

“Reaching Out Together”

Philippians 1:3-11, 25-27



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Good morning everyone and welcome to this second week of 40 Days of Community. During these exciting 40 days we are doing two things. We are deepening our sense of community within our church family, and reaching out to the community around our church. We are learning to build stronger relationships within our church, and we are reaching out in love to those outside our church. Now our outreach to our community is two fold: First, we are going to be providing food for all the hungry people in our area. That effort is called SW HOPE: FEED THE HUNGRY, and you will be hearing more about that next week. Secondly, we will be reaching out to those who are spiritually hungry and sharing with them the Good News of Jesus, the Bread of Life.

It isn't hard in our society to see the effects of filling our lives with those things that are not truly the Bread of Life. The pursuit for more and more material things, the desire for more and more fun and recreation, the drive to succeed—to attend the best schools, to be the best athlete, or the best scholar all in the long run are dead ends, and can result in us feeling empty and unfilled. That's why God has given each of us a very important mission...the mission of sharing God's love with other people, with our friends, our family, with our co-

workers and neighbors, with those who don't know about the Bread of Life, and who don't know the joy of being part of a family of faith. God wants us to share the good news. And know I that just bringing up this subject can make some of you feel uncomfortable, because this isn't something that we Presbyterians do readily. But the great thing is that we don't have to do it alone. God wants us to do it with other people.

I like this translation of Philippians 1:27. Let's read aloud together. "You are standing together, side by side, with one strong purpose to tell the good news." Now on your outlines circle, "standing together" and circle "telling the good news." That's what we are looking at today. How do we do it together? How do I let my friends and loved ones know that God loves them? In another verse in that first chapter of Philippians Paul writes, "I am thankful for your partnership in the gospel."

How do we share the gospel in a partnership with other people? This morning I want to lift up seven ways we can partner with other believers, with other people in the church, to help us reach our friends, our relatives, the people we care about most with the good news. Now during 40 Days of Community almost 140 of you are in small groups, reading this daily devotional, *Better Together*, and looking at and discussing six videos that help us build stronger relationships. And so I am going to offer some ideas of how we can use our small groups to help us reach out to share God's love and grace and goodness with those who are spiritually hungry. I am going to use the word "Partner" as an acrostic.

The first letter "P" stands for PRAY TOGETHER. Ask your small group to pray for your friends or family members who haven't stepped across the line, who are still considering whether to be a follower of Jesus, and whether to try getting to know God in a personal way. You know, you can't force anybody to love God, but you can pray for them. Prayer can warm up a cold heart, or activate and arouse an apathetic heart, and change a stubborn heart. You see, people can reject your arguments. They may refuse to listen to your logic, but they are powerless against your prayers. It goes straight to their heart.

So, what are you supposed to pray about as a group? Well, one of the things is in Colossians 3:4, "Pray for us, that God may open to us a door for the world, to declare the mystery of Christ." Pray for God's opportunity to share with our

friends and our loved ones the great news about God. And as you pray for an open door you will start seeing them everywhere. So write this down on your outline, "Prayer makes us aware." As you pray you'll begin seeing more clearly the needs of your friends and loved ones.

So the first action step in sharing the good news is: Make a group prayer list. Ask everyone in your group to name one person who they would really like to become a follower of Jesus or connect with a church family. Share those names and start praying for each other's friends and loved ones.

Number two: The "A" in 'PARTNER' stands for appeal. APPEAL TO COMMON INTERESTS. Before you can share with good news with anybody, you have to establish a relationship with them and building on those things you have in common can help you relate to others. What common experiences do you have with others? Common interests? Common needs? Do you have kids? Do you like to fish, or hike, or go to movies or concerts?

So the second action step for your group is to discover the common interests in your group. Ask the question in your group, "What do you like to do?" and make a list of all the things you find out. Then think about some of the people you are praying for and see if any connections can be made. It is important for people who are not followers of Jesus to experience Christians as people who enjoy life, have fun, and have other interests. I was once in a church group that met monthly to read plays together, and that group appealed to people outside the church who had that kind of interest. So appeal to common interests.

The "R" in 'PARTNER' stands for REACH OUT IN LOVE. Why? Because you have to have the right motive in reaching out to your neighbors and friends. Jesus said, "Love your neighbor..." How? As yourself. Well, why are we doing this? Why are we even talking about sharing the good news of God's love with others in our community? Why don't we just focus on making the love in our church warmer and stronger?

We do it because the Christian message is the greatest news in the world. If I had a cure for cancer, I'd be shouting it in the streets. If I had the cure for AIDS, I'd be telling everybody I could. We have something even better. We have the key to the purpose of life in this world, and hope for life in the

world to come. We have been forgiven and loved unconditionally. Through Jesus we have a wonderful picture of what God is like. God wants a relationship with us that begins now and lasts forever. Now that's great news.

The sad thing is that so many people who are not yet followers of Jesus, who haven't stepped across the line, expect Christians to reach out in judgment, not to reach out in love. They see Christians thinking that they are better than everybody else, or acting like they are all the answers, or putting down everybody else. But that's not how we are to reach out. We are to reach out in love being willing to share our lives. Listen to these words in the book of Thessalonians, "Because we loved you, we were ready to share not only the gospel of God, but our very own selves."

The action step for reaching out is, Ask God to give you a deeper love for others. And one of the best ways that you can show love to a friend or to a family member or to a co-worker who is not a Christian is simply to ask them, "How can I pray for you?" I have discovered that when people are in need they don't find that question offensive. They might say something like, "Sure. If you believe it, I can use all the help I can get." So reach out in love.

The fourth way that you and I can partner together to let other people know how great God's love is to "TELL YOUR STORY." Do what the Bible talks about in 1st Peter 2:9: "You are God's instruments to do his work and to speak out for him, to tell others of the night and day difference he made for you." (The Message) Tell your story. In fact, the most effective way to let other people know about the great things that God can do in their lives is to tell the story of what God has done in your life. That is what makes a difference. You will need to do two things. First, think about what your life would be like if God was not an active part of it. I've included a little handout of some things that might be different for you because you are a Christian. Look over those areas and see if God has touched your life in any of those ways. Secondly, listen carefully to the concerns of your friend, and if you hear a concern that Christ has helped you with, just humbly say, "Look, God helped me with that. Maybe God can help you too."

Now here's the action step with that. Write out your story and share it with your group. Start there. So I'd like to encour-

age you during '40 Days of Community,' to invite a couple of people each week to take just two to three minutes to share their faith journey with the rest of the group. Or maybe do it in pairs. But let everybody get a chance to tell their story.

The fifth way to help other people experience God's love is to NURTURE FRIENDSHIPS. Just build friendships with them, so you can build a bridge between your heart and theirs that Christ can walk across. Now this step takes a little bit more time and effort. It takes a little more energy to build a friendship. You just don't do it overnight. In Romans 12:16 we hear, "Be friendly with everyone. Don't be proud and feel that you are smarter than others. Make friends with ordinary people."

Now I believe that very few people have a true friend in life, a person who will be there with you when you need them the most. Yet, I believe that everyone is looking for a true friend.

I think that there are people that you work with, or live with, or who live down the street, or you who to go to school with you who are hungry for a friendship. I think that maybe God has put those people in your life so that you can share the good news of God's love with them. If not you, than who? You may be the only Bible some people may read. You represent Jesus Christ to them.

So here's the action step. Invite a friend to church or to your small group. Now you may be thinking, "Are you kidding? I don't have any friends that would be interested in coming to church with me or attending my small group." Have you seen the latest Gallop pole where they took a survey and found 34 million American said, "I'd go to church, but I've never been asked." Have you ever wondered if your un-churched friend may be one of those 34 million Americans. So think of a friend, a neighbor, a co worker you care about. Invite them to church or to your small group. Build relationships and nurture friendships

The sixth way to reach out is to EXPECT GOD TO ACT. I believe that God desires to be in relationship with every human being. That there is no one that God ever gives up on. I believe that if people seriously look at Christianity, intellectually weigh the options, and allow God to remove the emotional and spiritual blocks they will choose God. But the real-

ity is that very few people become followers of Jesus the first time they hear the good news. They're got to think about it. That's why we should never push anybody, never pressure anybody. We need to say, "Take the time to make the right decision." I learned a lot watching two of my college roommates embrace Christianity following a number of years of searching. I knew that God was working in their lives long before they claimed that presence for themselves, so I never got discouraged. I have held that same hope for other seekers I have met through the years.

Hebrews 11:1 reminds us, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen." Even though we don't understand how things are all going to work out, we need to have faith and expect God to work. We don't need a lot of faith. We just need a little faith. If we put a little faith in a big God, we're going to get big results. It isn't the size of our faith that matters, it is the size of our God. Expect God to work. So the action step here is to never give up on anyone.

Finally, the last way to share the good news of God's love with our friends is "R", REPRESENT CHRIST WITH YOUR LIFE. That's what Paul is getting at in his letter to the Colossians when he says, "Whatever you do or say, let it be as a representative of the Lord Jesus." Whatever you do or say. That means we need to be audiovisual Christians, who walk the walk and talk the talk. We need to do it and say it. We need to live it and share it. We need to communicate it and demonstrate it. We need to be show and tell Christians. We need both. We need to live it our lives and we need to share it with our mouth. Again, I believe God has specifically put people in your life and you are God's representative to them. And if not you, then who? God put you there.

This is the action step. It is a prayer, a two word prayer, but maybe the most dangerous prayer you could ever pray, "Use me." I dare you to pray it during the next 40 days. "God, use me." Use me to show your love to people who don't know that you love them. Use me to show your purpose to people who don't know that you have a purpose for their life.

Now here's my last challenge: Imagine if every group in our church had the privilege of helping one person step across the line and embrace the faith. That's my prayer for this community of faith, and may it be yours as well.