

THE VALUE OF A SAFE PLACE

“Where do you go for radical change?”

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I. POINT OF INTRIGUE **THE VALUE OF A SAFE PLACE**

I'm so blessed to have this privilege to share with you today.

How are you doing today?

Today we're looking at 3 ways we can make significant changes in our lives. How many people love change? A few...? Most of us hate it. Sometimes we can even fear change. *That can be me...*

But we all know that change is good. Change is healthy and it's a part of our life, even if we don't like it.

If we're in a bad place, change can be good. If we're in a good place.... change can still be good. It can grow us, if we let it.

Change is uncomfortable, but **WE GROW IN OUR DISCOMFORT!**

Today we're going to look at three places - SAFE PLACES - that could change your life. - radically change your life, if you embrace what God has for you today.

Let's look at some statistics on the **value of making personal connections....**

- Robin Dunbar, Psychology Professor at Oxford, states that the average person - *whatever that is* - can recognize about 1,500 names & faces, has 500 acquaintances and 150 casual friends who might attend a wedding or our funeral.

- We have 50 buddies, 15 close friends, 5 in our “circle of trust” and 1.5 in our closest relationships.
- Studies have shown that *social connection* improves physical, mental & emotional health, yet ***loneliness, isolation and alienation are on the rise.***
- In a survey, 25% of Americans claim that they have no one to share a personal problem with. Hear that - **1 in 4 Americans have no close friend!**
- Loneliness is the main reason people seek psychological counseling.
- Feeling lonely has nothing to do with having people around you. Thus, you may have a lot of friends - even hundreds on Facebook - and still feel *disconnected, lonely and isolated.*

Here are some of the **Dangers of having a low social connection:**

- You see *social pain* and *anxiety* are real physical pain.
- *Social pain* and *loneliness* impact our health in a greater way than obesity, smoking and high blood pressure.
- It can be the same as having 15 cigarettes a day.
- Higher inflammation at the cellular level with slower recovery from disease
- Higher susceptibility to anxiety & depression
- There's increased anti-social behavior & violence
- Can lead to many mental issues, which can even lead to suicide

Here are some **Benefits of having a strong social connection:**

- leads to a 50% increased chance of longevity
- strengthens your immune system & helps you recover from disease faster
- lower rates of anxiety & depression
- Higher self-esteem and empathy
- Better emotion regulation skills
- social, emotional and physical well-being
- may even lengthen your life

- The need for connection is seen as early as Genesis Chapter 2
2 The LORD God said, "It is **NOT GOOD** for the man to be **ALONE.** *Genesis 2:18 (NIV)*

Everything that God created up to this point was made in *swarms* or in *pairs*. MAN was the only thing God created as an individual. But God - in His infinite wisdom, knew that His creation was a *social being*. That he wasn't created to be alone, but to fellowship with others of his kind.

Now we know that, in this passage, God is referencing Woman. But, He is also referencing that we all have a basic need to connect on a deep or intimate level.

II. LET'S PRAY

Lord, I ask that you give me Your words as I share today. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart pleasing to You. Let us, who are here, see Your love and Your plan for our lives. Let us embrace radical change, as we are open to Your leading in every aspect of our lives... in Jesus' name, AMEN!

As I was praying about the *value* of that safe place, I thought, "WHAT would a safe place look like?" To me, it would:

- Feel comfortable, like home
- Have no false expectations
- Where there's no fear, condemnation or judgment
- Where people are for you and not against you
- Where people build you up & encourage you
- Where they can support you in times of need and rejoice in your victories

God brought to mind many people in our congregation who don't have a family like this. It makes me so sad, because I truly believe that God wants our families to be our SAFEST place - the main place where we find *unconditional love*. The world has definitely taken that from us, and left us so broken and disconnected!

Instead, families can be a place of hurt, pain, arguments, dysfunction, unmet expectations (especially around the holidays) missed opportunities, unresolved offenses... and the list goes on... If that's you, it's certainly not SAFE!"

Now, some of you may have good friends that you consider a SAFE PLACE to share. I pray that you do.

Proverbs 17:17 (NIV) says, **"A friend loves at all times and a brother is born for adversity."** That's what true friends should be to us. The Good News Translation (GNT) says, **"What are relatives for, if not to share trouble?"** Are your relatives there for you? Are you there for them...?

So, you may be able to share a lot with these close friends - we all need a place to "dump" - but if it's not done in a *healthy* or *productive*, you can still be *stuck* and unable to move forward.

Before I continue, I want you to know that there are safe places and ministries within GCCC where you can share. I'm going bring three to the forefront with a purpose in mind.

III. **CHURCH IS SAFE**

As I mention a SAFE PLACE, I pray that the first place that came to mind is the CHURCH. Steve spoke about the church last week.

The word EKKLESIA (Greek) or ECCLESIA (Latin) has two meanings - a particular body of faithful people or a whole body of the faithful. Today we're referring to this body of faithful believers. Our church is filled with like-minded people who have a genuine desire to connect and fellowship with one another - just look at our recent church picnic. *It was amazing!*

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV) states, *24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

In **John 13:34-35 (NIV)** we see, *34 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

And then in **Romans 12:10 (NIV)**, *10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.*

But we know that connections on Saturday or Sunday can only go so far. All the time, I find myself wanting to go a little deeper with someone, only to be interrupted by someone or something. It's not anyone's fault, it's just that sharing at the church can only go so far.

People have various other reasons for not sharing in a church setting, especially if it's a sensitive subject. Some things are meant to be shared in private.

It's even possible for the church to mess up... with good intentions

• HERE ARE SOME UNINTENTIONAL MESS UPS...

- *Low Self Esteem Support Group will meet Thursday. Please use the back door.*
- *Weight Watchers will meet at 7:00 p.m. at the First Presbyterian Church. Please use large double doors at the side entrance.*

So, I hope that we can see that church could generally be a safe place to share some things, but it's not always the best place.

The result is that people share on the surface - that they're "*having a tough week*" or "*it's been interesting,*" but they never open the door to what's really going on. They say things like, "*I'm fine*" or "*It's all good.*"

BTW - if you're here and having that "tough day," I encourage you to connect with someone. If you need prayer, please go to the chapel. We have an amazing team waiting to pray with you!

IV. **SMALL GROUPS ARE SAFER**

Since no one can reach everyone in the church on that deep level, the next SAFE PLACE is our primary focus today - small groups. So what's the value of being in a small group? **SMALL GROUPS ARE SAFER!** They are vital to the body of Christ.

And our best example of a small group was Jesus and His 12 disciples. Jesus gave us that first example and, when He returned to Heaven, the Gospel message was also shared through small groups. So, it must be really important.

- **Acts 2:42 (NIV)** "*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*"
- We see that one of the four things the early church ***devoted*** itself to was "fellowship." (the others were teaching, prayer, & breaking of bread) They just didn't ***have*** fellowship; they ***devoted*** themselves to it. Fellowship was a priority and one of the objectives for gathering together.
- When Jesus got away with His disciples, that's when the "real" conversations happened. Not out in the open, but in a ***safe place*** - a place where they could ask questions (some not so great) and learn more about Him and God.
- They did life together through teaching, fellowship, communion, prayer, miracles, radical generosity, and corporate worship.

- They spent time together eating, learning, celebrating, proclaiming the Good News, and supporting each other.
- There are over 50 "one another" verses in the New Testament that delineate the VALUE of this SAFE PLACE where people loved, forgave, served, bore burdens, encouraged, exhorted, prayed, equipped, spoke the truth in love, confessed sins, and treated each other as precious members of one body. That's VALUE!
- So, let break this down, to see it a little more clearly. There was VALUE in Fellowship, Food, Teaching God's Word and Connecting as we share our joys & burdens.

1. **VALUE IN FELLOWSHIP** - making deep connections is so important to the life of the church. And the larger the church, the easier it is to be disconnected. Thus, the more important it is!

We see it in **Galatians 6:2 (NIV)**, *2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*

And again in **1 Thessalonians 5:11 (NIV)** *11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

EXAMPLE - I still meet people outside of church and they say "Hi, Pastor Jim." I'll say "Hi" back and, if I don't know them, ask them their name. I've had some people respond "I'm so-and-so. I've been coming to church for 5 years." I think... how cool! But I still don't know who you are... LOL! Some of you hide in the back. *We know who you are...*

We see that fellowship is so **that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. Romans 1:12 (NIV)**

True fellowship allows us to make those connection to genuinely know people and what's going on in their lives. It involves getting together for spiritual purposes: for sharing needs, for prayer, for discussing and sharing the Word to encourage, comfort, and edify one another. Just that alone is **radical!**

2. **VALUE IN FOOD** - Like fellowship, Steve spoke on this last week, but... FOOD! How can we have a service without mentioning FOOD! LOL!

Seriously, the act of eating presents a time when we let down our guard a bit and allow connection to begin. We have to really work at being tense and eat at the same time. It's hard to do that! We naturally are more open for discussion, especially deeper discussion when we eat. That creates a SAFE PLACE for sharing. That's one of the reasons that there's a Café. Go eat in bit!

3. **VALUE IN GOD'S WORD** - You might think "Well, duh! Of course!" But in small groups, it's more that just reading from the Bible.

Small groups time take time to learn more about God and His Word by having discussions about the previous week's sermon. This "in depth" study allows the group to have a better understanding, helping the points in the sermon to become more *real, practical* and *relevant*.

1 Corinthians 14:26 (NIV) says, *26 ... When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.*

Small groups are a SAFE PLACE where you will grow your faith and be built up. It's also where you can ask questions without any judgment or criticism. You know - the questions you'd never ask in church. "Were there unicorns on the ark?" "Did John the Baptist have locusts and honey stuck in his beard?" "Was there lamb served at the Last Supper?"

Small groups will be a safe place for you to get the answers that you need in an environment that's conducive to caring and learning.

4. **VALUE IN CONNECTING** - meeting in small groups will let you find people who “have your back” in all situations. It’s where you share the joys and burdens in your life. You’ll find people who will listen to you and pray for you. *We all need that!*

- EXAMPLE - I read something funny the other day. A man’s wife said to him, “I bet that you weren’t even listening to me just now, were you?” He thought, “Wow, that’s a funny way to start conversation!”

There’s great value in having someone listen and pray for you. It’s really powerful stuff, my friends! We continue in Acts, Chapter 2

Acts 2:43 (NIV) *43 Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. 44 And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common;*

It’s important to note that they had things in common. Our groups will be similar, so that you’ll feel comfortable and safe in as short a time as possible.

Acts 2:46-47 (NIV) *46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

Philippians 2:1-2 (NIV), *1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.*

- Small groups are how we get through. Give strength & encouragement. Showing hospitality blesses both sides - opening our *homes* also means opening our *hearts*.
- Small groups help us to “regroup” in our lives, to see God’s plan and purpose. Those in our groups can pour into us that God is still there for us and that He cares. That keeps us from getting into our own heads and believing the lie about ourselves and our situation.
- Life in a small group becomes a journey of personal discovery, with deeper friendships and maximum participation in learning more about God’s Word.
- I say it’s a place to **GO... KNOW... and GROW!**

Thus, there is great VALUE in these FOUR THINGS - **FELLOWSHIP, FOOD, GOD’S WORD & CONNECTING**. We see that, in small groups, the church grows in like-mindedness and is of one mind and spirit.

The result of these things is that the church becomes more connected - more involved - more understanding on every level. As we do this, we see ***radical changes*** - in our lives and the lives of those around us!

The phrase I’m now using is:

MAKING CONNECTIONS, CHANGING LIVES

That’s what church should be all about...

BTW - we’re presently looking for people who feel “called” to lead a small group. We’ll have training for that soon.

Now, I would be remiss if I didn’t share the third leg of this stool. Church is SAFE, Small Groups are SAFER. *Celebrate Recovery* is SAFEST!

V. **CELEBRATE RECOVERY IS SAFEST**

If I didn't lead this ministry, I would still tell you that! And it's really cool that more and more people, who are NOT addicts, are finding true hope and healing from this ministry.

It would take multiple hours to have all of them share their testimony, but Celebrate Recovery has changed their lives.... ***dramatically!***

So, let's be totally open and honest. There are things in our lives that we don't want anyone to know about! It's that deep stuff that we would never think of sharing - in church or in small groups... Mostly because, if people knew how bad our stuff was, they would never talk to us again... or so we think.

What do we do with that stuff? We bury it. We stuff it down so far that we don't even know it's there. Until it rears its ugly head in the form of a character defect or issue.

If we can't share that stuff with anyone in church or small group, how do we ever get past it? How do we heal from that PAST, so it doesn't affect our NOW? That's why there's Celebrate Recovery. You might justify your actions by saying, "That's who I am. I made that way." The enemy will let you believe that everything's okay. It's quite possible that reality is actually far from that.

If your issues are so far out-of-control that they cause physical, emotional, spiritual or mental injuries to yourself or those around you - then you have a problem.

Celebrate Recovery is a ministry where we can work through those issues in the SAFEST PLACE possible.

James 5:16 (NIV) 16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

We can't get any healing by hold on to that stuff. We need to share that in a safe place with safe people who understand the process of healing those things.

1 John 1:9 (NIV) *9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

We can accumulate so many bricks in our backpack. Some from *ourselves*, some from *others*. Don't you want to get rid of as many as possible?

Hebrews 12:1 (NIV) *1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*

We give you the tools and support to get those bricks out of your backpack and keep them out. Then you can RUN the specific race that God has for you. You can't run with a full backpack!

Don't let PRIDE get in the way of making the decision to come to *Celebrate Recovery*. ***Pride brings you back to YOU. Humility Brings you to GOD!***

James 4:10 (NIV) *10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*

We have really cool news that we are praying to launch theLanding in November - the ministry for students in middle and high school. They would get the same amazing ministry, but for their age group. Since it's mostly run by the teens, it always feels *real* and *relevant* to what's going on in their lives today.

TEENS NEED A SAFE PLACE AND TOOLS TO HELP THEM STEER THROUGH THE CHALLENGES OF LIFE!

We'll be looking for leaders for theLanding, so contact me at jim@gcccopray.com if you're interested.

So, God willing, as of November, we will have the "full package." Recovery for children in *Celebration Place* (kids of parents who struggle, have issues, too), *theLanding* (teens) and *Celebrate Recovery* (18 and over).

- To ***radically change*** your life, I encourage you to connect to one, two or all 3 SAFE PLACES that we have, or will have, here at GCCC.

- **Come to church.** Reach out to others while you're here. Serve as an usher or greeter. Don't wait to be asked - just do it. You'll get to know new people and you'll be a blessing to so many.
- **Join a small group.** Don't worry about what that looks like. You **now** know the great VALUE that it has, so just commit in your heart to give it your best effort. You won't be disappointed and you'll be better, stronger and more healthy for it - as a person and a believer.
- **Go deep!** Consider *Celebrate Recovery* for you and your family. It's for everyone breathing. *Celebration Place*, prayerfully *theLanding* in November and *Celebrate Recovery*. Haven't you been carrying your backpack of bricks long enough?
- The first, most important **radical change** - is to get to know Him! *Nothing else matters if your relationship with Him is not in place. Jesus is the ultimate SAFE PLACE where radical change happens!*

VI. INVITATION

THE VALUE OF A SAFE PLACE

The question is: Has there ever been a time when you said to Jesus, "Here's my life?" Here's how...

Admit - your sins have separated you from God. (*Psa 14:1-3; Rom 3: 23*); **Believe** - that God did something about your sins through Jesus Christ. (The final Pascal Lamb/Messiah.) (*Lev 17:10; Heb 9: 19-22*); **Commit** - yourself to His righteous by confessing Jesus as Lord and Savior. (*Isa 53:5; Col 1:22*); **Do it today!** (*Isa 49:8; 2 Cor 6:2*).

Father in Heaven, I'm sorry for the things I've done that are wrong: I am a sinner; forgive me. Thank You for loving me and sending your Son, Jesus, to pay the penalty for my sin. Holy Spirit, come into my heart; Jesus be my Lord and Savior. I give You my life. Amen!

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