

In the year 2000, author Robert Putnam published a book called “Bowling Alone.” The title was a reference to the decline of the bowling league in American culture. What had once been thought of by some as the “blue collar country club” was vanishing. But this, of course, was only a case study, highlighting a darker trend.

In “Bowling Alone,” Putnam sounded the alarm that since the 1960s and 70s, Americans have been withdrawing from their communities in a number of measurable ways. Attendance at public meetings plunged by nearly half between 1973 and 1994. The family dinner stopped being an anchor of the home during that same time period. Trust in strangers took a sharp drop; and in the 1990s, as social connections withered, people watched ‘Friends’ on TV rather than actually spending time with friends. As of 2004, nearly half of those polled in the United States reported being one confidant away—one—from social isolation. And this was obviously sixteen years before the pandemic and the rise of social distancing as a recommendation.

It’s no secret that the church—and here I’m talking about the holy, Christian, apostolic Church we confess in our creeds—is not exempt from the decline described in “Bowling Alone.” Social science is not my discipline, but theology kind of is, and a study of God’s Word offers quite a few reasons why people might withdraw from a faith community, and clearly, some have. I would submit there are spiritual reasons for this that run very deep. But although there are spiritual and social forces at work to isolate us from each other, I still believe that the church—the local congregation of believers—is uniquely equipped to address our human need for togetherness. In the era of “Bowling Alone,” the church, by its very nature, has an approach to life together that nothing else does. In an increasingly fractured, compartmentalized, distanced society, I believe that local congregations offer hope for creating communities that are not just civil, but caring, and not just caring but loving, and today I want to show you why I think that.

And I’ll do that by conducting a fly-over of each of the three readings you heard as part of today’s service. And by doing so, what will emerge is this: gathering in a local congregation addresses three great needs that we all have, and of course, I’m sure we could think of a lot more than three. But distilling each Bible passage down to its essence, we will see that life together with other believers addresses (1) our need to meet with God; (2) our need to give and receive care in community; and (3) our need to serve with humility.

First, our need to meet with God. The Old Testament reading from Numbers chapter 11 is filled with complaining. And I don’t want to make light of it. The people were hungry. They were tired of manna. Moses was tired of bearing the burden of leadership. It was all too much. So what does the Lord God do? He tells Moses, “I want to meet with you. Bring seventy elders with you to the tent of meeting.” Moses does, and God comes down as promised, and God grants them all a special measure of His Spirit. It’s a simple idea, but don’t miss it: God demonstrates His care by meeting with His people. And He gave them something much greater than that for which they were asking.

You and I have the same deep-seated need to meet with God. We long for transcendence and spiritual experience and that is precisely what God has provided in what we are doing right now. A service of worship. It is the beating heart of everything else the church is and does. Because in worship, God comes to meet with us, speaking to you in the words of Scripture, and serving you with the heavenly food of Jesus' body and blood. The Word of God works on us. Like the people in Numbers, we come with complaints. Complaints about what we don't have; complaints about the burdens we bear; lamenting the good old days now past; and into all this God just says, "Meet with me." Come together, gather around, and meet with me. And when you're together around my gifts, I'll tell you again, your sin problem is a lot worse than you care to admit—but my love for you is far greater than you ever dared to hope. Look to the cross of Jesus and see, you are loved beyond your capacity to imagine. Why do we run from this? Why do we think other things are more worth our time? We need to meet with God. That happens here.

Secondly, we need to give and receive care in community. The letter of James provides a pretty stirring description of this. It comes right at the end. He writes about ministering to others in the community of faith with prayer, with singing, with ceremonies such as anointing, and with mutual confession leading to forgiveness of sins. And the very last thing he writes about is looking to bring back those who have wandered away, who have wandered from the truth. It's easy to view this as a checklist to review and then do; let's get busy! But wait. Take a step back with me. Look at the bigger picture. James is showing you and me: this is what it looks like to love others. These aren't just pretty words. These are investments of time in others. This is the opposite of the Bowling Alone mentality—these are practical actions going back and forth between people. The natural question is why do them? The answer is awesome. It's because God has met with us, together. We have the same need to be forgiven and have received that same gift in Jesus. So I'll pray for you—you pray for me—when you're down, I'll come pick you up, if I ever wander off the path I give you permission to come get me. Deep down, we know we need relationships like this if we are to grow. We *yearn* to know someone has our back to this degree. You can have that here; it's really true.

Finally, we have a need to serve with humility, and our connection to Jesus will generate countless opportunities for us to do just that. In today's Gospel, disciple John wants to know if it is OK for people besides "the Big 12" to be out doing things in Jesus' name, and it's obvious that John thought the right answer was no. He tried to stop those casting out demons in Jesus' Name. John and the disciples were probably shocked—again—when Jesus said, 'Actually...the right answer is: it is OK, if they're not against us, they're for us, and if someone gives you even something as small as a cup of cold water because you're with me, that's a beautiful thing; a pleasing offering.' And though it's not in the text, you can almost hear John say, "Oh. Sorry."

Life with Jesus involves a lot of repentance and readjustment. That's true of the vertical relationship with him, and the horizontal relationship with those around us—especially those within the community and family of faith. If we go the route of power plays, and score keeping, and 'what have you done for me lately,' then what makes us different than any other group or club? But with Jesus as the center of our life together, there's going to be an abundance of

repentance and readjustment to one another that we will *want* to do. There will be genuine “I’m Sorry’s” and sincere, “I Forgive You’s.” If not here, then where? This is THE place to put faith into practice—to practice repentance leading to the forgiveness of sins.

Is it too late to reverse a “Bowling Alone” culture? It’s hard to say. But I hope you share this conviction with me: that the church can be; should be, and in Christ Jesus, IS capable of moving people back into community. We need to meet with God. We need to give and receive care. We need to serve with humility. We need it. He provides. It is here.