

Strength in Numbers

Welcome back to Walking with Purpose! I trust that as we meet week by week, God is teaching you both individually and as a group how ***exciting*** living a life with purpose – *His purpose* – can be! We've been focusing on our third purpose, fellowship, and have seen how important the community is...our brothers and sisters in Christ...to living the Christian life! There really *is* strength in numbers. I love watching birds fly, and ever since I learned how God created them as a perfect illustration of the body of Christ, I enjoy it even more. You see, as each individual goose flaps its wings, it creates an "uplift" for the birds that follow. By flying in a "V" formation, the whole flock adds 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew alone! When a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of flying solo. So, it quickly moves back *into* formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front of it. Now, when the lead goose tires, it simply rotates further back into the formation and another goose flies to the front to lead. No single goose leads all the time; it's a shared effort. When a goose gets sick, wounded, or shot down, ***two geese*** drop out of formation and follow it down to help protect it. They stay with it until it dies or is able to fly again. Then, they launch out with another formation or catch up with the flock. And, finally, have you noticed how flying geese ***honk*** to ***encourage*** those up front to keep up their speed? It's their bird language of saying, "You can do it! Keep up the good work!"



Fellowship

1. Let's compare our support system with that of geese! Try to give an example from *your life* with each lesson they provide:
 - When I've shared a common goal/direction, I've drawn strength from others and reached my goals more quickly and easily.
 - When I've been headed toward a goal and stayed in formation, I've been able to give and accept help from others.
 - It's been great to be able to share leadership and responsibilities. I didn't burn out.
 - In groups where I've been encouraged, the production was greater.
 - People have stood by me when I'm weak and helped me find my way again.



Discipleship

As you may already know, each “ring” a tree has in its cross-section signifies one year of age. The giant sequoia trees in California are famous for their size and majesty. One was found with 4,000 rings! Imagine a tree with a lifespan of 4,000 years! What’s the secret to such a long and healthy life? Well, the sequoias have very shallow root systems. A tour guide pointed out that their roots just barely extend below the surface. It sounds impossible because we all know trees need deep roots to withstand drought and wind, but sequoias are most unique. They only grow in groves where their roots intertwine and their limbs interconnect with each other. When strong winds blow, they hold each other up.

What a perfect illustration of how God designed the Church! Without the help and support of others to keep roots firmly planted, the individual Christian will soon fall. Like sequoias, we grow tall when we stand together and are intertwined with each other.

Turn with me to I Corinthians 12, verses 12 through 27 and let’s read it together. “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts, and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body.’ It would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

Think about it: if a thumb is severed from the body, it will die! In the same way, God designed us to need each other and contribute to the total body’s health. We can’t live healthy spiritual lives without each other! And no matter how insignificant you feel your role is, it is *vital* to God’s purpose for those around you.

One member of the church was a very wealthy man who had *never* been known for his generosity. Yet the church was involved in a big financial program, and they resolved to pay this man a visit. When the committee met with him one afternoon, they said that in view of his *considerable resources* they were *sure* that he would like to make a substantial contribution to this program.

"I see," he said, "so you have it all figured out have you? In the course of your investigation did you discover that I have a widowed mother who has no other means of support but me?" No, they responded, they did not know that. "Did you know that I have a sister who was left by a drunken husband with five children and no means to provide for them?" "No", they said, "we did not know that either." "Well, sir, did you know also that I have a brother who was crippled by an automobile accident and can never work another day to support his wife and family?" Embarrassingly, they responded, "No sir, we did not know that either." "Well," he thundered triumphantly, "I've never given any of *them* a cent so why should I give anything to you?" (*chuckle*)

You know, we can hoard *not only* the resources of our *money*, but also of our time, love, prayer and support from our Christian family! Now let's contrast that story with one from the fifteenth century in a tiny village near Nuremberg. There was a family with *eighteen* children. To keep food on the table, the father (a goldsmith by profession) worked almost eighteen hours a day at his trade *and any other* paying chore he could find in the neighborhood.

Despite their seemingly hopeless condition, two of the children had a dream. They both wanted to pursue their talent for art, but they knew full well that their father would never be financially able to send either of them to Nuremberg to study at the academy.

After many discussions, the two boys finally worked out a pact. They would toss a coin. The loser would go down into the nearby mines and, with his earnings, support his brother while he attended the academy. Then, when that brother who won the toss completed his studies, he would support the other brother while he attended school.

They tossed a coin and Albrecht won the toss and went off to Nuremberg. Albert went down into the mines and, for the next four years, financed his brother, whose work at the academy was almost an immediate sensation. By the time he graduated, he was beginning to earn considerable fees for his commissioned works.

When he returned to his village, the family held a festive dinner to celebrate his triumphant homecoming. After the meal, Albrecht rose to drink a toast to his beloved brother for the years of sacrifice that had enabled Albrecht to fulfill his ambition. His closing words were, "And now, Albert, blessed brother of mine, it is your turn. Now you can go to Nuremberg to pursue your dream, and I will take care of *you*."

Albert rose and said softly, "No, brother. I cannot go to Nuremberg. It is too late for me. Look what four years in the mines have done to my hands! The bones in every finger have been smashed at least once, and lately I have been suffering from arthritis so badly

in my right hand that I cannot even hold a glass to return your toast, much less make delicate lines with a pen or a brush. No, brother, for me it is too late."

More than 450 years have passed. By now, Albrecht Durer's hundreds of masterful portraits hang in every great museum in the world. But the odds are great that you, like most people, are familiar with only one of them. Maybe you even have a reproduction!

To pay homage to Albert for all that he had sacrificed, Albrecht Durer drew his brother's hands with palms together and fingers stretched skyward. He called his powerful drawing simply "Hands," but the world has renamed his tribute of love "The Praying Hands." It is a tribute to Christ-like family and love...a love that is willing to do whatever is required to see another succeed.

Are you willing to be there for your brothers and sisters? How can you be the support for them in their time of need?

Some time ago, Time Magazine reported on the benefits of religion and the church. Some of the observations included: *Heart surgery patients* who draw comfort from their faith have a significantly higher survival rate than those who do not; the *blood pressure* of church attendees is lower than of those who don't attend; people *with religious faith and fellowship* regularly experience less depression than non-religious people; and finally, *suicide rates* are 4 times *higher* among non-churchgoers.

Of course...this baffles "the experts", but not God. He designed His family to be a healthy spiritual body, and only by living within that purpose can true physical and spiritual health be fully attained.

One study showed that people join churches more because they want warmth than light. We like to think it's our stunning proclamation of the truth that keeps them in the pews...and sermons may get them into church the first time. But what *keeps them coming* are friendships that foster support. It's the honks of encouragement when they're about to give up. It's seeing Jesus alive in our world today...through His visible body, the church!

2. Read I Corinthians 10:16-17. To what is the body of Christ compared in this passage? Why is this significant? What responsibility does this carry?
3. Read Romans 12:4-5. How does the fact that each member is distinct and unique pose challenges as a family? What are the practical advantages of diversity?
4. What significance does the second half of verse 5 bring to your self-esteem? To your sense of freedom and independence?



Ministry

5. Divide up some or all of the following verses. Brainstorm as a small group practical expressions of ways to “help” the body of Christ.

Acts 11:29; 18:27; 20:35; Romans 16:2; I Corinthians 12:28; I Corinthians 16:6; II Corinthians 1:11; II Corinthians 9:2; Philippians 4:3; I Thessalonians 5:14; I Timothy 5:16; Titus 3:13; Hebrews 6:10.



Evangelism

6. Who do you know who is outside the flock and flying alone without support? Share their names and commit to opening a conversation with them this week, demonstrating the community available to them.



Worship

7. Pray for the names listed in #6 and for those struggling and in need of encouragement in your group.

8. Read Romans 11:33-36 aloud as we close our session for today.