

I used to really think of faith as an individual matter

All of the emphasis was on the personal relationship with Christ

Yes, *“as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord”*—but it was really parental commitment

It didn't really say anything beyond that

It was kind of like a bunch of silos with all of the emphasis on the individual

As Americans, we have so emphasized the individual—that we took that into the church

Now I really see us as connected and that lateral connection is important to our vertical connection

It's more of a circle or a triangle in which I am as connected to you as to God

Or a rhizome where it grows underground over a broad area—sending out shoots

At nodules, the rhizome grows up and is visible and down as roots, all connected

God's original intent in creation was that God and people would be partners on earth

Abraham and his family are called to be the beginning of a people of God

They were to start a grand plan in which they would live in relationship with God

So that all peoples could see God's intentions on earth

And come into the same relationship

Israelites were the people of God—continuing to live in this relationship with God

Jesus demonstrates what it is like to live in relationship with God

Early church is a gathering of people living in intimate relationship with God

Throughout history, God has called people to be in relationship with God

To live as a people of God who follow God's leading

George Fox climbed Pendle Hill in England and saw *“a great people to be gathered”*

It was the beginning of the Friends movement, of which we are a part

We are a people of God—we've been gathered together by God

But it is more than us—we're connected through the Spirit to all people of God

The greater our connection to God—the greater our connection to the people of God

What does it matter?—this greater connection to other Christians—to others on this journey with God

Even in the beginning of our journeys—those around us are important

*“... for when I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up, and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life, whereby I might feel myself perfectly redeemed.” Robert Barclay, Apology, 1678*

As I connected with people who knew God deeply—just by being with them,

I felt both challenged and drawn into the Presence of God

*“The Kingdom of Heaven did gather us and catch us all, as in a net, ... We came to know a place to stand in and what to wait in; and the Lord appeared daily to us.... And our hearts were knit unto the Lord and one another in true and fervent love, in the covenant of Life with God; and that was a strong obligation or bond upon all our spirits, which united us one unto another.” Francis Howgill*

While we love the idea of this, we often struggle, thinking “our community” isn’t like that  
We yearn for something else  
We desire to be part of a great God movement in which we are all caught up, as in a net  
We get glimpses—yet they slip through our fingers and we lose the connection  
We often leave—thinking it has been another failure of a church to connect to us

This connection to those who have been gathered with us is often called “Fellowship”

Thomas Kelly talks about that as a “pale and thin word”

Rather than really recognize the spiritual power of the blessed community

The church has settled for the social connection in our understanding of fellowship

*“The precious word Fellowship becomes identified with a purely horizontal relation of [person] to [person], not with the horizontal-vertical relationship of [person] to [person] in God.” Thomas Kelly, Testament of Devotion, p 80*

No wonder we become dissatisfied with the social connections within the church

We easily reduce our understanding of the gathered community to a social gathering

We yearn for a place where our best friends all gather with us in worship

But I don’t think that is why we are gathered in community as the people of God

We’re gathered together as people living in “holy obedience”

We’re gathered together to do the work of God

We talked about Kelly’s “holy obedience” which is not about being a good person

Or obediently doing the right thing all the time

Rather it is the life changing transformation of an encounter with Christ

Out of that emerges a desire to live intimately with God—we Listen and follow

Callings and ministry emerge among us and we are released to do them

We’re gathered to live out this “holy obedience” and our callings in community

We do this work together

Kelly says that “we don’t create it deliberately; we find it and we find ourselves increasingly within it

*As we find ourselves increasingly within [God].*

*It is the holy matrix of ‘the communion of the saints,’ the body of Christ which is [the] church.”*

We are the saints gathered by God—saints simply refers to the People of God

Saints are not limited to some separate class—we are all saints, every one!

But this interconnectedness goes beyond our church—we’re connected all around the world

I sometimes think of interconnected circles

I’m a part of many circles of people gathered to follow God in holy obedience

Some are expanding/wider circles—others are overlapping circles

Together we accomplish God’s purposes in our world

Together we do the work of God—all of us—it is a powerful movement of God on earth

Bringing heaven to earth

Making God visible to others

Setting the transforming power of God’s grace loose in our world

We do that a zillion ways—and they join together to make a huge difference

We’re all connected, just as mountains all go down into the same earth

God is at work, making something much larger happen

We are in this Holy Fellowship, the Blessed Community—a people of whom God is the Head

We easily divide into smaller communities based on similarity of thought  
    Groups that hold basic assumptions in common  
    But those similarities and assumptions are of human construct  
Our Holy Fellowship reaches behind the similarities to the immediate Presence of God  
    This is our real connection—shared experience in God  
Our Holy Fellowship can tolerate our differences of thought and belief  
    Because we focus on the Center where we live with Christ  
This Fellowship is a “theocracy” where God is our ruler and guide—directing Listening children

In that our diversity is our strength—as we hold the broader diversity of God within our midst  
No one person has it all—we need each other with different ways of thought and understanding  
It is the Quaker belief that we all bring our piece to the larger community  
But only as I fully offer up and release my piece, can the whole be known

*“Community is a place where the connections felt in the heart make themselves known in bonds between people, and where the tuggings and pullings of those bonds keep opening up our hearts.” Parker Palmer, A Place Called Community, p. 27, 1977*

Our differences pull at one another—but if done in submission to Christ among us  
They open us to the larger work of God

*A cord of three strands is not easily broken. Ecclesiastes 4:12*

3 strands—purity, mercy, unity—woven together by God  
Best if we stay together, but we are often tempted to separate and be single-focused  
They seem at odds—but all have their place—all reflect the truth of God

This gathering into communities by God—in which God does the gathering  
It is not dependent on a certain number  
*For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them. Matthew 18:20*  
It can be 2 or 3 or 10 or 20 or more that are gathered and in touch with each other through God  
It also isn't dependent upon being together constantly  
    —some despair that we see each other once a week or less if we miss a Sunday  
    Because it is about our shared God connection of living deeply in God's Presence  
It isn't dependent upon self-disclosure  
    I used to think this was important and found it to be the way to connect  
    But I've learned that this isn't the key  
    The important thing is our connection in Christ and our commitment to Listen together  
We accompany each other in our going out  
    If part of us go, or one of us goes—we all go in accompaniment  
    Usually this accompaniment is in the spirit as can't go physically—except on occasion  
    But we go nevertheless—none of us are alone in living out this work of God on earth

We are the People of God, gathered into various smaller communities, together doing the work of God

Main resource for this message...

*A Testament of Devotion*, by Thomas R. Kelly, Harper and Row, 1941, *The Blessed Community*, pp. 77-88.