

## **One**

*"God's Plan A"*

April 6-7

Aloha everyone! I'm Mark and I want to welcome you to our service. If you're joining us back from one of our Holy Week services, welcome back, we are so glad that you're here!

Last week was an absolute whirlwind of God-inspired moments. From the amazing performances of our youth, to the soul-stirring worship experiences on Palm Sunday and Good Friday, through our celebratory weekend services, every moment was infused with God's Presence. Not to mention everything that was happening behind-the-scenes, from captivating media, heart-stirring videos, breath-taking ambience, ministry to our keiki, warm hospitality, seamless ushering, powerful prayer, spirit-filled dancing, and countless other acts of service — we are truly Mo Bettah Togeddah! But God was also moving beyond our four walls! A couple of amazing families in the Church hosted an Easter egg hunt in their neighborhood! [Testimony] The world is longing for the people of God to rise up as one and shine the love of Christ.

### **Stone Soup**

This past week reminded me of an old folk story about stone soup. Story goes, there was a great famine in the land and the people of one small village didn't have enough to eat. People were afraid their families would go hungry so they hid the small amounts of food they did have. The town grew very untrusting and suspicious of one another, hiding their food from even their friends and neighbors.

One day, a traveling Monk came into the village and asked different people about a place to lay his head for the night.

"You better keep moving." They replied. "There isn't a bite to eat in the whole country."

"Oh, I have everything I need," he said. "In fact, I would like to make some stone soup to share with all of you." He pulled a big iron cooking pot from his wagon, filled it with water and built a fire under it. Then, he reached slowly into his knapsack and, with several villagers watching, he carefully pulled a plain gray stone from a cloth bag and dropped it into the water.

By now, hearing about this special stone, most of the village came out and surrounded the Monk and his cooking pot. As he sniffed the stone soup and licked his lips their curiosity grew.

"Ahh," the Monk said aloud to himself, "I do like a tasty stone soup. Of course, stone soup with a bit of cabbage is even better."

Soon a villager ran from her house into the village square holding a cabbage. "I have this cabbage from my garden," she said as she held it out for the Monk.

"Fantastic!" Cried the Monk who cut up the cabbage and added it to the pot. "You know, I once had stone soup with cabbage and a bit of beef and it was delicious."

The town butcher said he thought he could find some beef scraps and as he ran back to his shop other villagers offered bits of vegetables from their own gardens — potatoes, onions, carrots, celery, and so on. Soon the big pot was bubbling and steaming. When the soup was ready, everyone in the village ate to their heart's content. Neighbors and friends were talking and laughing. There was music and storytelling and at the end of the night everyone asked the Monk to stay a while longer and cook for them more stone soup.

## **Post-Pandemic Reality**

As most of us are likely aware, we are living in a post-pandemic world but we have not returned to pre-pandemic life. Our world has changed and is changing. These past years have exposed and exacerbated fissures in our society, leading to greater isolation, mistrust, and division. Through the lockdowns and social distancing we turned to screens and social media for connection and information instead of face-to-face interactions. Many of these polarizing media platforms amplified our fears and insecurities while demonizing those who did not share our view creating a deeper sense of “us-and-them”. Through this time of shaking, many are also gripping the rails a little tighter and clutching what we have a little closer out of fear and insecurity.

## **God’s Plan A**

But last week was such a powerful reminder of what happens when God’s people coming together as one. It truly was a stone soup moment with Jesus as our *Cornerstone* and the rest of us being added together to make a delicious chicken soup for the soul. Proving, once again, that we are “Mo Bettah, Toggedah”.

And this is God’s Plan ‘A’ for our lives. Doctors Cloud and Townsend remind us that community and connection are what we were created for and how God transforms us. But for some of us, *our* Plan ‘A’ is that God would just zap us and make us instantly whole. If God has to use people to get the job done, that is a distant Plan ‘B’. Don’t raise your hand but how many of us have ever felt this way? “God, just deal with me personally! If I have to rely on others, things must’ve gone *really* bad!” Like the old bumper sticker, “I like God, it’s people I can’t stand.”

Because, let’s be honest, people are messy and complicated! Especially in these times we live in. But there’s a wise Hawaiian proverb that says,

*A hewa no he hale kanaka,  
‘a’ohe hewa o ka hale kanaka ‘ole.*

Which means, “Fault can be found in an inhabited house and none in an uninhabited one.” In other words, wherever there is humanity, mistakes and weakness abound.

The Israelites have a similar proverb which says,

*“Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox,” (Proverbs 14:4 ESV).*

If the goal in life is to have a clean manger, don’t put any animals in it! Animals are stinky, animals are messy, you have to clean their poop! But if you’re going to produce a crop, you gotta get used to mess. Or as my bumper sticker would read, “No crap, no crop.”

If the goal in life is to just sail through with as little mess and complication as possible, then by all means, go alone, tune out, detach. However, if the goal in life is to be fruitful and to do the will of God, then we need to go together.

This is God’s Plan ‘A’ for our lives.

*“From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work,” (Ephesians 4:16).*

How does God grow us and build us up in love? Through His body as each part does its work. Could He do it personally? Sure. But He chooses to do it in community. Which is why Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12,

*“The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” (1 Corinthians 12:21).*

You and I can’t live dismembered from the body. As believers God has knit us together and our health, growth, and purpose are interconnected with the people around us.

### **A Church of Small Groups**

This is why our Church is making a monumental shift. Are you ready for this? We are moving from a Church *with* Small Groups to a Church *of* Small Groups. What’s the difference? In a Church *with* Small Groups, the small group value is one department — an option for those looking for deeper connection. It’s a nice-to-have but not necessarily a need-to-have. A Church *of* Small Groups operates with the understanding that every part of the body should be meaningfully connected. All of us should be meaningfully connected. It is not a nice-to-have but a must-have in the Christian life.

This year we are making a big push for everyone to be meaningfully connected in a small group setting.

“But Pastor Mark” you might say, “I’m here every weekend or I watch online. Isn’t that enough?”

### **Jesus’ Two-Winged Approach**

What we see in the life of Jesus is a two-winged approach to ministry. On one hand, Jesus met and taught in the Synagogue (Their ancient equivalent of going to Church), He also ministered to large crowds and gatherings (These would be our events). On the other hand, much of His ministry was life-on-life. He met in homes or on a boat with only a handful of people. For Jesus, ministry didn’t just happen on a stage but also around the table. His listeners didn’t just sit in rows but also in circles. Both were important to the ministry of Jesus and both served a purpose.

A perfect example of this dynamic is in Mark 4

*“Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around Him was so large that He got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water’s edge,” (Mark 4:1 NIV).*

Here, Jesus is teaching in a large-group setting. He’s teaching the crowd parables about the Kingdom of God. After His message we read in verse 10.

*“When He was alone, the Twelve and the others around Him asked Him about the parables,”  
(Mark 4:10).*

What’s going on here? The service is over. It’s been a powerful message on the sower and the seeds and now Jesus and His Small Group are discussing what was taught. There’s room for dialogue, He is able to answer any questions they have about what was spoken (come to find out, they didn’t get it at all). They discover how the message applies to their lives.

It was in a small group setting that Jesus revealed His true nature to His closest followers, He lovingly called them out on character flaws, He corrected wrong motives of the heart, He unveiled His deepest plans, He empowered them to do what He did, He restored them after they had fallen away, He washed their feet, and so on. The vast majority of the disciple's growth and transformation happened in a small group context.

This is why we need to have the same two-winged approach to ministry that Jesus had. We cannot neglect our large corporate gatherings for the purpose of teaching, worship, and prayer. But we must also make sure we are plugged into a setting where we can ask questions, dialogue, be held accountable, be challenged, contend for reconciliation and carry out the mission.

Next week Pastor Earl is going to show us the kind of oneness we are contending for in community and see how this was God's plan for us from the start — in fact it was Jesus' prayer for us and why He gave His life.

Then we will discover how small groups actually help us to heal and grow in very practical and profound ways.

Finally, we will learn about being groups on mission and how small groups empower us to live on mission and transform our world.

## **Conclusion**

I read about a Pastor who decided to experiment with changing the sad statistics of his church. He made a list of 12 people who had recently been baptized in their church, and then he and his wife invited them over. Naturally, these new believers were thrilled to be invited to their Pastor's house. They were excited about their new connection with the Lord and with the Church.

After dinner the Pastor sat down with this group of enthusiastic new Christians --- and he asked them an unexpected question. He asked if they would like for him to predict their futures for the next 2 or 3 years.

They were a little surprised at that offer, but they all said "yes".

So, the Pastor made this prediction: "As I look at the 12 of you, I must predict, that...statistically speaking, in the next 2 or 3 years,

- 2 of your marriages will break up and your feelings of shame will cause you to leave the church
- 3 of you will have conflict with someone in the church and you, also, will leave the church
- 1 of you will experience tragedy and lose faith. You, too will leave the church
- 2 of you will have some sort of moral failing and will leave the church
- 2 of the 4 remaining will simply lose interest and drift away from the church for no obvious reason

In two or three years, out of this group of 12 only 2 of you will still be attending church and only 1 of you will still be attending THIS church.

There was dead silence in the room. All these wide-eyed new Christians looked around at each other as if to say, "How could that happen to us?" Finally, one of them spoke up and asked, "What can we do to change those statistics?"

This was the question the Pastor was waiting for and he had his answer ready. He said, "You can get together and as a group decide that you are not going to let anyone go."

That is exactly what they did. These strangers who had never been together until that gathering at the Pastor's home formed themselves into a Small Group. Week by week they came to really KNOW each other. They supported each other through the tragedies, divorces, conflicts, and moral failings. In 4 years of meeting together, only 1 person left the church.

That small caring group, changed the statistics from losing 10 out of 12 to losing only 1 out of 12. Throughout this series you are going to hear powerful testimonies of how small groups have impacted people's lives in our Church. We believe that every part of the body needs to be meaningfully connected so if you are looking for a small group community please let one of the Pastors know and we can get you connected.

In John 13:35 Jesus said,

*"By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another," (John 13:35).*

It isn't by our services, or our teachings, or our programs. Jesus said our love for one another will be our greatest testimony that we are His disciples. So let us strive to be known for our love for one another, both in our large gatherings and in our small group settings, as we seek to glorify God and contend for His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

### **Next-Steps and Reflection**

1. Is my aim in life merely to get through it with as few hiccups and interruptions as possible or is it to live on mission and fulfill God's calling on my life?
2. Am I meaningfully connected to people who know me, can hold me accountable, help me to live on mission, and grow?
3. Are there certain struggles or weaknesses that I need to reach out to others about for prayer and support?
4. How could a small group help me to live on mission in reaching out to others and sharing the love of Christ to my community?