

**Essential Choices: Kinship over Isolation**

Acts 1:4-5, 8; 2:1-21, 38-39; Ephesians 3:16-21

Sports fans have been hard hit by the Coronavirus.

After all the hype and hoopla of the Super Bowl, sports fans were eagerly awaiting March Madness. To their dismay, the entire basketball tournament was *cancelled*. There were no arenas packed with fans. No television broadcasts. No coaches. No players. Nothing to fill the aching sports void for devoted couch potatoes.

To add insult to injury, the NBA suspended professional basketball on March 11. Now, 3½ months later, the NBA hopes to restart the season with stringent health protocols in a single-site campus at Disneyland Resort in Orlando, Florida. Again, no fans in the arena. Just coaches and players—and TV crews.

Training camps for Major League Baseball were shut down until *this* week. The plan for baseball is a safe and shortened season of 60 games with playoffs in September and the World Series in October but with no fans (or vendors) in the stadiums. Only coaches and players on the field.

As for football, that is still the great unknown. It is not yet clear whether or how many students will return to university campuses, much less practice and play on NCAA football teams.

The National Football League still hopes to play a full 16-game season of professional football, with unprecedented restrictions, but no one knows *yet* whether there will be fans in the stands.

So even for football, the behemoth among sports, there will be no tailgate parties, fewer or no spectators, only coaches and players on the field, playing all-out to win—for TV audiences.

For sports fans and teams this is a *disaster*.  
But this same reality applied to the Church *would be glorious!*

Imagine a Church without any spectators, with no one just looking on,  
a church with everyone on the field, so to speak,  
pastors and people together,  
actively engaged, everyone in play, going all-out to win the world for Jesus!

What is bad for sports fans and teams would be great for the Church!

The Bible has a word for a church like this—*koinonia*.  
This Greek word occurs 19 times in the New Testament  
In English versions, it is translated various ways, depending on the context:  
as community, communion, fellowship, sharing, participation, contribution.

The word describes persons who are *bonded* together  
as *participants* in a shared life,  
as *partners* in a common purpose.  
It sums up the close-knit kinship and whole-hearted partnership  
of God's people in the church.

The early church *grew strong* and *spread* through the Roman world  
because of essential choices the apostles made,  
sequentially, though the *Book of Acts*.

In this message, the choice in focus is **kinship over isolation**—  
that is, on whole-hearted kinship and partnership in the Church  
rather than *half-hearted participation*, or *absence from*, the Church.

To make a informed decision for *full engagement* in the Church,  
we need answers to three *frequently* and *seriously* asked questions:  
Why be part of the Church?  
Why be part of a seriously flawed Church?  
Why be part of this church in particular?

To repeat the questions, and elaborate a bit:  
Why be part of the Church—capital C, the universal, worldwide Church?  
Why be part of a flawed Church—  
again, capital C, a widespread inditement of *all* churches?  
Why be part of this church—small c, Millersville BIC, a church of 70 people  
with aspirations for restored *health* and *strength* and *impact!*

We find good answers to all three questions in the experience of the early church as we read the story in Acts 2.

After Peter preached at Pentecost, this was the response in verse 41.

Those who accepted the message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

And this is what happened next, verse 42.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

The apostles, over a hundred disciples, and 3,000 newly baptized believers immediately came together into a community of people who devoted themselves—a strong word!—to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship—that is, to *kinship* and *partnership*—to the breaking of bread, a reference to the Lord's Supper and common meals, and to prayer.

The Church—capital C—consists of all who trust Jesus as Savior and follow Him as Lord. The Church is to be a covenant community with a shared commitment to worship, kinship, discipleship, and partnership in mission. In worship, we bring our whole-hearted devotion to the Lord God. In kinship, we live out our deep commitment to love one another. In discipleship, we follow the call of the Lord Jesus to obey and to teach all things commanded by Him. In mission, we proclaim the gospel in word and deed to all people.

The initial followers of Jesus knew they needed all of this. Isolation was not an option. From the beginning, they *bonded* together *as the Church*.

Why is the Church *essential* for followers of Jesus?

The answer is that the Word of God in us is *fragile*, easily compromised by *pitfalls* and *adversity*.

In Matthew 13, Jesus told his disciples this *parable*, a story with a point.

"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

When the disciples asked Jesus the meaning of the parable, he replied:

When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

Only when the Word of God falls on good soil can the Word *take root* and *grow* and *bear fruit* in our lives.

This is why the apostle Paul urges us in Colossians 2:6-7:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

If we want to *survive* and *thrive* as a follower of Jesus, rooted and built up, strengthened in faith, overflowing with thankfulness; if we want to bear fruit; if we want to bear *much* fruit, the Word of God needs to fall on good soil, and we find that good soil in the nurture of the Church.

There is an Amish nursery about four miles from our home. In the early spring the two greenhouses are filled with young plants rooted in good soil, fertilized by rich nutrients, and protected from the freezes and frosts of early spring weather. In that environment, the plants grow strong

to be purchased for gardens and flower beds that bless the surrounding community.

To *survive* and *grow* and *thrive* as followers of Jesus, we need to devote ourselves “to the apostles’ teaching and to kinship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer—in the Church.”

But as we know, the church is imperfect, which leads to the second question: Why participate in a *seriously flawed* church?

In the book of Acts, there are nine summary descriptions of the church. The first is this passage in Acts 2, picking up with verse 43.

Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

This summary description, and all nine, are wonderfully appealing. Yet even in the earliest days of the church there were troubles. In Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira attempted to deceive the apostles. In chapter 6, complaints arose because Greek widows being neglected. In chapter 11, criticism and dissension erupted over ministry to Gentiles.

And from then on, the NT letters address a litany of problems: disunity, immorality, immaturity, false teaching, legalism, lapses in love, rivalry, conflict, heresy, and laziness.

For all the *good* in the Church, we must admit, the Church is (and *has always been*) *flawed*.

This because Jesus brings us into the Church, *just as we are*. He does not refuse us admission until we get our life together. He does not send us back to the parking lot, or restrict us to the grandstands, as spectators. When we are still broken and wounded, but saved and forgiven, Jesus brings us right onto the playing field— with coaches to help us grow and mature— from the start, as full participants in the Church.

How can we demand a perfect church when you and I, ourselves, are still in recovery, still encumbered by the residue of sin?

Despite God's great mercy to us, we have an ingrained tendency to be hard on others—and on the church—which is why Jesus warned us:

Luke 6:41-42

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Jesus also said:

Mark 2:17

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

The church is flawed because we are still flawed. To be part of a seriously flawed church, though, is not an *inditement*; it is a compelling reminder of the good news of grace.

Now for the third question: why participate in *this* church?

The short answer is:

because in *this* church *we will be stretched*—and grow *strong* in the Lord.

Challenges and setbacks, as we encounter them, will force us to strengthen our heart, recalibrate our mind, roll up our sleeves, and get to work—together!

The apostle James, who was part of the church in Acts 2, wrote this in James 1:2-4:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

When Connie and I were starting a church in Oklahoma City,  
 I was way out of my comfort zone.  
 I had never led a church, must less started one;  
 my pastoral skills were minimal at best.  
 But I was willing to attempt most things,  
*except* I did not want to go out knocking on doors.  
 That, I thought, was too embarrassing, too scary, too Morman.  
 But when our church start began to sputter and stall, I became so desperate  
 that I went to our target area and knocked on my first door.  
 An older women opened the door, and said.  
 "My son lives here, but he's away on a business trip.  
 Come back again. He needs what you have."  
 I went back, and this time he was home.  
 After I introduced myself, the first thing he said was:  
 "Funny you should come by today.  
 I just decided that I'm not going to drink any more. . .  
 Of course, I'm not going to drink any less."  
 As it turned out, once we started a Bible study in their home,  
 alcohol *was* a serious problem for both Chuck and Carol.  
 One evening, Carol said,  
 "Pray for me. My stomach hurts. I think I have cancer."  
 We prayed for her stomach pain and went home.  
 That night Carol drank into the wee hours of the morning,  
 and then *said—for the first time*—"I need help, Chuck; get me help."  
 The next morning he took her to a treatment center.  
 He came home and poured all their alcohol down the toilet;  
 and Chuck was clean from that time on.  
 Carol came home from treatment, had a relapse nine months later,  
 but in time, with struggle, she made it to faith and sobriety.  
 Both Chuck and Carol came into the church, and are now in heaven,  
 because the Holy Spirit stretched me to knock on their door that day.

That's why Connie and I choose to partner  
 with churches that are in some sense desperate,  
 churches that have to strive together  
 in ways that compel us to grow strong in the Lord.

In *this* church, we will be stretched;  
 and when we are, this is what we can anticipate:

When we are all on the playing field—all in this together—  
*we will grow strong* amid the challenges ahead.  
 The essential choices we are making now will be transformative.

Most importantly, we will have an impact for Jesus—  
in this community, in this area, in this world.

Jesus' invitation to us this morning  
is to choose the shared life, the mutual care, the common purpose  
of *koinonia*—of whole-hearted kinship and partnership in the Church.

I am rejoicing in all the ways this is *already* happening here.  
We are moving beyond tailgate parties.  
We are getting out from among the spectators in the grandstand.  
We are running onto the playing field—  
in the Church, an admittedly flawed Church, and in *this church*—  
actively engaged, *together*, to win the world for Jesus!

Warren L. Hoffman  
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Millersville BIC Church