



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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40 DAYS OF COMMUNITY, Week #7...

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

~ Text: Deuteronomy 11:2 (TEV) ~

November 12, 2006

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible says in **Deuteronomy 11:2** – *“Remember today what you have learned about the Lord through your experiences with him.”*

Some things you only learn through experience. Matt or I could stand up here and teach a full year on the value of community, the importance of being together, and the benefits of serving together. But you just don't get it until you actually get in a group and experience real *koinonia* == which is being as committed to each other as we are to Jesus Christ..

Our text says, *REMEMBER*..... That's so we don't have to learn it again. So, we're going to highlight what we learned during the 40 days—week by week. Let's start with.

I. WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT FELLOWSHIPING TOGETHER

We learned two of the most important truths in life:

1. That we belong to each other;
2. That we need each other.

-- **Romans 12:5** says: *“Since we are all one body in Christ, we belong to each other and each of us needs all the others.”*

God never meant for any of us to go through life alone. Whether you're married or not, you need a *spiritual family* that's going to be there in the tough times.

Now during the *40 Days of Community*, we have had more than 200 people involved in twenty-some small groups. And we learned a lot in being together in groups and fellowship. Listen to these TESTIMONIALS. .

“I was hesitant to join a small group, thinking I couldn't fit in one more thing. I was afraid that I would leave frustrated. To my surprise, I found myself leaving refreshed and renewed—feeling more relaxed than when I came in.”

“Our small group became so close, open and comfortable. It happened very quickly. We learned an amazing trust amongst each other that could only be attributed to God's work. It is awesome!”

“We've enjoyed opening our home to others and the opportunity to share what God has provided. The fellowship and sharing of God's love has been wonderful.”

“I liked the feeling of fellowship. . .the feeling of being a team. When we did our community project, everyone just pitched in and did their part. . .The anticipation of staying together and working together is

wonderful.”

“One of the most enjoyable facets of our group is its diversity. No two of us are very much alike; we are all at different stages of life, and of different backgrounds. That’s been the coolest thing!”

James 3:18 says this: *“You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoys its results, only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other and treating each other with dignity and honor.”*

It does take hard work. It takes hard work to build relationships, to build community. There were probably nights you felt like staying home and not going to your small group. But you went anyway; and it not only blessed you, it blessed others. It takes effort. But it’s worth it because then you have people in your life and you’re not walking thru life alone.

The Bible says it is a good and pleasant thing when God’s children dwell together in unity. When there is community, God says it is good. Today, we celebrate the fact that many people have discovered community in ways they never knew possible.

II. WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT GROWING TOGETHER

FIRST, We learned that we grow faster and we grow stronger together. In fact, it’s pretty hard to grow at all if it’s all on your own. Notice in **Ephesians 2:21** – *“We who believe are carefully joined together with Christ as parts of a beautiful, constantly growing temple for God.”* We grow when we are connected.

It’s a grizzly example, but if you cut off a hand and it’s lying over there, it’s not going to grow. It’ll eventually die. If you get disconnected from the Body of Christ = church (i.e.: if you’re not connected to a group of other believers who are in your life and you’re in theirs), there is no lifeblood. You cannot grow apart from the body, which is the Family of God. You’ve got to be connected in. We grow faster and stronger that way.

A SECOND thing we learned is that the goal of growing together is to become like Jesus Christ. A little later on in **Ephesians (4:13)**, Paul writes: *“This work must continue until we are all joined together in the same faith and in the same knowledge of the Son of God. We must become a mature person, growing until we become like Christ and have his perfection.”*

It says becoming mature is becoming like Christ. . .and having His perfection. Have any of you attained perfection? ☺ Of course not! That won’t happen until we get to heaven. In heaven, God will finish the work He has begun in your life; the goal will be achieved. But He wants you to get as far along the way as you can while you’re here on earth.

And that takes effort. This kind of growth takes commitment. It doesn’t just happen. It starts with a determined choice to be on that path. Many of us grew these past 6-7 weeks because we made a decision that’s what we wanted. . .and went for it.

I would like for you to hear the testimony of one who is relatively new to our church. VIKKI GARDNER is going to come and share how God has used the *40 Days* to help her grow in her walk. Many, many of you have a similar story. Let’s welcome Vikki as she shares hers. . .

~ VIKKI’S TESTIMONY ~

III. SO, WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT SERVING TOGETHER?

Two very important truths: (1) That we all need to be served;
(2) That we all need to give back. . .to serve.

A. It’s important that we learn to **RECEIVE** as well as give. You & I were designed to give and

receive help. . .to serve and to be served. . .to share and be shared with.

But most of us have a hard time asking for help, much less accepting it. I can't tell you how many times I have asked someone that's going through a difficult time: "*Could you use some additional assistance?*" "*How about a Stephen Minister?*" "*How about I refer you to so-n-so or such-n-such where you can get some help?*"

All too often, the reply is: "*Oh no, I can handle it on my own*"...OR..."*We're OK, don't bother*"...OR...they just don't follow through on something we've set up.

What is it, our pride? our ego?

The Bible is full of "one anothers". We've just studied 40 of them over the past 40 days:

- "*Love one another*" . . . "*Care for one another*" . . . "*Help one another*" . . . "*Serve one another*" . . . "*Share with one another*" . . . "*Meet with one another*" . . . "*Encourage one another*" . . . "*Counsel one another*"

They're all through the New Testament. It's God's way of saying—over & over again (though we don't seem to get it)—that we need each other.

The AA movement recognizes this. The most important word in the 12 Steps is "WE". It's a WE-program.

Many of our groups that formed over the last 40 days discovered ways to give + receive help. I'm thinking of the group that DAN & ANNE KAPELA are in. . .

Dan & Anne left for Rochester, MN yesterday. Hopefully, after a week at Mayo Clinic, they can come up with a better understanding and treatment plan for Anne. One couple in their small group loaned them a van for the trip → which should make it easier on Dan's back. Another couple gave them a "travel pack". This group has done things for others outside the group too (e.g.: sent cards to a lot of people the church might have lost touch with + sent care packages to a couple guys in Iraq). But what's so impressive to me is their commitment to taking care of each other. . .PLUS they are working on how to ask for help. They intend to keep going and become a Homebuilder's group.

They exemplify the words of Paul in Galatians 6:10 – "*Every time we get the chance, let us work for the benefit of all, starting with the people closest to us in the community of faith.*"

But asking for and receiving help – sometimes hard to do!

B. Now, here's an example of someone learning to GIVE help—out beyond the parameters of the small group. KAREN LINDNER writes:

"It was at the very first 40 Days of Community meeting when the question arose—is there something that you know you should be doing, but haven't? My answer to that was 'yes'.

"My mom died recently, and my grief is still hard to bear. At her assisted living apartments, she had many close friends whom I wanted to visit. . .But every time I tried, I got as far as the parking lot and broke down in tears and couldn't go in.

"But the lesson pointed out that it's not about you—it's about doing for others. With that in mind I was finally able to go see her closest friends and we shared our grief along with our happy memories. Now I go over every week-end, and we enjoy our 'Girls Sunday Supper' together. Helping them really is helping me, thanks to the 'God Moment' in my small group experience."

This is one of many "projects" of ministry and serving that people took on during the 40 Days. There were many others—some individual (as Karen's), others group (such as the following):

- Some groups are signing up for an evening at Alpha House.

- Some are taking on building-related tasks around our campus.
- One group is interested in improving communications within the church (e.g.: getting the word out about little known ministries within our church).
- Another group wanted a more people-centered ministry. So they are talking about becoming mentors to new members as they come into our church.
- Yet another group wants to find some effective ways of serving our veterans and the military personnel from our area.

Isn't it true, what Paul says in [1 Corinthians 3:9a](#) -- "*We work together as partners who belong to God.*" We serve together, and so much more Kingdom work gets done.

You heard me say a few weeks back that the two most dangerous words you can pray are the words, "*USE ME.*" You just never know where the answer to that prayer might lead. Here's another word that's just as dangerous: "*WHATEVER*". "*Whatever God. . .*

- "*Whatever you want me to do, I'll do it.*"
- "*Whatever you want me to be, I'll be it.*"
- "*Whatever you want me to say, I'll say it.*"
- "*Whatever you want me to give, I'll give it.*"
- "*Whatever you want me to think or go or whatever, I will do it.*"

When you come to that point of saying, "God whatever. . .", then you begin to experience the thrill, the adventure of life as it was meant to be lived. That's how we grow in serving—by being available—whether it's to serve in big ways or little ways. "*God, whatever!*"

IV. WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT REACHING OUT TOGETHER?

We learned that: "*Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight*" [James 1:27].

The test of your faith is NOT what you know or what you say you believe. It's how you treat other people. The real test of our faith is this: "Do you love people enough to help them when they're down?"

We set a goal of gathering 500 pounds of food to re-stock the shelves of *Faith in Action*. When it was all said & done, over 1000 pounds came in. I was there for a luncheon this past week, and they showed me the "food bin". It was full almost to overflowing. They said the lion's share had come from DUMC.

Did you notice in the *Did You Know* section of the bulletin today that over \$14,000 was raised for world and local hunger by our participation in the CROP Walk? A new record!

Remember when at the first of the campaign we picked someone to show appreciation to? I could tell you story after story of lives touched by simple acts of kindness.

And then, how can I not mention the day we "*detailed Dexter*". Did you see the editorial in the *Dexter Leader* a couple weeks ago (cf. November 2nd, 2006)?

~ Read 1st column ~

Somebody noticed! We ought to thank this man from Dexter Flowers for his article. In it, he said we represented what *Dexter* is all about. What's even more important is representing what *Christ* is all about (i.e.: serving, reaching out).

There's another point I need to make. We exist to reach the unconnected 1000's in our region—NOT only physically, socially, emotionally, relationally, and financially. . .BUT spiritually (most of all).

More than anything, God wants us to know Him personally. He wants us to know the Good News—that He has a plan and purpose for your life; He wants us to know Him as well as He already knows and loves us. He

sent Jesus Christ to die for our sins. So, all our sins can be forgiven when we place our trust in Him. We can know where we'll spend eternity AND we can have a purpose for living now.

That's the good news! Look at **Romans 10:13-14** – *“Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?”*

The answer is obvious, they can't! People in our families, our neighborhood, our community, our church need to know that God loves them and has a plan, a purpose for their lives. Who will tell them—if not us?

Let's not be afraid to mention the name of Jesus...OR...share what we're learning from our own study of God's Word...OR...better yet, be the one to lead them to a saving relationship with God.

There's one more area—one we started on last week and will continue with next week.

V. WHAT ARE WE LEARNING ABOUT WORSHIPPING TOGETHER?

One thing we learn is from **Matthew 18:20** – *“Wherever two or three of you come together in my name, I am there with you.”*

A. Worship can happen anywhere / anytime. It's not confined to this building, this time on Sunday morning, or this particular group of people. I encourage you to find ways and times to worship in your homes and in your small groups. Maybe it's a Scripture passage. . . a song (sung or recorded). . . prayer. . . hands lifted in praise to a holy God. Just about any group meeting can be turned into a time of worship. It happens when the focus turns from us to God and we begin to express love to Him.

B. Here's another thing about worship I want you to know this morning: It is to be a joyful, uninhibited celebration. **Psalms 68:4** says: *“O God, you are the one who rides on the clouds, and we praise you. Your name is ‘Lord’, and we celebrate as we worship you.”*

God wants our worship to be enjoyable, exuberant, a festival (not a funeral). There's a creed—**The Westminster Shorter Catechism**—that says we were made “to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.” WHY? Because God is a great God. When we worship, we begin to understand how great He is → it tends to shrink our problems, our despair, our anxieties (the stuff that freaks us in life). It fills us with hope, new drive & energy to face life, a new outlook, and power (the power of the Holy Spirit).

And again, worship is a *together*-thing. We join our voices with the choir, the praise team along with other worshippers. It's a “family reunion” of sorts. It's also a time to make public our declarations of faith. We do that often when we baptize people...OR...receive new members ...OR...share a witness (as Vikki did a few moments ago).

We're going to climax this service this morning with the baptism of a new Christian—one who next week will join our church along with some others. I'd like to invite BRIDGET GERGEL, along with her husband MIKE and Pastor Matt to join me on the platform.

NOW WHAT?

What do we do next, now that the *40 Days of Community* is over? Let me propose three things, all clearly set forth in the Bible.

FIRST, **Hebrews 10:25** – *“Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead, let us encourage one another all the more...”*

Don't stop now! Keep meeting together. Some of you will be going back to your old group. . . some will be

staying with your new group. It doesn't matter; whichever one you feel led to do is fine. If you're thinking: *"I need to meet on a different night. . .at a different place. . . with a different group. . .one with a different focus."* Fine, that's OK. It'd be great if you stayed with the group you've been in, because you're just starting to build trust. But if you want to change, now is the time to change—no matter what the reason. If we need to shuffle the board, that's fine. Point is, all of us need to be in a group. We know better now: WE'RE BETTER TOGETHER than alone.

SECOND, Philippians 4:9 – *"Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard. . .and the God of peace will be with you."*

What have you been doing that you need to keep doing?

- You've been having a daily quiet time (reading a little everyday from our book Better Together, and perhaps some from the Bible). Keep doing it!
- You've been coming to weekly worship. Keep on coming—consistently.
- You've been memorizing a Bible verse each week. Not a bad habit—to "hide God's Word in your heart". Keep it up!

Here's the THIRD thing, it's found in II Thessalonians 3:1 – *"Pray that the Master's Word will simply take off and race through the country (or community, or world) to a groundswell of response."*

During our PRAYER WALK last month, we focused on three things. Would you continue to pray. . .

- For your pastors and their families?
- For everything we do as a church to glorify God?
- For the building up of a strong core of leaders and participants to be "used" in our community (by which I mean our church family and our surrounding region)?

Wouldn't you love to see the old 20-80 rule turned around? Instead of 20% doing the work and 80% coming as consumers/admirers, how about 80% (or more) of us fired up by the Holy Spirit and making a difference. . .living out the purposes for which God created us. . .and doing it together?

LET'S PRAY

Lord God, we thank you so much for all you've done for us in our lives. Thank-you that you created us. Thank-you for saving us when we placed our faith completely in you and you alone. Thank-you for giving us a purpose and for promising us a home in heaven.

We also thank you for each other, for our church family. How wonderful that we get to be part of something that can change lives, change a community, and change the world. Thank-you for calling us to worship together, to serve together, and to share & grow in fellowship together.

As we go today, Lord, we give you our lives once again. Many of us are saying to you right now: "WHATEVER". Whatever God! Whatever you want to do with our lives and our church, we are yours. Let Your Word take off in this church and race through this community and bring a groundswell of praise and glory to Your name. Indeed, You are worthy, O Lord.

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Let's carry COMMUNITY over into the 41st day, the 42nd day. . .

- Pastor Steve