

- This is the fourth week of a series we're calling Next STEPS as in next steps to a better you.
- As Christians we're called to be followers Jesus Christ but we often struggle because at our deepest level, a spiritual level, the level of our minds and hearts, we aren't quite sure what steps to take.
- Following Christ **is** a journey made of simple steps, simple, but **not easy**, life style choices essential to growing a relationship with Christ who can gently transform us into the disciples God calls us to be.

- After 4 weeks, you could probably recite them with me:
 - S is **serving** in ministry or on mission.
 - T is **tithing and giving**, is mirroring God's generosity to us
 - E is **engaging** is supporting one another on the journey of faith
 - P is **practicing** prayer and the sacraments
 - S is **sharing** our faith with others. Our faith actually grows when we share it with others.
- Today, we're going to look at another of those essential STEPS. This one is acknowledged as an important step in all kinds of organizations and efforts.
 - It's is a principle leveraged to help people succeed in business and run successful organizations such as training groups and recovery programs.
 - This principle, this STEP, leveraged today in all kinds of clubs and cultures, is actually a Biblical principal and it's **absolutely vital** for you to grow as a disciple.

- To rediscover this step we're going to look at a passage taken from the beginning of the Bible. We'll be looking at Genesis which we heard in our first reading.
 - At the very beginning of Genesis, about a chapter before what we heard today, we read: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*
 - And after describing the constitutive elements of creation the Bible tells us God created Adam, and then: *God looked at everything He had created and saw that it was good*
 - The whole world is created good. There is no sin in the world. There is no war, no disease, it's a complete paradise. In the course of this creation, we learn...
The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and care for it.
 - All the world is good and God gives the first man Adam a job, a mission, to care and cultivate the land.
 - It's just a footnote, but an interesting one... Work is not a punishment. It's part of God's plan.
 - And it was part of what Adam did in paradise, a gift from God given to humanity before anything went wrong in the world.
 - Adam is in paradise. He has a good relationship with God. He has a good job. He has a good place to live, good food to eat.

- All is good, which makes this next verse somewhat surprising. Then the Lord God said: *It is not good...*
 - Everything is good in this good creation, except for one thing that is not: *It is not good for the man to be alone.*
 - God recognizes a problem in Adam's life that even Adam doesn't truly understand.
 - So, here's what happened: God said...*I will make him a suitable partner. So God formed out of the ground various wild animals and various birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each would be its name. But none proved to be the suitable partner for the man.*
 - Didn't God know that none of the animals would satisfy Adam's need for companionship? Didn't God know all the animals would fall short?
 - Of course God did! But God also knew that Adam didn't.
 - As the animals fail to meet Adam's need for companionship, for a suitable partner, God is helping Adam to realize the basic human need for relationship. God is building Adam's desire for fellowship and companionship.
 - Like Adam, we can be alone and lack friendships and companionship and not even realize we're missing something.
 - So one of the very first things that Adam learns is this need to be in relationship, in community, in communion with others.

- And you know the story from there.
 - Relationships are key to our physical, mental, emotional, even our financial health.
 - And what's true for every other avenue of life is true for your spiritual growth and health. It is not good for you to be alone.
 - Until you have friends in faith, until you leverage intentional relationships to grow as a follower of Christ, you're limiting and inhibiting your spiritual growth.
 - As long as you're all alone in your following Jesus, you will not be all you could be as a follower of Christ.
 - You are limiting what Jesus can do through you and in you, how he can change and transform you to be the great mom or dad or husband or wife, the great boss or business executive, the great student leader you want to be.
 - It is not good for you to be alone in facing your faith. More, facing a world that is actually hostile to your faith.
 - God says it is not good for Adam to be alone because God is not alone. God is a community of three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who are continually loving one another and glorifying one another for all eternity.
 - In a perfect community that is, in fact, a small group.

- The step we're looking at today is what we call Connect Groups, small groups, faith sharing groups.
 - And I am fully aware of what a hard sell they are in a Catholic setting where anything beyond the one hour once a week deal is unheard of, but just hear me out anyway.
 - First thing, Small Groups are where our pastorate gets intimate.
 - Let's face it our community can sometimes be impersonal. We're running to get to Mass and then on to the next thing. When we go to a different Mass and look around we realize we don't know anyone.
 - But, there is something, as the TV show Cheers reminded us, about a place where "everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came."
 - But that doesn't happen easily and small groups, Connect Groups can answer our need for community.
- Small Groups bring our community up close and make it personal.
 - Its where everyone can find friendship and fellowship: people who know you, know about you and care about you too.
 - Friends in faith will help you go faster and further in the direction you want to go, in the direction Christ calls us.
 - Small Groups are also our primary delivery system for member care. Ultimately our groups are one of the major ways we care for you and look out for you as a part of the church family.

- As the pastor, I can't do it all, and that's not God's plan anyway.
 - God's plan is that each member of our community engage in mutual care for one another.
 - Because you know the members of your group, you're going to be more qualified to provide support and care for them and they for you than I could ever be.
- They're place to learn from other people's life experiences. You don't have to figure out everything in life out on your own. You can learn from other people's successes and failures.
- You can learn from how other people parent or manage money or lead a department.
- We call them Connect Groups because they help each of us to connect better with God, connect better with others, and, importantly, connect with the better me I'm striving for.
- Connect Groups rely on a simple formula:
 - 90 minutes once a week, the group spends some time catching up on everyone's lives,
 - There's a 10 minute DVD presentation given by someone on our staff or in leadership, we like to call it a "Special Edition of Our Weekend Message" to help you go deeper in that message
 - Then we provide discussion questions, led by the group leader. the conversation can be as structured or as open-ended as needed. The structure is adaptable to fit the group.
 - The session ends with brief prayer. No one is ever asked to say or do anything they're not comfortable with.

- The problem with small groups though is that they are like retirement savings. If you wait until you need it, you won't have it when you need it.
 - You save and invest now for your retirement so you'll have it when you need it.
 - If you get in a group now, when trouble comes you'll be better prepared for whatever life brings.
 - People have shared with me witness of support from their small groups that got them through trauma and sickness, through loss and grief, through conflict and divorce.
 - When that stuff comes your way, you need more than platitudes and expressions of consolation from your church. you need a network of care and support and that's what your small group can provide.
 - And small groups also provide you the opportunity to help another through the same challenges. The opportunity to pour into the lives of others is also a richly rewarding thing to do. Someone recently shared with me that the only good from the tragedy she experienced was the empathy it gave her and the ability to share in the suffering of others.
- I like to say that Small Groups are schools for discipleship.
 - Spiritual growth and health requires more than just a good relationship with God.
 - It is not good for you to be alone. Spiritual maturity, just like emotional maturity is developed in relationships.

- You were made for community. You were made for relationships. The very nature of reality begins with a community of Father, Son and Spirit.
- We grow in prayer, in our appreciation and celebration of the sacraments, in our understanding of and love for Scripture. We grow in all the steps of discipleship further and faster if we're doing it in relationships with others.
- Heaven itself will be a relational experience.

- So today as you leave Mass, you'll have the opportunity to leverage relationships and community for your spiritual growth.
 - Give it a try by stopping by the Connect Group table..
 - And give it a try even if you've tried it before and, for whatever reason, had a bad experience.
 - It's true some people have. You've had a bad meal before, and you still eat (it never stopped me, anyway!). Give groups another try. Perhaps, you hesitate because of the timing or the commitment.
 - We've got several opportunities at different times, on different days, with different people. If none of those work, we'll help you start another Connect Group, providing the resources and formation to help you get up and running.
 - I can't encourage you strongly enough to ENGAGE in small group. You won't be sorry.

- Discipleship is simply following the Lord, step by step, on the path of greatness, following the Lord step by step in the direction of discipleship.
 - A little bit more today than yesterday; a little bit more tomorrow than today
 - And in the process discovering a more successful a great life.