

Staying Alive Series:
“IT TAKES A VILLAGE”

Scripture lesson: Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; John 19:26-27

**Dr. Andrew Wolfe, Trinity United Methodist Church
 Homewood, AL – May 8, 2011**

Back during the turbulent era of the 60’s and 70’s when there was so much turmoil in our culture, a revolutionary was speaking on a college campus. Trying to stir up the students, he asked them a question, “Do you have anything you are willing to die for?” A student standing near the front raised his hand and replied, “I would be more interested in knowing if you have anything you are willing to live for?”

That is the more important question: What’s worth living for? What keeps us alive? That was the question faced by the first disciples of Jesus. After his death, their reason for living was gone. They were trapped in their feelings of loss, grief, disappointment, fear, hopelessness. But all that changed. These fearful disciples, who at first hide behind locked doors, were soon out boldly proclaiming the gospel; beginning a movement that spread to cover the earth. How did that happen? The question for them wasn’t, is there anything worth dying for? The question was do we have anything worth living for? The miracle of Easter is not only about the resurrection of Jesus, it is about the resurrection of his disciples.

We get hints of how this movement from death to life took place in the Gospels’ accounts. In John’s telling of the crucifixion, we have this little detail tucked away, “When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.” In pain, Jesus thinks not of himself, but of his mother. Not wanting to leave her alone, he commends her to one of his disciples. He surrounds her with a community of support.

He does the same for his disciples. After the resurrection, before his departure, he tells his disciples to stay together in the city “until they shall receive power from on high.” When the day of Pentecost came, Acts tells us they did as he said; they were all gathered together in the upper room when the Holy Spirit descended upon them.

The Christian faith did not begin with isolated individuals, it was a community affair. Woven into the very fabric of Biblical faith is this idea that we human beings are not islands entirely unto ourselves, we need each other to survive and thrive and stay alive.

The book of Genesis tells the story of the creation of Adam, but Adam, by himself, was unhappy, incomplete. And so God says, “It is not good for this man to live alone...I will make for him a helper, a partner.”

God first made Adam some pets – birds, cows, dogs and the like. Which was fine, but that didn’t do it for Adam. At last God created woman and this time God got it right: “This is at last bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh,” Adam says.

We are better together than we are apart. The book of Ecclesiastes says it plainly: “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his

fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up.” Two are better than one.

There is a George Jones song that says:

One is a lonely number
 One can never have fun
 One is a lonely, lonely number.
 One is always on its own.

There are lots of studies that support this. Research has shown that having supportive relationships has a greater impact on health than diet, exercise, stress, smoking, drugs, and even genetics. One study collected 17 years of data and determined that people who lacked social and community ties were 1.9 to 3.1 times more likely to die prematurely than those with more extensive contacts.

In fact, Dr. Dean Ornish states that our survival depends on the healing power of relationships. Ornish’s research has shown that loneliness and isolation:

Increases the likelihood of engaging in behaviors that adversely affect our health (i.e. smoking and overeating) and decreases the likelihood that we will make lifestyle choices that are life-enhancing rather than self-destructive;

Increases the likelihood of disease and premature death from all causes by 200-500 percent or more, independent of behaviors; and

Keeps us from fully experiencing the joy of everyday life.

A key part of staying alive is sustaining healthy relationships - having a network of family and friends.

We see that in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus was not a loner. He gathered around him a group of supporters – disciples. He created community. A vital part of his ministry was restoring people to each other; bringing outcasts and sinners back into the community – lepers, tax collectors, adulteresses. Bringing them back to life. Jesus models for us what it takes to build and sustain relationships which in turn sustain us.

First, it takes the investment of time. Thousands turned out to hear Jesus, but he had an inner circle in whom he invested a great deal of his time. Over and over again in the Gospels we read of Jesus taking his disciples aside for times of instruction, retreat, prayer. With all the demands on his time, he knows that some of the wisest use of time is in nurturing those key relationships.

James Dobson shares the story of a man who told him about one of the most painful experiences of his life. When he was 17 years old, he was a star on his high school football team. But his father, a very successful man in the city, was always too busy to see him play.

The final game of the season came around; it was for the state championship. The boy was desperate to have his father there. The night of the big game he was on the field warming up when he looked into the stadium just in time to see his father arrive with two other men, each wearing a business suit. They stood talking for a few moments and then they all left.

Dobson said the man who told him this story was 58 years old, yet tears streamed down his face when he recalled that moment. It had been 40 years, but the rejection and pain were as raw as if it had been yesterday.

This man's father died and as he stood at his casket at the funeral home he said, "Dad, I never really knew you. We could have shared so much love together, but you never had time for me."

How we spend our time reflects our deepest values and priorities. If we stay too busy to invest ourselves in those relationships that will pay us back over time, we are shooting ourselves in the foot. It is these relationships that will sustain us and keep us alive, extend our time.

Second, building and sustaining the relationships that sustain us takes respect and appreciation. People need to be affirmed and appreciated. Affirmation and respect brings out the best in us. British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli once said that "the greatest good we can do for another is not just to share your riches but to reveal to him his own."

That's exactly what we see in Jesus: his ability to look past what was and to see what could be in people. When he first met Simon, he told him you are "Peter" – *Petrus* means rock. You are the rock on which I will build my church. Now anyone else looking at Peter would have not seen a rock. They would have seen a jelly fish; someone all over the place – impetuous, quick tempered, always saying and doing the wrong thing. Promising one thing and doing another. But Jesus saw past that.

Rick Byrdsong, former basketball coach at Northwestern University, shares that he was a tall and gangly 10th grader in high school. One day, as he was pushing his way through the halls, he heard a big booming voice say, "Hey, son!"

It was Coach William Lester – a big barrel-chested guy. Besides coaching basketball, he was known to be a disciplinarian, so Byrdsong thought he was in trouble, pretended not to hear. But the Coach fixed him with his eyes and said, "Yeah, you son." He walked toward him weak-kneed, wondering what he had done. "Son, you're too big to be walking down these halls and not playing basketball. I'll see you in the gym today at 3:30."

Byrdsong tried to beg off, "I've never played ball. I don't have any shoes."

"3:30," the Coach said.

"From that moment on," Byrdsong said, "there's no question that everything that has happened to me – becoming a ball player, then a coach, raising my three kids, writing a book – is a result of the day when coach called to me, 'Hey, son!' Until that point, my life was drifting. I had no idea of where I was headed. Coach Lester helped me to see there was something bigger out there. When he told me I could get a college scholarship, I didn't believe him. Didn't know how. But he told me he would show me. I knew when I set foot on the college campus, he believed in me. If only every kid had a Coach Lester who believed in them." (Coaching Your Kids in the Game of Life).

Relationships are built upon that kind of appreciation and respect.

We also see in Jesus the quality of empathy. It means literally "in-feeling." Empathy involves coming along side of a person, knowing their heart, mind and spirit. It is to walk a mile in their shoes.

We see this kind of empathy in the story where a woman who had a flow of blood snuck up to Jesus in a crowd. "If only I can touch the hem of his garment, I will be healed," She said to herself. This is what she did – a light touch, in a crowd. But the Gospels say that Jesus felt it, he felt the power go out of him. He turned and faced the woman who had lived isolated and alone, and in that touch and look, there was healing.

It is a wonderful phrase. “He felt the power go out of him.” Out of all the crowds pressing around him that day, he allowed himself to be touched by one woman’s pain and suffering. He listened with his ears and with his heart.

It’s often been said that no one cares how much you know until they know how much you care. Relationships are deepened when we give the gift of our time and the gift our care.

And perhaps most importantly, relationships need loyalty to grow and deepen. We know how the story ended – with Jesus’ disciples fleeing, deserting him when things got tough. Peter even denied knowing him. But even in the face of all that, Jesus remained loyal. After his resurrection, he sought out these same disciples who had been so disloyal to him. He especially sought Peter one on one. Not to berate them for their disloyalty, but to say to them that he is still counting on them. Still needs them. Still trusts them,

We see that same loyalty in St. Paul. While in prison, facing a possible death sentence, he writes to the Philippians: “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.... I do not know which I prefer.... My desire is to depart and to be with Christ, for that is better, but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith.”

Given his circumstances Paul yearns for life with Christ, but “To remain in the flesh is more necessary for you,” he writes. His loyalty to them gives him the courage to go on living.

For relationships to nurture and sustain us over time, requires that same kind of loyalty. Of backing each other when things are tough.

You know Bobby Scales, our pastor for visitation. Bobby and his wife, Twink, had one son. Robert was born with spina bifida, an open spine. In his case it was severe; it could not be closed surgically. Children born with this rarely live beyond childhood. Bobby and Twink were told that Robert would not survive beyond childhood. He had dozens of surgeries; many times he seemed to be at the edge of death.

But he lived to the age of 42. Once in the hospital, a specialist told a colleague, you need to come meet Robert, you will never meet another person with his condition who has lived as long as he has.

Robert survived because of the extraordinary care given to him by his parents, especially by Twink. He not only lived beyond his expected years, he thrived, lived fully. It was their loyalty that kept him alive. Loyalty sustains those relationships that sustain us.

“Two are better than one...for if one falls, who will lift him up.... Woe is the one who falls when he is alone...and has no one to lift him up.”

One is a lonely number.