

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Small Church, Big Purpose

Ecclesiastes 4:1-12

I've always remembered a conversation I had with a fellow student in seminary. He had recently heard Bart Campolo speak. During his message, Campolo made a comment about how pastors, in general, seem to move from smaller churches to bigger churches. Campolo said that based on what he had experienced with lots of ministers, you would think that God never calls a pastor to go from a bigger church to a smaller church. Most of the time, clergy tend to move in the other direction. A smaller congregation gets treated as a stepping stone to a bigger ministry assignment. Campolo's message was a sobering reminder about how the church, including its ministers, often reflects the values of the prevailing culture rather than the values of Christ and his kingdom. Bigger is better. That's the mentality, the bias, that shapes so much of life in the western world, particularly in America.

And when you prize bigness as much as we do, don't be surprised at how envy multiplies. You can spot it all over the place. The speaker in this morning's Scripture passage sees it in the competitiveness of the economic world. "And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (v. 4). "This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind." Get used to that statement. It's one of the speaker's favorite refrains. It captures his struggles with cynicism and despair about the meaning, direction, and purpose of life.

Indeed, no one can ever accuse the writer of Ecclesiastes of keeping his uncertainties and questions to himself. He's very out there with his doubts and frustrations. In fact, the whole book opens with his declaration, "Meaningless! Meaningless! . . . Everything is meaningless!" 1:2). Even so, the book ends with affirmations about remembering your Creator, fearing God, and keeping his commandments. Yes, there's a lot of wrestling in Ecclesiastes. There's a recognition, arrived at the hard way, that human wisdom and human understanding simply cannot fully fathom the will, the ways, and the purposes of God. And yet, in the midst of the speaker's sense of frustration and futility about where all this leads, we still get glimpses of how we can experience some measure of happiness and contribute to larger divine goals.

This sense that we human beings have a place within a bigger purpose, and that we each need to be part of a larger cause, is reflected in some of the examples used in our text. In verse eight, we meet a lonely person whose lust for riches is never satisfied and who never simply enjoys life. He's a man without a spouse, children, or siblings. His deepest relationship is with his job. His financial assets are his closest companion. The only network he has formed is an alliance with his own drive and ambition. Day in and day out, he lives in solidarity with his bank account and his real estate. Deep down, even he realizes that all this saving for the future is depriving him of some much-needed joy in the present. According to the writer of Ecclesiastes, "This too is meaningless—a miserable business!"

The next part of our text highlights pairs of people who, by contrast, enjoy the benefits of things like cooperation, marriage, and teamwork. "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! (v. 10). Then, after a glimpse at the marriage bed where two snuggle to keep warm, and a pair of people who look out for one

another's safety, the text closes with the metaphor, "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken" (v. 12b). All these examples combine to provide a positive alternative to the envy, rivalry, and competitiveness that only undermine, rather than enhance, our sense of meaning and purpose in life.

I believe this is where the life of the church, especially a small church, can come into the picture. A small church is a great setting for us to be formed into the kind of people that God intends us to be. Within the life of a small congregation, each of us can discover and mature into our identity in Christ, and grow into our place in God's mission in the world.

Small churches are like every other church in that they're working out what it means to follow Jesus in our day and time. Big churches are doing the same thing. But small churches bring some distinctive gifts and dynamics to the task. In the midst of our culture's bias toward bigness, it's easy to lose sight of the things that make a small church unique and vital to the spread of the gospel and the work of God's kingdom.

First and foremost is the importance of relationships. The strength of a small church is its relationships. Now that doesn't mean that activities, ministries, and programs don't matter. They're still significant and necessary. But as one person has pointed out, in a small church "the classes and programs are more like back-porch conversations."¹ Any way you slice it, the lifeblood of a small congregation is the network of close, caring relationships that forms over time. These intimate, mutually enriching relationships are the primary way that people in a small congregation get formed and shaped into the likeness of Christ and become a community that embodies and exhibits the reign of God.

A few years ago, columnist Emily Esfahani Smith wrote about our culture's declining social connectedness. She said:

We volunteer less. We entertain guests at our homes less often. We are getting married less. We are having fewer children. And we have fewer and fewer close friends with whom we'd share the intimate details of our lives. We are denying our social nature, and paying a price for it. Over the same period of time that social isolation has increased, our levels of happiness have gone down, while rates of suicide and depression have multiplied.²

In a society that's so individualistic, where people are increasingly disconnected from one another, a small church is a great opportunity to experience the relationship-based life of God's kingdom. Our interconnectedness is where you hear what God is saying to you about who you are. As author Eugene Peterson has put it, "There can be no maturity in the spiritual life, no obedience in following Jesus, no wholeness in the Christian life, apart from an immersion in, and embrace of, community. I am not myself by myself."³

You are not yourself by yourself. A small congregation like Grace Baptist Church is a wonderful spiritual family in which to learn that, and grow into what it means. And I don't use the word "family" lightly. That too is one of the distinctive gifts of a small church, it's family feel. Not a perfect family. Not a family free of disagreement and conflict. But still, a congregational family where we strive to practice the Father's love and get trained in how to be children of the kingdom.

This family-type atmosphere not only strengthens those on the inside, but also helps attract others from the outside. In other words, the strong sense of belonging that characterizes a small church like ours becomes a key part of our witness to newcomers. Karl Vaters has done lots of research and writing about small church life and ministry. He highlights some of the primary reasons that people come to a small church: Family-style friendliness; access to the pastor; cross-generational worship; a chance to learn, grow and lead; personalized, relationship-based discipleship; to know and be known.⁴

That last one is crucial. To know and be known. It's hard to be anonymous in a small church. When you come in the front door, you're probably going to be engaged by somebody wanting to know more about you. And when the service is done, it can be tougher for you to just slip out unnoticed. When you step into the life of a small congregation, your chances of simply blending in and becoming another face in the crowd are greatly reduced. Plus, if you're a regular part of the congregation, you're more likely to be missed when you're not here. I, or someone else, will probably notice that your spot in the pew was empty, so we can contact you and let you know that we missed you in our worship and fellowship.

To know and be known. That's not just a description of human interaction within a small church. It's also a reflection of our relationship with God, which is based first and foremost on God's knowledge of us, as well as his desire to be known by us. The fact that God has made himself known to us in Christ, and wants us to know him through faith in Christ, is the reason that our congregation exists in the first place. Without that, we're not even here as a church to begin with. So the kind of personal, close communion we have with each other in a small church setting is part of our personal, close communion with God himself. To know God and be known by God. To know others and be known by others. In a small church, these things go hand in hand. It's part of who we are and why we're here.

As others have noted, the small church is here to stay. Though the trends point toward more and more people joining larger congregations, small congregations like ours still occupy a critical place in the religious landscape. As Karl Vaters writes:

Big and megachurches are great. And they get almost all the press, both positive and negative. They deserve our prayers and support, not second-guessing, jealousy, and ridicule. But, as valuable as they are, large congregations are not where most people receive the bulk of their spiritual nourishment. Most of that is happening in millions of small congregations all over the world.⁵

Congregations like Grace Baptist Church. Remember that ultimately, it's not about envy and competition between congregations of various sizes. It's really about how churches of all sizes do their part in the larger purposes of God and his people. As we see in today's Scripture passage, isolation and disconnectedness can feed into a sense of futility, empty toil, and meaninglessness. But when and where an individual, or a congregation, especially a small one, finds its place in the larger cause of Christ's kingdom and God's one church, cries of vanity can turn into shouts of victory. "A cord of three strands is not easily broken."

We're a small church that's part of a big purpose. Our aim is always to grow, in every way. That includes how you, as an individual, learn to live out beyond yourself and into the greater cause of the gospel. A small congregation, with its relationships, its intergenerational life, and its sense of belonging, is a great place to do that. So let's continue to look to the God who gives life, to keep giving our church vitality and joy and purpose as his people.

¹ Dave Odom, "Reclaiming the Distinctive Gifts of a Small Church." Faith & Leadership website. Duke Divinity School. May 31, 2016. Accessed August 11, 2016 <<https://www.faithandleadership.com/dave-odom-reclaiming-distinctive-gifts-small-church>>.

² Emily Esfahani Smith, "Social Connection Makes a Better Brain." *The Atlantic* (October 29, 2013).

³ Eugene Peterson, "A Generous Savior" (*The Gathering*, 2012) 32.

⁴ Karl Vaters, "How I Stopped Feeling Embarrassed by My Small Church." Pivot blog. June 29, 2016. Accessed August 11, 2016 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/karl-vaters/2016/june/how-i-stopped-feeling-embarrassed-by-my-small-church.html?paging=off>>.

⁵ Karl Vaters, "Your Small Church Is Big." CTPastors website. Spring 2015. Accessed August 11, 2016 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2015/spring/your-small-church-is-big.html>>.