



CONNECTED: Identity and Community

I held out a Kleenex to the sobbing student across the table.

"My heart is broken!" she cried, clutching the tissue to her face. "Why do people hurt me again and again? Why can't I find good friends that aren't going to destroy me? You can't imagine how this feels!"

"Actually, I can," I replied gently. I told her about how a friend had hurt my feelings, just a few days before.

"I didn't even realize adults could have messed up friendships and be hurting, too" my student sniffed. "Is this something I'm going to have to deal with for the rest of my life?"

You already know the answer, don't you?

We live in a world marred by sin. God's original plan for us to live in harmony with each other was ruined by Adam and Eve's decision long ago, and we're still dealing with the negative effects. Relationships that should offer us peace and joy instead cause pain and anger. We experience loss and brokenness, leaving scars in our souls.

Sometimes these broken connections leave us reeling. Perhaps we lose our sense of self, without the other person in our life. Perhaps a changing friendship prompts us to re-examine who we really are. Or perhaps we decide it's just not worth it to risk getting hurt again, so it's better to shut the world out and not allow anyone else to get close to us.

The people around us can be a source of pain, but they're also a source of comfort. The Holy Spirit uses the community around us to provide safety, encouragement, healing, challenge, and understanding. It's important to be able to hold both these truths simultaneously: you *need* people and people *will* hurt you. God placed mankind in community, and we're meant to exist with and around others. Proverbs 27:17 reminds us, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."

1 Corinthians 12:25-27 tells us, "So that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 points out that we draw strength from each other: "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."

Don't believe the lie that you can go through life all on your own. Isolation is dangerous —emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and physically.

Ask God to surround you with people to point you back to Him, even on the days when you feel like pulling away from others. Trust that God has placed you in the community you're in for a reason. Know that when you're hurt by others, you can always turn to God for comfort, forgiveness, and understanding. Embrace the peace that comes with knowing that you are part of the body of Christ, and that you are never alone.

Dear Jesus, thank you for giving me the gift of community. You know how I've been wounded and scarred by the people in my life, and I trust that You have a plan and purpose for me as I walk through difficult situations. Forgive me for the times I hurt others. Please surround me with fellow believers to encourage, guide, challenge, and uplift me in Your name. Help me to live in Your peace, forgiveness, and hope as I go about my day. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

Questions for Reflection:

- Reflect on the five people you're closest to. How open can you be with them? Are they a positive or negative presence in your life?
- Where do you experience the blessings of community? What about the challenges of living life with others?