The Community of God (pt4) – The Four Friends

1. If you've followed along so far, you know the story. We are entering the same kind of world that the apostles entered. We are entering the same world a Christian missionary would have entered in the 400s, 600s, 800s and so on: a divided world, a dangerous world, a world that does not share a common story. How do we take the message of Jesus into this world?

2. We have talked a lot about the failure of the top down model of church. While it fails to change a people, it is an efficient way to grab and keep power. That is why, even during the heyday of Christian church growth in the last century, when we compared divorce statistics, addiction numbers, alcohol addiction, out of wedlock births, etc. in communities with large concentrations of churches which communities with few churches, the numbers looked very much the same. (some outliers here, but that is where one group has control over most aspects of life, such as Mormons in SLC).

3. Now, let's talk about what works and what part you are to play in this unfolding new world. God is doing something new and it will not require government power, or particular people being elected while others are not, or social media surges going your way.

4. The only evangelistic model that worked throughout the last 2000 years still works today…but slowly, and with daily, intentional effort. Relate to people. Identify with them. Engage them in friendship for friendship's sake (NOT as an evangelistic ploy). Minister to them in the truest sense of the word, seeing what their needs are and taking care of them as best you can. Find what they need or what their concerns are. Walk with them through that. Help them find solutions when possible and, when there are no solutions, stay with them.

5. This is the Deuteronomy 6 model but it is also the Sermon on the Mount and Matthew 25. Be their true friend, their anam cara.

6. The result is that people belonged before they believed. A professor in India invited students to his home every week for meals. He did not sneak in a Bible study because the meals were not about conversions; they were about love and kindness. His phrase "love

them until they ask you why" has become the mantra of my ministry for the last 30+ years. And continue to love them even if they don't like the answer to "why?" Don't diminish your love or care for them in the slightest. Trust God and time and the process.

7. People are attracted to authentic faith shown in love. St. Patrick called this "giving the authentic sign." The mark of the Christian was not making the sign of the cross, but living out the teaching of Jesus in love.

8. As Aidan wrote about Columba, "The best recommendation of his teaching to all was that he taught them no other way of life than that which he practiced among his fellows."

9. People were taught to bring with them whatever gifts or talents they had and put them into service for the community. Studies in Celtic Christianity has come up with several divisions and names to help us understand how and why this worked so well. I will choose four which should suffice for our purposes.

10. Light Bringer: we have Christians in the medical field today who are providing on site medical help. Others are digging wells to bring safe water to communities. Others teach about sanitation, midwifery, etc. Just like Jesus, they heal when they can, feed when they can, clothe when they can. They do not preach the faith, they live their faith out, applying whatever wisdom they have to improve the lives of others.

11. To Light Bringers, gaining converts is not the primary mission; living and loving like Jesus is. What a change in evangelistic focus! Light Bringers today can be scientists, engineers, medical professionals, school teachers…anyone who takes their knowledge base and puts it into action to improve the lives of those around them.

12. In Celtic art, they are depicted as the opposite of darkness. They bring light. Where there is worry, they bring peace of mind. Where there is confusion, they bring understanding. Where there is pain, they bring healing. They are the human embodiment of Genesis 1:1-3 and John 1:1-5.

13. It has long been the fashion in academia to criticize missionaries for making improvements in the lives of those they find, but Light Bringers continue on anyway. That is who they are. That is how they serve their Lord.

14. Cross Bringers: This is a very interesting group. Here are the brave, those who risk themselves on behalf of others. Here are soldiers, judges, law enforcement personnel, firemen…and even everyday people who put themselves in harms way if that's what it takes to tell the story of Jesus in actions and words. They will never be the ones using their phones to record attacks on others. They will get between the attacker and the victim.

15. They have been represented in many ways. Think of the Freedom Riders and all who fought for Civil Rights or for the end of slavery. Think of those who reach out to save modern day slaves here in this nation or in the open slave markets of Sudan, Mauritania, Mali and more. Think of those who hunt for the kidnapped children in Nigeria or other nations where violent men take women and children captive.

16. They can, yes, often be found wearing uniforms and carrying a firearm but they are also found writing letters to government officials asking them to defend the lives of the unborn or using their accountancy skills to help people in poverty or to protect those the world wants to use and discard.

17. They are called Cross Bringers because they were said to bring their death with them. In other words, they were not afraid of losing their life to save others. Revelation 12:11 and Hebrews 11:36-40.

18. They bear the cross the risk it all for the Savior who carried his cross for them. It is who they are. It is how they serve their Lord.

19. Friendship Weaver: Only Christ can truly heal the divisions among us. Some in St. Patrick's team were known for never bringing judgment on people or their culture unless they were harming themselves or others. Instead, they entered into that culture and healed it by bringing Jesus into it.

20. Think of Andrew here. Just like him, they introduce people to Christ in their very person. They introduce them to others as well. They build bridges. They are the peacemakers so beloved by God. They are the daysman redeemer that Job cried out for. Matthew 5:7-9. They live cross shaped lives, linking the vertical and horizontal, God and man, man and God, and man to man.

21. Some are family counselors, some are church leaders, some are neighbors who help overcome the petty arguments found in every neighborhood. Some are family members who gently work to heal their family. Some are given the gift of hospitality and generosity.

22. They are always connecting people to God and to each other just by bringing their personality and gifts into play every day in every way they can. That is who they are and that is how they serve their Lord.

23. Friends of God: think here of Mother Teresa or St. Francis. These are the people we think of as “Jesus with skin on.” They live as friends of God and love to tell the story of Jesus in word and deed. I think of Jerry Tallman, Leroy Garrett, Carl Ketcherside, some of our poets and songwriters. They are Deuteronomy 6 people, those Jesus described in John 14-16.

24. They live in harmony with God and you can tell. They write our best songs, best books, and show us the path forward (such as Henri Nouwen who gave up his fame and life to serve another).

25. Many of these people are mothers who nurture and love their children in such a way as to give them a lifelong example of love and faithfulness. Others are fathers or men of faith who serve as examples to younger men, civilizing them through faith and showing them how to live their lives in tune with a Higher Power.

26. Because that is who they are. That is how they serve the Lord.

27. All of these can be small things or big, dramatic things. It really doesn’t matter which. Jesus can take your scraps of fish and bread and feed thousands. He can take your small acts of kindness and love and change generations.

28. We are perfectly positioned to start this new way – which is an old way, a proven way – to spread the story of Jesus in a broken and fear filled land. Whether you are one, or a family, or a group of friends, or a house church…you are where you are supposed to be and you are equipped to do what God wants you to do.

29. Open your eyes. Pray without ceasing. Yes, watch and pray. Look around. Do the small things. Pick up the litter, Pet the dog. Smile at the child. Hold the door open. Return the cart. Share your food. Make eye contact. Open your hands and your heart. God will take it from there….