

## Ancestry.umc Week 3: Stronger Together

### Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Begin message by celebrating Max and Ella's Confirmation (2-3 minutes)

It's appropriate that we celebrate these Confirmands today, as we wrap up our series, ancestry.umc, where we're looking at our roots as a United Methodist Church and how that shapes us today. We've been building this off of the life and legacy of Francis Asbury, who helped grow the Methodist church in the United States, he was the first Bishop in the Methodist Church in America. By the time he died, he was one of the most connected people in the country. And you can see that through all these places that are named after him. I mean, there's even a **(SLIDE)** Bruce Springsteen album named after a place that bears his name, Greetings from Asbury Park NJ. And for this person, who did so many things, who was so well known, there were three simple things that he really built his life around: preaching, collecting for the poor, and visiting old friends.

So today we're focused on this piece of visiting old friends and we're going to look at what it means to be connected to each other in community and why that matters. And look, if you spend time in literally any church, you're going to hear that it matters to have relationships. So on the surface this probably doesn't feel like some groundbreaking thing I'm talking about!

But, if you put it in the context of who we are and where we've been as a church, practicing faith in community was actually essential to who the early Methodist Church was, and it's essential to who are today too.

Because you know that we are the loneliest, most isolated we've ever been. A quick Google is going to get you article after article talking about where we are. In fact, one study I looked at says that:

Over 60% of adults in the United States report feeling lonely. Young adults between the ages of 18 and 22 are the loneliest age group. ([artandhealing.org](http://artandhealing.org))

I think we need to care about how lonely we are as people. We need to care about this disconnectedness that's somehow becoming just part of our normal lives. Because how it is isn't how it's always been, and, maybe more importantly, how it is goes against who we were created to be. You can go all the way back to the beginning, back to the creation story, and of ALL the things that those early storytellers wanted people to know about who they believed God was—one of those critical things they wanted to pass down was that **(SLIDE) God created humans to have each other.** God could look around, see so much goodness, and still say: "It's not good for people to be alone."

God knew that relationship was the foundation for really just about everything. From the very beginning. And I just wonder if that's why this idea of being in community with each other has been such a central part of who we are as Methodists.

I might actually say that the fact that we've been about being connected to each other, so focused on preserving and creating and nurturing relationships, is why Methodism exists at all today. Because back when John Wesley was creating this new faith movement that came out of the Church of England, back when Francis Asbury was getting it going over here, it's not like they were the only ones trying to create something new. There were several different faith movements going on at the same time, and frankly, some of them were much more popular. But the thing that helped Methodism stick, it wasn't the flashiness or entertainment or any of that...it was this thing that they did, right from the start, called the "class meeting."

Today, we'd call that a small group. It was this chance to meet regularly, probably weekly, with the same group of people and check in on your life and your faith. It wasn't super complicated and it was all based on connection. If you were part of a class meeting, you weren't just hearing someone preach a sermon, you weren't just thinking about faith, you weren't just doing acts of service. If you were part of a class meeting...you were known.

Being known can change a lot of things for a person. I've been living this since the fall, when I started going to Orange Theory. Now, before you're like, wow, our pastor really loves fitness, I just want you to know that almost every day, I do not want to go. 100% of the time, my alarm goes off at 5:45am and I say, either in my head, or sometimes out loud: NO. I am not the person you go to if you need early morning motivation, ok?

But fortunately for me and my grouchy morning self, there are just so many people who KNOW me on the other side of that alarm. Kim literally picks me up. Leesa and Kelly are always waiting by the front for a 6am chat. The people at the desk and the coaches call me by name and know about my bad feet. I KNOW if I hit snooze and I skip it, I'm not just going to miss a workout, I'm going to miss time with all these people. And if I'm honest with you, it's not the burpees that make me want to get out of bed! It's the people, it's the relationships that make it worth it.

I wonder if our faith might be similar. Just like exercise, You CAN do it solo. You can. There's all kinds of tools and apps and ways to cultivate a perfectly fine solo spiritual life. God's not at all confined to this building or this thing called Church. Not one bit. And when I am feeling particularly close to God, when my heart and spirit are really aligned with Jesus, I have no problem cultivating a spiritual life that's just me and God. I can go on a

hike, I can spend time in the quiet, I can see the Spirit reflected in my children and in my community, it's all there and it's incredibly holy stuff. I can DO that kind of faith solo SOMETIMES.

It's just that...I don't always feel it. I don't. Maybe you don't either.

And if my faith is up to me carrying it forward, trying to connect with God on my own, I don't think I'll make it that far. If I don't have the opportunity to connect with friends, whether they're old or new, if I don't have the practice of investing in and developing relationships with people who share my faith, I can't possibly be as strong on my own as I could be with people around me.

It's why this passage in Ecclesiastes keeps bringing up this idea so repetitively that two are better than one. And I love it because the teacher here, the voice that is speaking this wisdom, they go through all types of scenarios. You fall, you're cold, you get in a fight...two are always going to be better than going it alone. These relationships sustain us, they uplift us, they help us keep going.

And so it's very clear that we need each other, and what I don't want us to miss is this last little line in this passage. It says, **(SLIDE) A threefold cord is not quickly broken.** It's interesting that the teacher spends so much time talking about pairs and

then all of a sudden it shifts. Now we're not just talking about two people, but there's some third presence in the mix that makes things stronger. It doesn't explicitly say, "this third cord is God" but I don't think it needs to. Because when I read this and I think about what makes community with other Christians SO powerful, it's got the Holy Spirit all over it. The Holy Spirit just works in this way that strengthens our relationships like nothing else can. It gives them a different value and purpose. **(SLIDE: The Holy Spirit turns our friendships into something sacred)** It makes our friendships and relationships not just an enjoyable thing and not just good for our quality of life, but it turns them into something that's actually sacred.

And sacred doesn't always mean that it feels very serious and spiritual. Sacred doesn't always mean let's get out our Bibles and pray for forty-five minutes. You know I joke, but I've heard this fear from so many of us. That we don't know HOW to do sacred community together. It feels intimidating or unfamiliar. But I think sacred friendships like this aren't that complicated—they're simply when the Spirit of God is present and connecting us to each other.

I was having lunch with Skye Smith this week. She is the curator for our Midtown Art Gallery and she is also the leader of our Young Adult Game Night **(SLIDE)** that happens once a month. And we were talking about what a sacred space this is for

people. How it can be so hard for young adults especially to make friends and find their people. How going to church can be really intimidating and it can be kind of weird trying to get to know people when sometimes it seems like everyone already HAS their people.

And so Game Night, as simple as it is, they just meet at Books and Brews once a month, but it takes down some of those barriers. ANYONE can come—you can be new to church, been at church for years, not even sure if you WANT to be at church...it doesn't matter. There's a space for you where someone will see you, ask how you're doing, and get to know whatever part of your story you might want to share. You might also get to show off your board game skills, bonus!

It speaks to a hunger so many of us have. I don't know if you know, but we just wrapped up Lenten Small Groups as a church and at the Midtown Campus, we had over 100 people in small groups this year. That is an astounding percentage of our worshipping community! And what it tells me is that we both feel this need but we also are living out this DNA that we carry, of being people who are committed to each other. Of being people who want to stay connected, who want make each other feel know. You might not KNOW that this is a huge part of the church you're part of, but it is. And you're creating that by showing up for each other.

Showing up for each other like this matters. But community isn't JUST small groups and gatherings. It's not JUST the nurturing side of friendship. Sometimes the most powerful, important moments of community come when life is the hardest. Sometimes, the power of community matters most when we're facing injustice or collective grief and we need to work together to find healing and create something better. That kind of community is part of who we are as a church just as much as anything else.

I saw a really powerful example of this when I was on the Civil Rights Pilgrimage to Montgomery, AL last week. We visited a lot of the significant places from the Civil Rights movement. But we also visited some newer sites that have been created by the Equal Justice Initiative to give an accurate telling of our nation's past and present. And one of these sites is called **(SLIDE)** the Legacy Museum, which traces the history of our country from Enslavement to Mass Incarceration.

One of the small theaters in the museum told the story of **(SLIDE)** Emmett Till. If you don't know who Emmett Till was, he was a young Black teenager from Chicago who went to spend time with family in Mississippi in 1955, at the height of Jim Crow segregation laws. During a visit to a store with his cousins, he whistled at a white woman who later accused



him of doing much worse. Emmett Till was brutally murdered by a group of white men as “punishment.”

His murder became one of the early defining moments of the Civil Rights movement. His mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, insisted on an open-casket funeral so there would be no doubt as to what these men had done to her son. And when Emmett Till’s murderers were all acquitted at the hands of an all-white, all-male jury, in the face of that devastating injustice, Mamie Till-Mobley kept going. She raised awareness, she gave speeches, she was one of the key sparks to the Civil Rights Movement that would change our entire country. And as she told her son’s story, she made it clear—this was not a one-woman fight. In the footage I watched at the Legacy Museum, she said, “This CANNOT be MY fight...it MUST be OUR fight.”

She understood the power of people coming together. She understood why connection matters. It’s not just for the comfort community brings, but it’s because of the POWER that comes with people of faith joining up and working toward a common goal. It’s through our relationships that we see God at work and feel the moving of the Holy Spirit. We NEED those friendships, those connections. We need each other.

Because a cord of three strands is not easily broken.

I told you a couple of weeks ago, when we started this series, that this is a buildup to General Conference which begins this coming week. It will be two weeks when United Methodist delegates from all over the world come together and make decisions on some significant things, including LGBTQIA ordination and inclusion in our church.

I don't know what is going to happen—we're going to keep you updated as things go on. But here's what I do know. Who we are as a community is who we are as a community. We are here for each other. We show up. We love. We break barriers, we include and affirm. We work for justice and we love Jesus. Because that is the call that God has given each and every one of us in this place.

And we don't do this as scattered, solo individuals. We do it together.

We are living, breathing legacies of this DNA of being connected. We are creating a community that is connected to each other, that is connected to God, and connects to what is happening in our world. And I am so grateful to be part of this community WITH YOU. To be part of what the Holy Spirit is doing in us and through us and around us.

Because this is the kind of community that is not easily broken.

Let's pray.