

**Victory of the Lamb  
Pastor Ben Sadler  
September 20,2020  
Series: Path to Victory  
Sermon: Groups for encouragement  
Text: 1 John 4:7-12**

**<sup>7</sup> Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup> This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. (1 John 4:7-12)**

I think we can all feel a great battle going on in our culture. A battle for power and control. A battle over ideals and values. The book of Revelation describes these global spiritual battles like large beasts that are looking to devour its enemies. The battle seems to be fought with force using fear and intimidation. We Christians seem to be falling into the trap of fighting these battles using these same weapons of force using anger and fear as a way of gaining back power and control.

What we need to understand is that this is not something new. 2,000 years ago the Rome felt like it was losing its power and control over its bloated empire, so that started to force their subjects into submission. Some tried to fight back, like the leaders of Israel in Jerusalem. But in 70 AD Rome invaded Jerusalem, besieging the city, and tearing down the Temple, which was never to be rebuilt again.

The Christians were next on Rome's hit list. Christians didn't worship the Roman gods, nor did they participate in much of Roman culture. So they were seen as a threat to the Roman way of life. So to win back their power and control, there was a number of isolated raids and violent persecution of Christians throughout the Empire.

But the Early Christians decided to not use the weapons of the world to fight back. Instead they held strong to spiritual practices that Jesus taught them. They became martyrs, which is the Greek word for witness. They whole life, even their death, became a witness to the world. And because of their spiritual practices, by the year 313AD, Christians, in a way, defeated Rome without every lifting a sword as Christianity became a legal religion and the major religion throughout the empire.

So what were the spiritual practices of the Early Church? Acts 2:42-47 tells us:

**<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup> Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup> They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. <sup>46</sup> 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, <sup>47</sup> praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.**

Here are the spiritual practices of the Early Church.

**Gather- met in the Temple courts**

**Groups- met in homes to break bread and pray**

**Grow- devoted to the teachings of the Apostles**

**Give- Gave to anyone who had need**

**Go- The Lord added to their number**

The Early Church learned these practices from Jesus. These were the things that Jesus did. So these are the things that the Early Church did. We are calling these practices **The Path to Victory**. These are the practices that will help us grow in our faith and live out our faith in love towards others. We pray that this becomes part of our culture here a Victory. Why call it "Path to Victory" this is the path for you to see personal spiritual victory in your life. This is how the Early Church was able to be victorious over Rome and the ancient pagan culture. And this is how we can win back our communities and culture. This is how we base our life on Christ's victory and we begin to see some victory in our own lives as well.

You could think of these 5 Gs as five buckets. Ask yourself, "do I have anything in this bucket? Do I have any practices or habits that I'm filling up this bucket with?" Last week, Pastor Bill talked about the "Gather" bucket. Now Gathering to worship is going to look different today than it did in the early Church. It looks different today than it did a year ago. But are you doing something to gather in a larger setting to worship the Lord with other Christians?

Today, we are going to talk about the second bucket. Groups. The Early Church met in smaller groups for fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. They didn't just see the value in meeting in a large group at the Temple. They also saw the value of meeting in homes. Of building deeper relationships with a smaller group of people.

We are going to talk about this idea of groups for the next two weeks because, out of all the 5 buckets, 5 G's in the path to Victory, this is the one that is probably our weakest as a church. We have small group ministry, but it is really not a vibrant part of who we are as a church. I think there is at least 3 reason for that.

Why don't we have a vibrant small group culture at Victory?

- 1. Small groups are not part of our Lutheran heritage.**

Victory of the Lamb has Lutheran roots and many of you grew up in Lutheran churches. And Lutherans are not known for small groups. And that goes back to something that happen in the mid-1800s. In the mid-1800s there was a movement called Pietism. And Pietism was a response to what some people called dead orthodoxy. Some people believed that the Lutheran church had grown cold and dead, so the movement tried to bring it back to life. And one of the methods that was used was small groups. But the small group gatherings did not support and unify the church. They small groups were in opposition to the church. So many Lutheran pastors wanted to regain order and control and so small groups were discouraged. And the focus went back to pastor focused. There was a fear that if the pastor didn't have control over the teaching, these lay-lead small groups would cause more division.

## 2. Small groups don't feel needed in the Midwest.

I started ministry in Orlando, FL. And I led a Spanish speaking congregation. One of the most unique aspects of Orlando was that I met only one person who grew up in Orlando. Between our English speaking part of our church and Spanish speaking part we had people who were born in over 40 different countries. That means almost nobody had an extended family that lived by them. The church became their family. So it was really easy to have people want to meet together in the church. All the people I knew were craving community.

Franklin, the greater Milwaukee, and the Midwest in general is much different. I know almost nobody who wasn't born in Milwaukee or who doesn't have extended family in the area. Most of us have a large network of family and friends. Most of us are not lacking family and friends. We are not lacking a community. So small groups seems unnecessary.

## 3. Small groups have not been needed at Victory until now.

This church started in the home that I'm living in. So that original group was a small group. And it stayed a small group even when it met at Polonia and even into the movie theater. There was a time when everybody knew each other. It was like a family. And so small groups weren't especially necessary because everything we did as a church was a small group.

But now the Lord has blessed us to be a larger group. And so many people, especially if you started coming in the last few years, don't know anybody here. So you don't even know where to start when it comes to participating in a small group.

We have a real challenge when it comes to imitating Jesus and the church that he started. Jesus met with his small group of disciples. And the Early church met in small groups. And that led them to be a strong, unified family of believers. That led them on a path to Victory. But we have a lot of things going against us culturally and logistically that is going to make groups hard for us to make as a central part of our culture. But Jesus did this. And the Early Church did this. And I'm convinced that we need to do this.

So here is the question I want to answer today: **How do "groups" lead us on a path to victory?**

And to answer that question we are going to go to 1 John 4. John was one of Jesus' disciples. And by the time he is writing this, he is probably an old man. John has an incredible way of boiling down the life of a Christian in the simplest terms. In fact, when a person is learning to study ancient Greek, John's writings are a good place to start because he writes so simply, yet at the same time, his message is profound and life-changing.

John writes: **Dear friends, let us love one another... (1 John 4:7)** John is a wise sage that writes so simply. Like Jesus, he has boiled down the Christian life to its essence "love one another". This is it. Like Paul says, we could be doing lots of things as a church. We could have great preaching and great music. We could give a bunch of money to the community. We can have great vision and goals. But if all our ministry doesn't lead to love, it doesn't matter.

Why do we love? ...**for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)** God is love. God is a Triune God, The Father, The Son, The Holy Spirit. In fact, you could say, God is an eternal community

of love. The Father has been loving the Son. The Son has been loving the Spirit. And the Spirit has been loving the Father. And this has all been happening for eternity.

As Christians we become children of God, and we are to act like our God and Father. We were made in God's image to reflect his quality of love. An eagle was designed to fly. A fish was designed to swim. We were designed to love.

That's why solitary confinement is such a cruel form of torture. We were not designed to be alone. That's why this pandemic has been so hard. We were not designed to be alone. We are God's children and we were designed to love.

But what is love? **This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:9-10)**

Love is not just some feeling we have in our stomach. Love is an action. If you say that you love your wife, but this is no action, then it is just words. If you say you love your kids, but there is no action, then it is not love. God is love and his love led him to act. He saw that we are inclined to sin and selfishness and idolatry. So he swooped in to save. He took action. And the action he took was to sacrifice himself for our sins.

Even if you don't feel like God loves you, look at his actions. His actions prove that he loves you. His action, his love, means our freedom and deliverance. We are set free. Free to love. Free to act on behalf of others.

And that is John's next point: **Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.** Love takes action. It means we make sacrifices to make connections with other human beings. Here is an action, a sacrifice that I want to challenge you to make. Jesus lived in small groups. He taught his church to connect in small groups. I want to encourage you to:

**Connect to a "life group".**

We used to call our groups, "small groups", but now we are calling them "life groups". It is a small change, but we hope it makes a difference. We want these life groups to do life together. To be vulnerable with each other. To help each other grow.

Just like gathering looks different for everyone today, so also life groups will look different for people today. Some of our life groups will meet on Zoom. Some will meet in-person. Most of them are meeting at least two times per month. Most of them are going to be following spiritual practices. And I will explain what that means next week.

We are officially launching Life Groups on the week of Oct 4. If you don't see a group that works for you. Maybe you live too far away. Maybe you don't have one that meets at a time that works, then start up your own group.

I know this is a stretch for most of us. This is not part of most of our upbringing. This is not something that we even thought we needed. We probably don't want to make the sacrifices necessary to join a group. But look at what happens when we participate in a group to love one another.

John concludes this section by saying: **No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. (1 John 4:12)** We can't see God, but John says we can experience him. Maybe you have felt like you have experienced God at a worship service. And that's great. But John says that when we take the time to love one another. When we know each other and love each other and serve each other, God comes to love within us. That means when a Life Group meets the visible God becomes visible.

And he says God's love is "made complete". Literally, the word means "his love *reaches its goal*". When we join a group and love one another, God's love reaches its goal.

Let me say it this way: Legos were designed to connect with one another. A Lego only has a few notches that can be used to make connections. But when a Lego connects with a few other Legos it is reaching the goal for which it was made.

You are a Lego. You can't connect with everyone in this church and community. But you were created to make deep spiritual connections with others. When you connect with other you are reaching the goal for which you were made.

I see a lot of people angry and afraid of all the turmoil going on in our culture. We see that politicians and other groups are looking to grab power and control. And even Christians are caught up in a verbal war on Twitter and Facebook and Instagram. But if we fight our battles using the weapons of this world, we will lose like everybody else. Instead let's follow Jesus. Let's follow the practices he taught the Early Church because that will put us on a path to victory. Commit to Jesus. Commit to a Life group so that we can love one another. Amen.