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COMMUNITY MATTERS

We live in a culture that espouses rugged individualism like in Sinatra's famous song "I Did It My Way". People who pull themselves up by their bootstraps are greatly admired and self-help books are sold by the hundreds. But where has this mentality gotten us? There's an epidemic of loneliness and sadly suicide rates keep climbing. Why is our insistence on being fiercely independent not working?

I believe it is because God intended us to live in community right from the beginning. In Genesis He declares that it is not good for mankind to live alone. Therefore, God provided a help mate for companionship and as a co-worker in life. Then God set about creating a community of people to journey together and become a people who would know and follow him- the family of God. They were to show the world how to live as God's children. Sadly, they also chose to do things their way.

When Jesus came to earth he set about restoring God's plan by gathering disciples to learn from him and to carry his teachings about how to live and love one another to the world. We were never meant to try to live life as God intends alone. In fact, there are 59 verses in the New Testament that speak of loving one another. It's not possible to be a disciple of Jesus on our own because love requires being in relationship with other people and we are commanded to love one another. John 15:12. Then Jesus promises that where two or three are gathered as his followers we can be sure he will be there. Mt. 18:20. In Hebrews 10:25 he admonishes followers not to give up meeting together but instead encourage each other. The other thing he says we can be sure of is that he will always be with us, even to the end of the age. Mt. 28:20b. This is critical because he makes it clear in John 15 that without him we can do nothing.

Recent studies have proven the benefits of belonging to a community. Living in union with others promotes mental, physical and spiritual wellness, longevity, generosity, sense of purpose, support during trials and strengthened faith in God's loving presence which all result in joy no matter what our circumstances. It was such a blessing to witness the powerful difference a caring community made when our daughter recently went through a bone marrow transplant. Because she is allowing others to walk this journey with her, she is surrounded with selfless loving support that is giving her strength, comfort, encouragement, companionship and even laughter every step of the way. I found inspiring examples of how communities of faith can truly make a difference in a book called *Heaven Help Us*, by John Kasich, former governor of Ohio. In the book he tells stories that demonstrate how such communities can magnify the power of individuals and make amazing things happen when people work together empowered by God.

Recently, I have been personally inspired towards life changing spiritual growth by being a part of a book study group here at St. Andrews. Together we are learning how to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit as we read, discuss and seek to put into practice what we are being taught by the book *Tending the Wild Garden*, by Eugenia Anne Gamble. I'm so grateful to belong to a church family that provides many opportunities for its members to connect in meaningful ways so we can grow closer to God and each other and enables us to serve one another and the world that so desperately needs loving care. It is through these experiences together that we can share our concerns, needs and life stories so that no one needs to ever walk alone. Community really does matter!

~Written by Marilyn Whisner

P.S. The adult ministry team would welcome your suggestions for future books or topics that would enhance spiritual formation and ministry.

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