

It's Thanksgiving, and you can't wait to celebrate with your family. Pushing through the open front door, you expect to be warmly greeted. But instead, as you enter, a few family members glance up with half-hearted smiles. Others don't even seem to notice you. As you sit down next to someone to catch up, he slides further away, and buries his nose in a book. As the feast is served, no one asks how you've been. They seem to ignore you. After the meal, everyone moves into the living room to chat, but everyone subtly shuts you out of the circle, leaving you standing there alone.

How would you feel? Hurt? Angry? Confused? Wondering what's wrong with you, or what you did wrong? You'd probably leave, right? Wonder if you should ever come back? I mean, these people are your family! Why would they treat you like a stranger?

Maybe that puts us in a better place to understand what it feels like to belong to a church family, but feel totally disconnected from it. How it feels to come to church without receiving anything more than a courtesy "hello" from an usher. "But Pastor, that's totally different!" Is it though?

Maybe you've noticed the phrase "**A Family Growing in Christ**" before. It's everywhere, even on the front of our worship folders. It's not intended to be a cute cliché, or catchy slogan. It's meant to be our culture at Mount Olive.

That's why we're devoting this weekend, and all of September to an initiative called "***Mount Olive, Connected.***" The premise is simply to help encourage and equip the members of Mount Olive to connect more deeply with each other; to see and treat each other not as strangers or acquaintances, but to see and treat each other... as a family.

But here's the million-dollar question. Why should we? I mean, most people today are trying to disconnect from other people. You can get groceries without leaving your car, and everything else from Amazon without venturing beyond your front door. You can easily come to church, sit by yourself, and duck out the side door without interacting with anyone. You could even watch the sermon online from your couch!

But as convenient as that might be, is it good for us? In a world growing increasingly disconnected, it's increasingly important that church members remain connected. Because being **A Family Growing in Christ** is vitally important for our spiritual health, and I want to show you why.

In many ways, the early Christians we meet here are the picture of a spiritually healthy "family." Although the entirety of the Christian church, about 3,120 people, was about twice as large as our Mount Olive family, note three ways they express familial love to each other.

First, they gathered together for public worship. "***They devoted themselves*** (basically, they clung with a death grip) ***to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.***" They gathered together to hear the Apostles teach what Jesus taught them. They gathered to feast on the Lord's Supper that Jesus instituted. They prayed together as Jesus taught them. Worshiping together was such a priority that "***every day***" they continued to meet together in the temple courts. Who else do you spend time with every day besides your family?

Secondly, these Christians treated each other like family, by showing sacrificial servant love to each other. We're told, "***All the believers were together and have everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.***" Can you even imagine that? Willingly giving away anything you own, without asking anything in return. Selling a nice piece of property not to pocket the money, but to put

that money into a fund which is distributed to those in need. Literally, you don't benefit. Only the others benefit. Sounds like something people would only do... for family.

Thirdly, these Christians didn't just worship together. You might say they "did life together!" They daily spent time together in the temple, but they also daily **"broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts."** Imagine the loving connections that grew between those Christians as they gathered around each other's kitchen tables; learning each other's stories, hopes, fears, and challenges to build deeper connections. Gathering to spend time together around the table... like a family.

Sounds like a pretty beautiful, loving family to belong to, doesn't it? Think how deeply they cared for and loved each other! But I'm not just showing you these Christians today to give you church envy. I think there are vital takeaways from these Christians' example that can better equip us to be a Family Growing in Christ.

First, we need to worship together. There's a reason those Christians were devoted to worship as their first priority. There's no better way to grow closer together than to grow closer to Christ and stronger in faith, together.

But it's also important for us to spend time together outside of worship. Those Christians clung tightly to daily public worship, and rightfully so! But they also clung tightly to the practice of daily spending time together in their homes. Why? As they worshiped together, their faith and love for God grew. And as their faith grew, so did their unity and desire to love their fellow believers. Spending time together outside of worship also strengthened their love and connection with each other. And the more connected they became, the more they saw and treated each other as family.

And really, that's the whole reason for this Connected initiative. The better connected we are to each other, the more spiritually healthy we'll be as a congregation. The writer to the Hebrews encourages Christians, **"Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing."** He encourages us to gather together for one reason. **"Let us encourage one another."**

When we grow so closely connected to the members of our church that we start to view each other like family, then we're encouraged to come to God's house for worship like we're encouraged to go to Grandma's house for Thanksgiving. I mean, where would you rather feast? Around a table with your family? Or at the table with strangers who barely acknowledge you? That's why part of the Connected initiative is to saturate the calendar with opportunities for members to gather together outside of worship, so we can keep deepening our connections.

God gives us a church family to encourage us! But if I never get to know the man who sits two rows ahead of me every Sunday, I'll never get to support and encourage him with my prayers when he's battling cancer. If you never connect more deeply with your fellow member than, "Hi, how are ya?" as you pass at the mailboxes, she'll never be able to encourage you with God's Word when your marriage is slipping. If adults and teens never interact, they never build a mentoring relationship, or help each other better understand the other's perspective and challenges.

I don't always see my own sins. I don't always remind myself of God's promises. I don't always call myself back if I've strayed. We need to be connected to others. That's why God gives us a church family, and why we need our church to be a family.

Now, I know the excuses people make, because I've made them too. "What do I say? What if it's awkward?" "There are so many people at Mount Olive, there's no way to know everyone, so why bother?" "What if I

offend someone because I don't know them, or don't remember their name?" "I already have friends and family I'm comfortable with. Why make myself uncomfortable trying to meet new people?"

Can we all do ourselves a great service? Can we take the barrier of "awkwardness" that prevents us from connecting with new people and... smash it with a hammer? Can we take the excuses of "there's too many" and not let Satan use them to prevent us from connecting with any? Can we strive to show servant love, and go outside our comfort zone for the good of others? The person who desperately wants to feel like they belong in this family, but hasn't been able to connect? The person who feels like they're being ignored at the Thanksgiving table? Can we build an atmosphere and culture at Mount Olive that doesn't care if it's awkward or difficult, because it's important for ours and everyone else's spiritual health?

A few months ago, I challenged our Evangelism committee to try and meet two new people each weekend. One board member got to know a lady he'd never met before after church one Saturday. Then, the following Wednesday, he and his wife saw her sitting by herself at soup supper, and sat with her.

He admitted, "If I hadn't introduced myself before, I probably wouldn't have even noticed her sitting by herself." Later, that lady introduced him to her friend, who he also got to know. One conversation led to a deeper connection, and then multiple other connections. Just imagine how quickly the loving family connections could spread at Mount Olive if everyone sought to meet even just one new person every week. Then, as new friends got introduced to old friends, the family radius would continue expanding. It'd be pretty amazing, wouldn't it?

That's why we want to challenge you. In the Atrium this month, there's a white binder on a pedestal, containing the names of every family in our church. When you connect with someone new, whether here at church or elsewhere, use the highlighter that's next to the binder to highlight that family's name. The challenge is to have that entire list of names highlighted by the end of the month. Can we do it? I think so. I hope we can. Because disconnected family members leave; but connected family members stay for life.

We want to be a family, but most importantly, we want to be a family "growing in Christ." What was it that made those early Christians such a motivated, loving family? It wasn't an initiative, or a binder full of highlighted names. It was Jesus. Their lives, souls, and eternity were so unfathomably changed by Jesus' love that they had no desire but to show their love for Jesus, and show their love to their church family who also loved Jesus.

Let's not make this a one-weekend or one-month push. Let's make it our gospel-driven culture. Let's not connect because the pastor said so, but because those people sitting around you are really your brothers and sisters—through faith in our Savior Jesus. We all need each other, so let's keep striving to be a family...A Family, Growing in Christ.