Believe: The Practice of Christian Community
Acts 2:44-47

And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Here at Colonial we are on a journey called BELIEVE. It is a journey to think like Christ, to act like Christ, and to become like Christ. We began our journey by examining the way Jesus thought…what He believed to be true about God, about us, and about the world we live in. We recognized that to “believe in Jesus” is to both believe Jesus and to believe what Jesus believed. We also observed that we were never called to simply agree with Jesus…we were called to follow Him! That means that our bodies, along with our hearts, will undergo a transformation over time such that we live like Jesus and become like Jesus in our character.

Thus, in the second part of our series, we have committed ourselves to understanding and implementing the daily practices of Jesus. Remember…Jesus was a human being like all of us. He didn’t just decide to be obedient to God and die on a cross…he trained His body and His mind every day of his life, and the result of his daily practices was a Perfect Human Life! Thus, after placing our confidence in Jesus to save our souls through the forgiveness of our sins, we must enter into His Life of training if we have any hope of living the Life He died to provide for us….the abundant Life…the eternal Life that is possible for all who believe. This is the Life we have always wanted, but it will require us to train differently than we did before we became Christians. That is the value and purpose of the spiritual disciplines.

So far we have been looking at spiritual “disciplines” that each one of us can employ to cultivate a growing relationship with God including the disciplines of prayer, worship, Bible-study, single-mindedness, and total surrender. These disciplines are called “spiritual,” but make no mistake, they are profoundly “physical” in nature! Every discipline we have looked at thus far will require an effort with our bodies. It will require bodily commitment to pray, to read the Bible, to worship God, to be single-minded and to fully surrender our daily lives. Retraining our bodies…that often have competing desires and habits that oppose our new hearts…is a life-long process. It will be difficult at the start, but like all training, the longer we stick with it the more natural and beneficial these practices become. Now, so far, the five disciplines we have studied are those practices we can employ each day as individuals.
This morning…and for the next few weeks, we will look at practices of the Christian life that are also essential to our spiritual growth, but these practices are corporate…these are practices we employ in the company of other believers, our families, co-workers, our classmates, and the very real world in which we live every day. The first corporate discipline is the practice of Christian community. I will unpack this discipline under three subheadings: 1) the non-negotiable call to practice Christian community; 2) the unique attributes of Christian community; and 3) the everyday practice of Christian community.

I. The Non-negotiable call to practice Christian Community
As many of you know, it is a scary reality to discover that you have been seated next to me on an airplane! As B.A. Baracus would say from the epic series, “The A Team,”…’I pity the fool!’ Why is that? Because should you be so unfortunate to be seated next to me on airplane, I will likely ask you a ton of annoying questions and before long we’ll be deep into a conversation about your faith or lack thereof. Be that as it may, I can tell you that there is a phrase I often hear in such discussions, and it goes something like this: “I believe in God, I just don’t go to church. I don’t think you need to go to church to be a Christian and to be a good person. In fact, I know a lot of people who go to church, and many of them are not very good people at all. But I know a lot of people who don’t go to church, and most of the time they seem to be good people who do a lot to help others and so on.”

So…are they right? Can you “be a Christian and not go to church?” Yes…that is correct. For example: many people bound to a prison cell are Christians. They cannot ‘go to church’ in the assumed sense of that phrase, yet their faith and devotion to Christ are real and quite legitimate. You can certainly believe in God and be a Christian and not “go to church” on a Sunday morning. However, it is impossible to be a Christian…a real, genuine follower of Jesus…and not BE the CHURCH. Here’s a newsflash: if you are a Christian, you are the CHURCH! The “ecclessia”…the assembly…of those who believe in Jesus is what the Bible refers to as The Church…and it is wherever two or three are gathered in His name.

Now, our participation in a local church is certainly one way to practice Christian community, and we’ll come back to that in a bit. But the question raised by my airplane victims really does demand an answer: can we be followers of Jesus in isolation? Can our Christianity remain “private,” to the degree that it is simply a belief limited to my relationship with God? As we look to the scriptures, the answer is a profound NO. Christianity can never be, has never been, and will never be a solo sport. Here are a few points to consider…

1) Not even God practices life in isolation. God’s very nature is communal. God is love because God practices love in perfect community in the three-person Godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We were made in God’s image, which means we are hopelessly communal creatures as well.

We read in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world…” It stands to reason that if we truly love God, we will love the world as well. That means our faith can never be private…our faith will always lead to public expressions of love for people in Jesus’ name.
2) Jesus lived the perfect human life, and chose to do so in community. In the gospels we learn that Jesus always invited people to walk with Him. At times that crowd grew quite large. At one point Jesus chose 12 people out of a much larger crowd that he poured into as friends, disciples, and students. If Jesus, the Leader and central figure of our faith, chose to live life in community, walking through life with deep friendships, it stands to reason that we, His followers, are called to do the same.

3) To love Jesus is to obey Jesus; and to obey Jesus is to love one another. Here is what Jesus said in John 15:12, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” It’s pretty impossible to love your brothers and sisters in Christ if you never spend time with them, right? So clearly, to demonstrate our love to Jesus means that we will invest in Christian fellowship and community.

4) The quality of our life together will reveal who Jesus is to the world. In the profound prayer of Jesus to the Father in John 17, Jesus prays, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me....I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” Jesus made it clear that part of God’s plan to redeem the world was the witness of the Church. As the fellowship of the redeemed experienced ONENESS, the result would be a compelling witness to the world that Jesus was and is the Son of God.

In John 13:34-35 Jesus says it this way: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Again, we cannot take Jesus seriously and then fail to do what He clearly commanded us to do. He commanded us to love each other well so that the world would be able to identify those who belong to Jesus. Our failure to love one another in community is both an act of disobedience to our King and a recipe for disaster in terms of our witness to the world. Clearly we are called to practice Christian community.

In his book The Spirit of the Disciplines, Dallas Willard writes: Christian redemption is not devised to be a solitary thing, though each individual of course has a unique and direct relationship with God, and God alone is her or his Lord and Judge. But The Life is one that requires some regular and profound conjunction with others who share it. It is greatly diminished when that is lacking.

**II. The Unique Attributes of Christian Community**

In Acts 2, Luke describes the new community of believers that formed in Jerusalem following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. As you might recall, thousands came to the faith quite quickly in an environment of hostility and persecution. Even so, their life together was beautiful and compelling.

Here is what Luke records in Acts 2, beginning with vs. 42:
And they devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

The common life of the new community in Christ was marked by several unique attributes.

1) This was a community formed around the Word of God. The ultimate bond and authority in the new community was the WORD…Jesus Christ, and the teachings of His apostles…much of which is now recorded in the New Testament.
2) The community was distinct in the quality of fellowship that included corporate worship as well as intimate friendships enjoyed in their homes.
3) The community was famous for the level of sharing. Everyone shared what they had to care for those in the community who were lacking.
4) The community was well known for its generosity.
5) The community was marked by the spirit of gratitude, thanksgiving, and praise to God.
6) The community was respected for the power of God’s Holy Spirit that would often manifest itself through signs and wonders.
7) The community was attractive to unbelievers…such that new people were drawn to the community every day and were eventually counted as those who were being saved.

Now, I know that this list of unique attributes as presented here in Acts 2 places our church…or your previous experience with churches…squarely under the microscope, right? For some of us, when we think of “Christian community,” our perception is radically different than the description of the new community in Acts 2! In fact, for some of us, our experiences in churches made us walk away from the faith all together. Listen, I’ve been in churches all my life, and I get that. Unfortunately, although Christian community can be and should be qualitatively unique, beautiful, and attractive, that is often not the case. As it turns out, there are still hurtful, difficult people who attend churches…unless, of course, YOU happen to be out of town!!! Look, we have to laugh a bit, right, because the truth is that the church is people, so it’s always going to have some messy dynamics. Now, these attributes of the new community that we read in Acts 2 are legit, and I can say with all honesty that I regularly witness these attributes in our life together here at Colonial. But those attributes are God’s doing…and that’s really the point here. These attributes are the effects of the Holy Spirit’s work on real people in real life situations…but we should not think that “real life issues” with “real problems” somehow disappeared in the early church. That was not the case at all, and as we recently worked our way through Acts, the problems and challenges of the new community were well document. So, how should we realistically think of Christian community?

In its simplest terms, practicing Christian community means doing real life together with Christ as our common center. If we keep it simple, practicing Christian community is both edifying and a blessing…most of the time! If we have unrealistic dreams and wishes for our Christian community, we are going to run into problems.
In the most profound book ever written on this subject entitled *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had sprung from a wish dream. The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. But God’s grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves. Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God’s sight…the sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and to a community the better for both.

Oh that every single Christian would take the time to read Bonhoeffer’s anointed insights on Christian community…I know these words were a gamechanger for me many years ago when I first read *Life Together*. Church, Christian community must be real…more real and more honest than any community anywhere else in the world! It is the real, honest, gritty, messy life together that reveals the incarnate presence of God’s Holy Spirit at work among us, but far too often our desire for a “wish dream” of a church or a small group or even our Christian marriage leads us to become hostile, angry, and even hurtful to the very community we long to enjoy. Here’s what Bonhoeffer says about that:

Every human ‘wish dream’ that is injected into the Christian community is a hinderance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.

Did you hear that? If we love our dream of a community more than the actual people who make up that community, we become destroyers of that very community. If we love the dream of our small group more than the people in our small group, we become destroyers of the community. If we love the dream of being married more than our spouse, we can actually destroy our marriage! Wish dreams are dangerous…and do you know who is most susceptible to this tendency? Senior Pastors! The “vision” guys. The men who “have a vision” and “a dream” for what the church might become…and yet, if they are not careful, they will love their vision more than the people in their community, and that usually ends badly, right? Listen: we all do this. We all come into community with our human desires and expectations. But when it comes to practicing Christian community, those wish dreams and expectations must die. Christian community is not a full-service provider of everything you need to enjoy your life or to fix all your problems. If you come into Christian community as a consumer, expecting to have all of your desires satisfied, you are going to be disappointed.

Listen to how Bonhoeffer defines the goal of Christian community:

God has willed that we should seek and find His living Word in the witness of a brother, in the mouth of a man. Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God’s Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself...
he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother soley because of Jesus Christ. That clarifies the goal of all Christian community: they meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation. Their fellowship is founded soley upon Jesus Christ.
III. The Practice of Christian Community

That brings us to the practice of Christian community. I want to keep the practice of Christian community as simple as possible, and I think Bonhoeffer has accomplished that for us. To practice Christian community is, at its essence, meeting with another person or a group of people who will speak God’s Word into your life, even as you speak God’s Word into their lives.

I have given my whole life to the local church since I was a youth. I have spent every year of my adult life serving the local church. I have no regrets...I love the Bride of Christ! Because of my long history, I have been a part of countless worship services, led numerous retreats, preached a few hundred messages, travelled all over the world on mission trips. Most of my memories are based in Christian community. Given all that I’ve seen and experienced, I can tell you that, personally and professionally, what I need more than anything else from my Christian community...more than the meals and the groups and the outings and the mission trips...is for people to speak God’s Word into my life...period. When I am struggling, when my marriage is struggling, when my faith is struggling...when I feel depressed or angry or anxious, what ministers to my heart more than anything else is a Christian brother or sister who will speak the Word of God into my life and spare not my feelings. I have several friends...right here in this church...who have played that role in my life over the past 11 years. Ms. Mildred Abbot, Joe Knittig, Adrien and Cynthia Lewis, Glen Miller, Ken and Erika Marker, Steve and Nancy Aliber, Carol and Dave Robinson, Carolyn and Dave Unruh, and of course, my wife Christy. I have a global Christian community consisting of people like Pastor Sam Stephens, Jane Wanja Gitubia, Peter Maseko, and Kesnel Joseph. I have a group of pastors I meet with locally and another group of pastors I meet with nationally. There are myriads of others...far too many to list, both here and in all the places I have lived and served. All throughout my life I have been blessed with men and women who have spoken the Word of God into my life at just the right moment through the power and providence of God’s Holy Spirit. How grateful I am for those whom God has placed in my life to walk this road with me. The practice of Christian community, for me, is one of the great joys and privileges of serving Jesus. The fellowship of the redeemed is a community like no other, for we belong to each other in Christ.

Dallas Willard writes: In fellowship we engage in common activities of worship, study, prayer, celebration, and service with other disciples. This may involve assembling ourselves together in a large group or meeting with only a few. Personalities united can contain more of God and sustain the force of his greater presence much better than scattered individuals. The fire of God kindles higher as the brands are heaped together and each is warmed by the other’s flame. The members of the body must be in contact if they are to sustain and be sustained by each other...fellowship is required to allow realization of a joyous and sustained level of life in Christ that is normally impossible to attain by all our individual effort, no matter how vigorous and sustained. In it we receive the ministry of all the graces of the Spirit to the church.
There is so much more to be said about Christian community, but I think we’ll stop there for today. I would like to end a bit early and give you a chance to practice Christian community! As you leave, take a moment and introduce yourself to someone you don’t know. Ask a few questions and then bless them in Jesus’ name! And be grateful! Christian community is not something we have to do…thank God it’s is something we get to do!

Let’s pray.