

We are the people who heal each other - Sermon

Sisters and brothers,
in a remote village a half-day's walk outside Jerusalem, a woman fed dried branches into a fire as she prepared to make bread for the day. She dipped her hands into the water of a small basin that sat beside the vase she had carried from the well before sunrise. She sighed deeply at the prospect of another day of unending work just to scrape enough food together to feed her daughters and herself.

Since her husband's sudden illness and death, she had felt abandoned and alone in ways she could barely fathom.

As she felt the cool water trickle through her fingers, she thought about the story she had heard the night before as she gathered with her neighbours for prayer and supper. It was a story about a woman who met Jesus at a well, where he talked about "living water". She also remembered the story someone told about Jesus touching the man who had been paralyzed for so long.

Then a stream of stories flew through her mind, tumbling one into another. She thought about a shepherd and his sheep and a woman and her coin, two women's tears of sorrow and joy before an empty tomb, and a poor widow giving more than all the rich people in the temple. She smiled to herself thinking about that last one.

She had heard about Jesus for the first time only a few months earlier, and now his stories were hers. Word spread about his horrible death, and then, amazingly, about his being alive and about his followers gathering first in Jerusalem and then here and there in other villages. There were stories of Jesus spoken in the temple that were retold in the streets and talked about in the homes of her friends. She began to listen, and what she heard amazed her. And the people who told the stories invited her into their homes. Her!? Into their homes! She could hardly believe it.

Everyone knew that without a husband, she was on her own, destitute. But these people treated her differently. She and her daughters ate with them, receiving more than they could ever repay. And they prayed for her and with her for her daughters.

This unexpected love changed everything in her life. Suddenly she didn't feel abandoned and alone; she felt connected and loved, like her life counted for something...

Then she couldn't get enough of the stories or of her friends, these followers of Jesus. Whenever and wherever friends gathered to retell the stories, she was there, and then she retold them to her daughters and other neighbours. She loved learning more about Jesus, hearing about God, and building friendships with others. The stories carried her to the well and back each morning and sustained her through the daily task of feeding her family; and with the stories in her heart and friends at her side, the burdens felt lighter and the days more full of life.

Seventeen hundred and fifty years later, in a small cottage in a village an hour's ride from London, a man held his small journal closer to the lamp as he wrote his account of the evening's gathering. It had been a long day. He began working the fields before sunrise and laboured alongside other men from the village until after sunset. But unlike many of the others, his day did not end with his work in the field.

Instead, he washed up as best he could and ate a quick meal so that he could prepare his home, reread the scripture quietly himself, and pray for the spirit's guidance. As a Methodist class leader, he prayed for each person he expected to come, before they arrived. One by one they began showing up until his home was filled with the welcome and laughter, the blessings and good-natured chatter of a dozen of his friends and brothers and sisters. Their friendship brought warmth beyond what his small stove could provide. These men and women had also spent the day working hard, some in stables and fields and others in shops and kitchens.

When everyone had arrived, he reminded them of Mr. Wesley's rules for classes and about the covenant they had made with each other in order to belong: to attend the public worship of God, including the reading and researching of the Bible and receiving communion, and to commit to private prayer every day. Leaning toward the lamp, he read to them of their promise to watch over the souls of one another, to do good in every way, and to be merciful as far as possible to all people.

Then he led them in singing and prayer, let them all share the week's experiences: joys and sorrows, trials and temptations, and times when they had felt really close to God. They all spoke of their lives and God's grace during the week past. They shared a Bible text that he had prepared, and talked about the thoughts that had come to their minds through reading and reflecting on it. They prayed together, gave a little offering and parted from one another after having said the grace together.

The class leader closed the door behind the last of his visitors and noted the attendance of each member. Then he snuffed the lamp and took his rest. It had been a long day, but he felt grateful beyond words for his life, his faith and his friends. He felt renewed, strengthened, and encouraged. By his work in the fields, he made a living. By this care of souls, he made a life.

Two hundred and fifty years later, a young woman pulls into the church parking lot, just before the session begins. She's running a little late. Like most Tuesdays she is still wearing her suit from work, going through her evening marathon of leaving the office, taking her son to the football club, stopping somewhere for some food and drink and then driving to church. Her son throws the wrappings of his Hamburger into the rubbish bin next to the church door and grabs the bag with his school books. He will work on some homework, while his mother does her "Bible thing", as he calls it. She slips into a room as prayer just begins. Her best friend welcomes her to sit next to her during this precious hour of Bible study with other believers...

"From the first generation of Christians to the earliest Methodists to us today, people do "the Bible thing".

We all know how important it is and how precious it can be to read our Bible. And we all know that discovering biblical texts and characters in a group Bible study can open our eyes and reveal things to us that we alone would have never discovered.

By offering opportunities for "the Bible thing" churches help people to discover God's will for their lives and for the world, and bring people together to strengthen the body of Christ by building friendships and relationships. Christians seek to develop faith and grow

in Christ-likeness through study and learning. And God is best able to form people when they study the Bible together and not by themselves.

Learning in community is exactly the form of learning that Jesus had shown and taught to his disciples. Jesus' followers grew in their understanding of God and matured in their awareness of God's will for their lives as they listened to Jesus' stories and speeches while gathering around dinner tables, on hillsides, and at the temple. Jesus taught us to learn our faith this way: together with others, and in a long line of tradition of those who lived and believed before us, who live and believe with us now, and who will live and believe way into the future and long after us...

When Luke describes the early church after Jesus' death, he writes: "...they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers." (Acts 2:42). They started in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, and continued in the home of Mary and Rhoda. Little house groups and fellowships began all over the place and eventually the stories of Jesus and the way his followers lived and believed even after his cruel death made their way into the whole world known then – in Luke's day. And if you read this sentence by Luke carefully, you will notice that there is a dual reference to both: to learning and to community: to meet and do "the Bible thing"...☺

The apostle Paul follows these early words from Luke, when he encourages the disciples of Christ to learn, grow, teach, and mature. Paul presents faith not as something static, a possession, or an all or nothing proposition, but rather as something we grow into and strive toward. And once we have started falling in love with the way Jesus lived and loved and gave himself for people and the world, we seem to seek to get ever closer to this way of life. We would like to bear in us the mind that was in Jesus, allowing God's spirit to shape our thoughts, our attitudes, our values, our behaviour, our decision-making, our everything... Growing in Christ-likeness is the big goal of the Christians who really mean it! And none of us can achieve this on his or her own. We need friends and soul relatives. We need the community – with all its challenges and enrichments.

The growth in Christ, as Paul also says, is something that does not happen once and for all. It takes a life time. It is a journey. To the Christians in Philippi Paul writes at some point: "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own..." (Phil 3:12). In other words: faith moves, grows, changes, matures. It is dynamic, and therefore John Wesley, one of our great church fathers, called people to practice faith through learning in community, so that we all can see God more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly.

Early Christians, first Methodists, Christians of all times and places, you and I are experiencing for ourselves that faith can be learnt best with others.

When we meet, God uses other people and their faith, their strengths and weaknesses, their doubts and fears, their big questions in life, their strong convictions to shape us and change us. I bet we all have a story to tell here. We all have a story of somebody else's faith making a difference in our life, don't we?

Just try to reflect and remember for a second or so...

Whatever your thoughts were in the last few moments, one thing is true: living in community keeps us strong... Sharing, having friends, walking paths together really does make us strong. It makes us more courageous and brave than we'd be on our own! Think of a time when it was only through the presence and the encouragement of a friend that you dared to do something that otherwise you would never have done. Think of someone who believed in you more than you did at that time, and helped you stretch to a greatness that you would otherwise not have reached...

This is why Jesus sent the disciples out two by two to go to every town and place... (Luke 10:1).

Can you now see the importance of community in the first place, and of studying and learning in community in the second? Meeting as a church family has not only got to do with having a good and fun time together. Meeting as a church family has much to do with making the most of the time we are given together.

In our togetherness we can discover that God gives us to each other, that we all are on the same journey, that God wants to fill us with love which we can freely pass on to others.

When we meet and share our faith, God uses this time and blesses us.

It is our faith and our relationships which matter: the friends we have in each other, the trust we put in the other, and the knowledge that we are never alone on the journey.

God is with us and with all the good people here in this church, wherever our path may lead us.

We are the people who heal each other,
who grow strong together,
who name the truth,
who know what it means to live in community,
moving towards a common dream
for a new heaven and a new earth
in the power of the love of God,
the company of Jesus Christ
and the leading of the holy spirit.
Amen.