God on a mountain top better than in a church, so they never enter a church. Maybe they learned about Jesus when they were young and claim to follow him in their lives, but say that their faith is "private" and they believe it should stay that way. The individualism of our culture yields many aspiring religious soloists.

It also yields many lonely people. People who are afraid to admit their vulnerabilities; people who have difficulty with the imperfections of others; people who keep up an image of self-sufficiency, but who are deeply needy on the inside. Do I need to mention our high rates of depression and substance abuse and suicide? I think John Lennon was right. "Ah, look at all the lonely people!"

Maybe I'm talking about you. Maybe I'm talking about the person sitting next to you in the church pew.

We need relationships, relationships which go beyond "How are you?" "Fine, thanks, how do you like this weather?" We need relationships that ask, "how is with your soul?" and "how can I be of help?" We need relationships that share vulnerabilities and truth, relationships in which we can ask hard questions, wrestle with hard problems, and give comfort and encouragement and challenge where it's needed. I'm going to call those

“spiritual relationships,” for they are not afraid to deal with issues of our spirits and our relationship with God. We need community, community with God at the center and Christ walking with us and the Spirit binding us together as one.

Sometimes it takes hardship, or a crisis, to show us how essential our faith community is. The apostle Paul had a rough life after he became a Christian. He tells about it in his second letter to the Corinthians. He was beaten—five times he received 39 lashes; 3 times he was beaten with rods, and once he was stoned. Three shipwrecks, adrift at sea for 24 hours, and dangers everywhere—rivers, bandits, his own people, Gentiles, sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, and daily anxiety for the churches. So when Paul was in prison, and could write to his fellow Christians, his spiritual friends, he wrote out of deep gratitude that somewhere out there in the cold, cruel world he had friends! “I thank my God for you every time I remember you,” he wrote to the Philippian church. And then he told the reason why he was so grateful for these companions in Christ: “Because you have shared in the gospel, the good news, the message, the word of Jesus Christ from the first day until now.” Paul, this leader in the faith, this extraordinary human intellect whose writings have made an impact on the world for nearly 2000 years, this man who was personally responsible for taking the Christian faith around the Mediterranean world, knew in a deep way how utterly dependent he was on the faith and spiritual support of his Christian community, even when he was far away from them. He knew they “held him in their heart,” and “shared in God’s grace with him.” He knew he was not alone in prison because he knew their love and compassion and prayers included him. And he wanted them to know that he was with them in their struggles, too, praying that their knowledge and insight and righteousness would increase, so that God might be glorified.

Paul depended on his spiritual friends, his companions in Christ, and the feeling was mutual. They counted on him to teach them, to pray for them, to guide them in being Christ’s people, growing in their faith. They listened to his advice, kept faith when he was absent, and prayed for his release from prison.

A faith community is like an adopted family. Its relationships and interrelationships are not perfect. They can be complicated and messy at times. But how could you live without them? To be human is to need community. To be Christian is to need Christian community. The blessings far outweigh the challenges.

This week I saw Christian community in action in this congregation. Two deaths in one week is a lot. But the response of the congregation was a stunning testimony to Christian community. Our deacons pulled together two receptions, in a week which already was set aside for their annual winter clothing project for area children and the monthly Deacons’ meeting. The choir was asked on Wednesday if a few volunteers would be able to sing at Thursday’s funeral service, and the “few volunteers” turned out to be virtually the entire choir. As families and friends gathered, they felt welcomed into a church community full of love, not a closed community, but one able to open its arms wide to wrap them around those who were grieving and confused and sad. Twice this week, I witnessed the love of Christ known in this family of faith shared with a larger community. Sometimes it takes a crisis to realize how much we need one another, how much we need spiritual relationships. It’s not just me and Jesus, it’s us and Jesus.

But those spiritual relationships don't happen just because we sit next to one another in a pew. They aren't likely to happen, either, if all the time they are given is a coffee hour conversation, or a rehearsal which focuses only on learning the music for a "performance," or a youth group which gathers to be entertained. There are countless superficial ways we can be together and not pay any attention to one another's souls, to who the other person really is. Spiritual relationships need time, and intentionality, and care. They are nurtured by praying together, by worshiping together, by reading the Bible together, by serving together. And they are deepened by listening to one another, and being honest with one another, by revealing our weaknesses and needs, asking for help, and sharing God's strength.

Those sorts of relationships begin in smaller groups, and there are quite a few in this congregation which are open to all, places and small communities of Christians seeking together. The choir and bell choir, the children's Sunday school, the youth group, the fellowship around tables which happens at Feed Your Soul, the ministry groups of Family Promise and the Deacons, Presbyterian Women's circles, the Wednesday afternoon and Thursday morning study groups, the knitting group—all are examples of small groups gathered around a common purpose or interest which become Christian communities for one another. There is always room for more groups to form, to meet the needs of the individuals involved. I encourage everyone to consider which smaller group of the church is the place which will grow their faith, and to get involved. The bottom line is this—there are no solo Christians, and we need friendships which have a spiritual component to them. We need one another to grow as Christians. We need one another just to get through life!

Today is World Communion Sunday, a great day to remember that we do not walk the Christian journey as solo pilgrims. Sometimes we call it eucharist, meaning thanksgiving. Sometimes we call it the Lord's Supper, meaning that Christ is the one who began this meal and he is here in the meal. But today we emphasize that it is communion, a word that's only a couple letters different from community. This is the community meal around Christ, the meal we share with one another because he makes us community with one another. That community is not a tight little circle; no, it is an open circle, looking outward at the world because God loves the world and has shown us so in Christ. This is a meal where there is enough spiritual food for all, where all are welcome. This is a meal we want to have together, because we are adopted together into the household of God. This is a meal where the lost find a home, the lonely find companionship, and the least among us are seated right up there with the best among us. This is Christ's welcoming table.

His invitation to you is personal, but not private. Come, share the Lord with one another.