

Connect

Cultivate: Time to Engage Series, September 24 & 25, 2022 | Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

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Today we're talking about connecting with other followers of Jesus.

This is part three of our sermon series this fall called "Cultivate: Time to Engage."

We are thinking about our vision framework that says: "**Full Valley engagement cultivates disciples who impact the world for Christ.**"

In week one, we remembered that God wants each of us to impact the world for Christ.

But how do we do that? The key to cultivating disciples who impact the world for Christ is for each of us to engage in four critical habits: worship, connect, serve, and share.

Last week we talked about worship. The Bible calls each of us to engage in worship.

This week we are talking about engaging by connecting with other Christians.

As a topic, connecting with other followers of Jesus may not feel as weighty as some other topics.

The nature of God and the future are truly weighty topics.

The Bible is filled with weighty topics like sin, redemption, and sanctification.

Connecting with other followers of Jesus sounds kind of light weight by comparison.

And yet, I keep being drawn back to the topics of connecting and Christian community.

A year-and-a-half ago, I did a lengthy sermon on the theology of Christian community. It was a long sermon! One might conclude that I said everything that needs to be said on the topic.

However, I keep running up against the idea of connecting in Scripture. I constantly find the Bible telling us to love one another and to be just. The Bible confronts us when we get it wrong. Plus, the Bible shows us how to be reshaped by the Holy Spirit so that we get community right. If the Bible keeps coming back to this topic over and over again, it must be important.

Plus, I keep seeing our culture get justice, community, and loving one another wrong. It's sad to say, but I see us (disciples of Jesus) get it wrong. Perhaps loving one another, justice, and Christian community are weightier and more difficult than we think.

Actually, connecting is a theme that runs all the way through God's Story from creation to conclusion.

I like to think of God's Story from creation to conclusion in five chapters.

God's Story begins with creation. God made the world, everything in it, and us. He made us to have a relationship with him, and he made us to connect with one another.

But then, in chapter 2, "Brokenness," we sinned and disobeyed God. When we did, we broke our relationship with God. We broke creation, AND we broke our relationships with one another. We can't just fix what's broken with human relationships by wishful thinking or even by skills. But God has a plan.

In chapter 3, God sent Jesus into the world. Jesus died to pay the price for our sin, even the ways we have harmed one another. If we will accept the free gift offered to us in Jesus, we can be forgiven for our sin and adopted as God's children.

In chapter 4, "The Church," we get the gift of God's Holy Spirit. We are made brothers and sisters to each other in God's family, the Church. All the dividing walls between us are torn down, we are given gifts that make us all part of one team, and the Holy Spirit begins to make us new, so that we can love God and one another in the right ways.

Then in the last chapter, chapter 5, "Return," Jesus will come again. When he does, we will be made right forever, and we will live forever with God and with each other.

That's some of the theology of Christian community. However, all the theology in the world doesn't convince all of us that connecting is important enough to talk about and to do.

So today we're going to turn to the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes was probably written by King Solomon, who was the son of Israel's great king, David.

As a young ruler, King Solomon was offered an opportunity to ask for anything he wanted. Solomon chose to ask God for wisdom, which God gave him in abundance.

Solomon was known as one of the wisest people ever to live.

Sometimes Solomon made wrong turns in life despite his wisdom, and Ecclesiastes sometimes reflects his learnings from his mistakes as well as from his successes.

Solomon has some plain-spoken wisdom to hand out on the topic of connecting.

So, let's dig in today to see what Solomon says about connecting in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Toiling away alone leaves us empty.

Ecclesiastes 4:7-8 says that toiling away alone leaves us empty:

Again, I saw vanity under the sun: one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?" This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

When he wrote Ecclesiastes, Solomon seems to have been an older man.

From the perspective of age and wisdom, he was considering everything "under the sun."

He was thinking about the big issues of life through God's eyes.

A lot of it he called "vanity" or "emptiness." It made no sense and led nowhere.

One example is what Solomon points out about a person toiling away alone.

Solomon considered a person who works alone. This person has no sibling to share the work and no heir to inherit the wealth that his work might produce.

That makes the toil never ending. Why?

First, the work is never done. There are too few hands to do the work. There is no one to say, "That's a good day's work," so we would keep working indefinitely. Plus, working alone makes it more difficult to make ends meet and feel secure.

Second, with no one to share the joy and give the work focus, Solomon saw rightly that we would become obsessed with the wealth that work brings. Greed gets out of control.

It's a sad picture. To toil alone is not good. It leads us to bad places.

Today, we seem to be more connected than ever.

I recently got on an airplane to go to Denver, Colorado, with my wife, Tammi, to meet with a group of pastors for coaching on how to be more effective. The pastors were from around the country. Look how connected we are!

However, something ironic happened in the Denver airport. As Tammi and I were heading back to the airport to get on a plane to come home, one of our closest friends was arriving in Denver on another flight to spend time with family. We knew each other's schedules. Our schedules almost overlapped but didn't. We were within 25 minutes of each other, but we never saw one another. Our schedules didn't allow. We each went our separate ways.

Are we really more connected than ever?

Ironically, the government wants us all to be screened for anxiety and depression.

A government panel released a draft recommendation this past week that all Americans should be screened for depression and all adults under age 65 should be screened for anxiety.

If the recommendations are enacted, it means that when you go to the doctor's office, you will likely be asked questions about your mental health.

Why is the panel making this recommendation? The number of people suffering with anxiety, depression, and other forms of mental-health problems is skyrocketing.¹

Clearly, something is not working. There are lots and lots of reasons. However, at least part of the reason is that we are not nearly as connected as we think. We are hurting as a result.

We know what Solomon means when he calls toiling away alone "vanity."

The word translated "vanity" could also be translated as "emptiness" or "vapor."

Toiling alone, being alone is vanity. It's empty and it leads to emptiness.

Now, I'm not saying that spending time by oneself or time in silence is bad.

Nor am I saying that people who live alone are living wrong lives.

Connections take many different forms. Being "not alone" looks a lot of different ways.

But if you have ever felt fundamentally alone, you know what Solomon is talking about.

Solomon wisely calls being alone "vanity," "emptiness," or "vapor."

Connecting with people makes life fuller.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 argues that connecting with people makes life full:

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! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a

¹ https://www.wsj.com/articles/most-adults-should-be-screened-for-anxiety-u-s-panel-recommends-11663686000?mod=Searchresults_pos1&page=1

man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Solomon gives us four proverbs in quick succession.

These proverbs stand in contrast to what he wrote about toiling alone.

They extol the wisdom ~~and~~ of connecting and offer us a picture of a happier, less empty life.

First, two are better than one. Why? They have reward for their toil. They share the work, share the greater riches, and leave a legacy. Plus, they share not only work but risk. If one falls, the other will lift up the one who has fallen.

The second proverb addresses warmth at night. If two people lie together (in the cold night), then their shared body warmth tends to keep them both warm.

The third proverb addresses a man who is alone; he is, therefore, vulnerable to attack. However, two people are more aware and able to work together.

The fourth proverb is likely the most famous. “A threefold cord is not quickly broken.” We are stronger together than we are apart. It’s that simple.

People’s real thoughts about conversation remind us that connecting with people makes life fuller.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve always been told that small talk is a skill.

In fact, deep conversation, particularly upon meeting a new person, is frowned upon.

There are subjects we all have been told to avoid in conversation, particularly when we meet someone for the first time.

Social scientists ran a series of experiments, and their findings were surprising.

It turns out that conversations are easier to start and less awkward than we expect.

It also turns out that conversations that go to a deeper level leave us feeling more connected to the person with whom we have the deeper conversation.

When you think about it for just a moment, it makes sense. We all long to be heard, and we are all longing to talk about things that matter.²

Why? Because connecting with people (genuinely connecting with them) makes life fuller.

Solomon is right. The Bible is right!

When we connect with people, we display God’s image.

The three persons of the Trinity are connected eternally.

Let’s review our most basic theology of the Trinity for a moment:

The Father is God but is not the Son or the Spirit.

The Son is God but is not the Father or the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is God is not the Father or the Son.

God is three persons in one being.

² Michael Kardas, et. al., “Overly Shallow? Miscalibrated Expectations Create a Barrier to Deeper Conversation,” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Attitudes and Social Cognition, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000281>

Consequently, God has eternal community.

***Perichoresis* is the term used to describe the eternal mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity.**

Perichoresis captures the sense that each member of the Trinity is indwelt by the other two and indwells them.

God the Father always has community with the Son and the Spirit.

God the Son always has community with the Father and the Spirit.

God the Holy Spirit always has community with the Father and the Son.

As Augustine of Hippo, a great theologian of the ancient Church, put it: "Each are in each, and all in each, and each in all, and all are one." *On the Trinity*, 6.10.³

It means that connecting is in God's nature.

God is always Father, Son, and Spirit, three persons in one being.

That was true before the beginning of creation, and it is true after the end of history.

So, community is in God's eternal nature.

We are created in God's image.

God made us like himself, with community in our nature.

We were created for community with God and for community with one another.

That fact helps us understand Genesis chapter 2. In Genesis 2 God speaks after creating the first human being, a man, and putting him alone in the Garden of Eden. Even though the man was surrounded by everything in life that he could possibly need, God said that it was not good that he was alone.

Created in the image of our triune God, we were created for community.

John Donne challenged us to see this in his classic work, "Meditation XVII."

John Donne was a 16th century English poet and clergyman in the Church of England. His works frequently marry very ordinary ideas with topics that are sublime. In "Meditation XVII" Donne wrote the following famous lines about community:

No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's

³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/theological-primer-perichoresis/>

Or of thine own were:
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.

The work ends with a call for compassion, because we discover that when any other human being is lost or diminished, we all lose and are diminished.

What happens to you matters to me. Why? Because none of us is isolated and on our own.

Instead, we are all connected. We are in relationship with one another.

When we were created, God made us intentionally to relate to one another and to him. It's essential to who we are. When we do what we were made to do, we display God's nature and goodness to the world and bring him great glory! This is practical AND it's theological.

Let's connect with other Christians.

There are so many ways you can have connections with other Christians.

I've been pushing community groups here at Valley for a while. Getting into some type of group with other Christians who can help you to grow as a disciple is critical.

If groups don't work for you, then find a way to connect with a mentor or with Christian friends who will push you to grow as a disciple.

Connecting with Christians in some way is a critical part of our lives as disciples of Jesus.

(We will say more about non-Christians in future weeks.)

I've got lots of these relationships.

I've been a part of formal small groups over many seasons of my life.

My wife, Tammi, and I are in a community group here at Valley this fall.

I am also involved in lots of ways with other pastors.

I even have a mentor who keeps me focused on making and multiplying disciples.

Being in intentional relationships with other Christians has been a critical part of my own development as a disciple of Jesus.

Honesty is crucial in these relationships.

Surface relationships and surface conversations are fine, but they don't go far enough.

To get the greatest joy out of life, to experience the real benefit of Christian community, and to thrive and grow as disciples of Jesus require us to be honest about ourselves.

I'm not suggesting that we have to tell everyone everything about our lives.

But to grow, we have to be authentic. When we have questions, we ask questions. When we struggle, we ask for help. When we are up, we celebrate; when we are down, we ask for encouragement. When we are under attack, we ask for help. We have to be honest and become just a little bit vulnerable.

It's the only way community will ever be what it can be, what Solomon envisioned, and what we truly need.

Why? Because disciples are made person to person.

Those of us who are Christians, who are followers of Jesus, are disciples. That's who we are.

Our vision is to cultivate disciples who impact the world for Christ. I hope you share that vision. If you share that vision, then you recognize that it means not just that we cultivate other disciples who impact the world for Christ, but that we each become disciples who impact the world for Christ. I hope you own that vision and get excited about that possibility.

Here at Valley, our job is to cultivate disciples. We do the seed planting, the watering, the weed pulling, and the tilling. All of our processes are aligning to cultivate disciples of Jesus.

Very little happens, though, until you engage. **"Full Valley engagement cultivates disciples who impact the world for Christ."** When you engage here at Valley, when you engage with your faith, God does amazing things in your lives.

Getting into community with other disciples of Jesus is an important start. Let's connect with other Christians.