

“What We Have Learned”

Hebrews 10:19-25



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A little over a year ago the leaders of St. Andrew's church, your elders, deacons, and staff gathered for a weekend retreat of prayer, discernment and planning for the next steps on our journey of renewal. During that retreat three areas emerged that we decided to make priorities for the next couple of years. Those areas included passionate spirituality, holistic small groups, and need based evangelism. We wanted to help each person at St. Andrew's develop a more dynamic relationship with the living God. We wanted to strengthen our small group ministry, and we wanted to share God's love with others by meeting significant human needs. Then we heard about 40 Days of Community and decided we would use 40 Days of Community to work on these priorities.

Then God rose up a mighty leader in the person of Lori Sweeney to lead us in our 40 Days of Community campaign. I'd like to begin this morning by thanking Lori for her willingness to serve God and this community of faith in this special way. Next I'd like to thank you. You are an amazing people of God, and Tom and I love you very much. It seems like every time you face a challenge you far ex-

ceed our greatest expectations. We had hoped that perhaps 70 to 80 people at St. Andrew's would participate in a small group during these 40 days. Actually, 130 of you formed into 14 small groups. Unbelievable. So today is a day to celebrate all that we have learned and experienced during these 40 days.

So let's review what we learned during 40 Days of Community. First, what did we learn about worshiping together? The first thing we learned is what Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." We learned that corporate worship can take place anywhere you've got two or three people together. Now God is always with us, but when two or three are gathered God says, "There's a special sense of my presence, you'll be able to sense me a whole lot better in a group." So as you met in your groups or with your prayer partners you were worshiping God.

Now the other thing we learned is that worship is to be a celebration. Worship is to be a festival, not a funeral. Why? Because God is a great God, and when we understand how great God is in worship, one of the things that happens is that it shrinks our problems. Sometimes our problems can seem overwhelming and then we go to worship and we experience how great God is and we leave thinking, "God can handle that problem. God is big enough." So I'd like you to stand up if you are able and we are going to celebrate right now how great God is. "Lord, Lord"

Now, number two, what did we learn about being together? Well, we learned two of the most important truths in life—that we belong to each other, and that we need each other. God never meant for you to go through life by yourself. Whether you marry or not marry is irrelevant. We all need a spiritual family that's going to be there in the tough times. Remember when Tom talked about the red-wood trees, that they don't have very deep roots but they are the biggest things on the planet because they grow in groves and they interconnect their roots together, and that is what holds them up in the storms and the winds and the

fires of life. Paul says it like this in Romans 12: "Since we are all one body in Christ, we belong to each other and each of us needs all the others."

During 40 Days of Community we looked at the fact that relationships are what life is all about. If we summarize the whole Bible it's "Love God with all your heart," and "Love your neighbor as yourself." We also learned that relationships take work. They're not always easy. I'm sure that during 40 Days of Community, there were times that you didn't feel like going to your small group. You thought, "I'd rather stay home and lay on the couch." But you got up and you went anyway, and it not only blessed you, it blessed other people. Look at this next verse from James, "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 takes hard work to build community, to build fellowship. But the benefits are worth the effort because you have people that are in your life, walking through life with you, and you are not alone.

Third, what did we learn about growing together. Well, we learned that we grow faster and we grow stronger together. In fact, it is pretty tough to grow spiritually by ourselves. We grow by being connected. If a part of our body is cut off, like our hand it certainly isn't going to grow. In fact, it won't even survive. If we are disconnected from the Body of Christ, we can't grow. There is no lifeblood.

We also learned that the goal of growing together is to become more like Jesus Christ. Let's read this next verse from Ephesians together, "This work must continue until we're 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." By being connected to other Christians we become more and more like Jesus Christ. The third thing we learned about growth from 40 days of community is that growth is a choice. Remember, 'you are as close to God as you choose to be.' Growth is a daily choice, it's every day. Every day we have to make a choice whether or not to follow Christ. Growth is a daily choice.

Fourth, what did we learn about serving together? First, we learned that we all need to be served. We've got to learn to accept help from other people. And if you can't accept help from other people you've got a pride problem. Second, we learned that we all need to serve others. During the daily devotionals of 40 Days of Community we looked at 40 of the "one anothers" in the Bible— those wonderful verses that give us a picture of all the ways we can serve each other, by loving one another, by caring for one another, by helping one another, by encouraging one another, and on and on. I think God wants us to use the church as a laboratory for practicing love. As we grow in serving one another it better prepares us for serving others outside the church family. Look at this verse from Galatians, "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."

Now some of you served this community of faith in a very special way during 40 days of community as hosts for our small groups, and if you hadn't volunteered to be a host, there would be 150 people who would not have experienced what we did in 40 days of community. So let's applaud those who were hosts.

Remember that the two most dangerous words you can pray are the words, "Use me." But there is another one word prayer that is just as dangerous as the prayer, "Use me," it's the prayer— "Whatever." Whatever you want me to do, God, I'll do it. Whatever you want me to be, "I'll be it. Whatever you want me to give, I'll give it. That's how we learn to serve others, just by saying, "God, whatever."

Finally, what did we learn about reaching out together? The first thing we learned is in this verse from James chapter 1: "Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the father is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight." God says that the test of our faith is not what we know. The test of our faith is not what we say we believe. The test of our Christianity is how we treat other people—especially those who need help and who are the most vulnerable in our society. Because of 40 Days of

Community this congregation was lead to attempt the impossible—to attempt something that no other church or organization in this area has tried—to collect enough food, 50,000 pounds of food, to provide emergency food assistance to all the hungry people in SW Portland for four months. I'd like to ask Dan Simchuk to share what he experienced working on the front lines of this mission effort.

I am so proud of the way you have responded to this effort...the food that you have been bringing to St. Andrew's each week, and your generous donations of time and money.

Now we have known that SW Hope is about more than feeding the physically hungry. The faith communities involved in this effort have known all along that it is also about feeding the spiritually hungry, the relationally and socially hungry. It is about giving our God a good name here in SW Portland. That is why, as of today 1,000 homes surrounding our church will be canvassed with information not only about SW HOPE. But also about St. Andrew's church. We want people in our community to know that there is a God who loves them, who has a plan and a purpose for their lives. And we want them to know that there is a family of faith here at St. Andrew's who is waiting to welcome them home, accept them just as they are, and support and encourage them in their journey of faith. And I am so proud of those of you who are reaching out in this special way...and this effort has crossed the generations from our children and our youth to one of the oldest members of our congregation. Did you know that our 91-year-old Hazel Torgerson brought canvassing packets to 30 apartments in her apartment complex? Thank you Hazel. In the weeks ahead you have other major opportunities to invite others to St. Andrew's—extending Easter invitations to your friends and neighbors, and inviting them to an open house when our renovation is completed.

But what are we going to do now? What do we do next now that 40 Days of Community is over? Once again, God gives us some guidance. Look at these verses from Hebrews 10 and let's read them together, "Let us not give up

the habit of meeting together as some are doing. Instead let us encourage one another all the more." Now we told you that we wanted you to stay in your small groups for seven weeks. That is all the commitment you were asked to make. But some of you want to continue in your group because you are just starting to build trust, and that is wonderful. Others of you need to change and now is the time to do that. You may need to meet at a different time, in a different place or with a different group. We don't care if you want to try a new group, but we hope you will decide to be in some group, because now you know better. Now you know that you can't go through life alone. And there are others of you who didn't participate in a 40 Days of Community group who would like to give it a try. We will find a group for you.

Now as we end this 40 Days of Community I would like you to join me in a prayer of thanksgiving to God as it appears on the screen. Let us pray. Gracious God, we thank you so much for all you've done in our lives. Thank you for life itself. Thank you for creating us and giving us a purpose. Thank you for the people you have put in our lives, for our church family. Thank you that we get to be part of something so significant in this world. And so as we offer our lives to you we want to say to you, "Whatever." Whatever God. Whatever you want to do with our lives, we are yours. In your name, we pray. Amen.