Welcome: “Good morning... for those who may be new or visiting; my name is Chad and I’m one of the pastor/elders here at Reality Ventura.

We’re super excited about the re-launch of Community Groups at Reality Ventura and for the faithful men & women that were just commissioned.

I have to say... it’s been amazing to see God at work in re-building community at Reality Ventura and how evident it’s become that this is the heart of God... knowing we were created for community.

In launching community groups this week, the timing could not be better for us as a church... since we are right in the middle of our Kingdom Family series.

So, today we are going to take a break from our study in Ephesians... but as part of our Kingdom Family series... I will be sharing briefly the vision of Reality Ventura Community Groups, as well as, share our heart as a church... and God’s heart behind Christian community... simply said; Why Community?

Sermon Title: Why Community?

Open in prayer: “Would you join me in prayer...”

In setting the table this morning... it’s important for you to understand what I mean by community. The main thing I want to do this morning is provide a biblical basis for why we believe it’s important for us as a church family to be involved in some form of life-giving small gathering... it’s a call to "small togetherness."

My goal is for us to see and understand what moved Christians again and again throughout the centuries to seek small forms of togetherness.

But in saying this... I think it’s really important (especially in light that we are in the middle of our Kingdom Family series), that I share briefly the vision of Reality Ventura Community Groups because of there importance... and what that means for us as a church family in moving forward... for such a times as this!
Obviously, community groups are not the only way to be in community; but it’s certainly ONE way... and for that reason, I will give some other practical suggestions of small forms of togetherness at the end of the sermon.

However, I do want to make mention... another reason that’s it’s important to communicate the vision for community groups, is because it’s applicable for all Christian community... however that would play out in our lives in small forms of togetherness.

The vision for community groups is:
To see lives transformed through authentic gospel centered community in small gatherings of people meeting weekly in homes that is inspired by the power and wonder of God.

And the three pillars supporting this vision can be best understood through the paradigm of Theological, Missional, & Relational - which is the “DNA” of who we are and what we do as Reality.

1. Theological (DEVOTED WORSHIPERS): We want to be people who are devoted to worshiping Jesus by making time to join with others to grow in His Word and in prayer. The goal is Jesus must be the Object of our worship that makes worshipping exciting to us; even in the most basic settings.

2. Missional (DISCIPLE-MAKERS): We want to be a people committed and called to be disciple-makers. The Holy Spirit has given each of us a gift that is to be used for the building up of the body. The goal is that each one of us becomes like Christ, develops the ability to lead others to Him and make disciples by sharing our lives and the gospel regularly.

3. Relational (LOVING FAMILIES): We want to be a people who love each other deeply and show this by our sacrifice as we seek to obey all the “one another” commands in scripture. The goal is not merely to get along, but to love each other to the extent that Christ loved us, and to be united to the extent that the Father in one with the son.

In summary, We want to be a community of people who submit to and worship Jesus through prayer, devotion to Scripture, and praise. We want to be a community who are joyfully obligated to one another for the sanctification of the church, while fully committed to the mission of going and making disciples for the glory of Christ because we have been reconciled through the cross.
How did the early church live out community? And how we are going to do our best to endeavor to live out community as it pertains to the vision of Community Groups and the three pillars supporting this vision through the paradigm of Theological, Missional, & Relational?

In Act’s 2:42-47, we see a picture of the early church living life in community. This gives us a nice picture from which to build our expectations for what community can look like:

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” Acts 2:42-47 (ESV)

We see a beautiful picture of how the early church lived out gospel community as a lifestyle… not just an event.

It’s important to note… that we see how the early church lived out community by demonstrating regularly meeting together ‘corporately’ (large gatherings), as well as, ‘from house to house’ (small gatherings).

It’s also important that we see in this text a list of things (that I will call elements of community) that marked the early church: study, fellowship, communion, spiritual gifts, care, generosity, mission, prayer and worship.

God has given us a road map for seeking and finding Him… and we believe this can happen by living out community as seen in Acts 2. As we meet in small gatherings… our goal is not merely informational, but whole-life transformation.

So, that in a nutshell this is the vision of community groups… but like I said, it’s applicable for all Christian community, however that would play out in our lives… because it’s a biblical vision.

Now I want to shift gears and share our heart as a church… and God’s heart behind biblical Christian community… simply said; Why Community?

But first, let me define what it means when we say Community:
Christian community is simply sharing a common life in Christ. The biblical ideal of community moves us beyond our self-sufficient, isolated, private lives... and challenges us instead, to commit ourselves to life together as the family of God, for the mutual edification of one another.

So, what are the underlying reasons for biblical community (for small forms of togetherness)? Due to our limited time together, I will bring to our attention this morning two reasons for biblical community... although there are many more than just two reasons.

Two reasons Why Community?
1. Foundational
2. Motivational

So, the first reason for biblical community I want to establish this morning... is the Foundational reason for Why Community?

Believe it or not, it’s really important for us to ask the question Why Community? Why? Because “Why” questions are motivational.

What motivates me to get involved in... or move towards community? What motivates my actions and why I’m doing it undergirds this question of Why?

Most people are asking these questions... Why should I sign up for a community group? Why should I commit to a community group and/or why should I give up my time to be a part of a small gathering of community?

So first... understanding “Why Community?” It is essential to the life of the Christian and the proclamation of the gospel and begins with understanding that we were created for community. We are created and saved to be a community... God designed it this way for our maturity and our sanctification as believers.

And this reality that we were created for community... is connected to this eternal, foundational truth that God exists in community; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in perfect unity.... So, it is not surprising that from the beginning, God created us to be in community with Him, and one another.

The Foundational reason for Why Community is that God created us to bear His image; and He Himself exists in community – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our primary motivation for community should be first and foremost... the reality that we were created for community. So when we talk about community... our
motivation goes all the way back to the garden when the Trinitarian God who exists in community says in Genesis 1:26 ... “Let us create man in our image, after our likeness...”

So there is this concept when we were created... that when God spoke everything into creation... when He created man & woman (mankind); He is doing something very special. God is essentially saying, “I want mankind to bear my image...” We are to be image bearers of God.

But then we read in Genesis 3 that sin entered the world. What happens when sin enters the world? SEPARATION

First, separation from God... as soon as their eyes are opened they hide from God... but God comes looking for them. What happens when God comes looking for them? Man blames the women and blames God... and the women blames the serpent... SEPARATION

What does that show us? What sin does and what the enemy does is try to separate what God has brought together. So, this idea that we were created in the image of God to reflect the true nature of God... and what the enemy wants to do is to mare (hide) the truth about who God is... so he wants to destroy relationship within the world and within the church.

What sin does is comes in... and brings about broken relationship between man and God... and man and one another. So what Jesus does through His life, death and resurrection is... He brings reconciliation with God and brings reconciliation with one another.

What this does through Jesus and through the gospel is makes community possible. Apart from Jesus there is still a wall of hostility between Jew, gentile and us. (Eph. 2:14)

This is why the gospel is so important for us to understand... and how it works together with this idea that we were created in the image of God. And this has everything to do with WHY we do community. If we are not motivated by the gospel... if we are not motivated by the person and work of Jesus; then there is no reason for us to get involved in... or move towards community.

So why would we do community? It’s not just because we were created for community... although that's true. It’s because every time we gather in community we are displaying the goodness of God. Were displaying the truth about who God is... that He is a relational, loving, triune God.
And were displaying the truth about what He did through Christ. That He made it possible for us to be reconciled to one another… to love one another and to live in this type of community.

If this truth doesn’t sink into us… everything I’m saying this morning about community is just meaningless… or just another thing for us to maybe consider. You may give community (or community groups) a go… but eventually it will fade – ‘Here today, gone tomorrow.’

If our imaginations and our hearts are not captured by the beauty of God… and the grace and love of Christ to see the importance of community… then there is nothing that’s going to motivate us to take part in community and sustain us to stay in and be part of community… especially because community can be messy and hard at times.

Community should be life-giving when everything is great… and community should be life-giving when everything ‘hits the fan’… because we are motivated by what Christ did.

Remember, we are created and saved to be a community… God designed it this way for our maturity and our sanctification as believers. We flourish in community such as a vine that is being lovingly pruned, nurtured, and cared for…

And outside of community it’s just the opposite… we don’t flourish, and we can end up ‘dying on the vine’ as they say.

But I ask us… Do we actually believe this? We live in a culture that lives isolated lives and in a culture that is radically individualistic and self-sufficient… And yet, no one really debates the need for people to exist within community. It is not merely a Christian understanding… it is a human understanding. But belonging ‘in and of itself’ will never be enough.

Hanging the need for community on belonging… is like hanging the need for water on thirst. The need for both is deeper. Thirst is symptom of a deeper design… that your body was created to require water to survive. While we can technically survive without community… we don’t function properly without it. The deeper need for community is embedded in the very fabric of who we are… it is part of our design.
This is why we believe that without the emergence of community groups and many other smaller gatherings of community… we run the risk of ministry not happening in our church such as: care, discipleship, mission, etc...

The kind of pointed exhortation, encouragement, care, and loving warning; which is suited to our need… can’t be given or received on the run. And it’s not enough to have it given from the pulpit on Sunday’s only.

We need people who know us and feel our particular need… so that their word of exhortation is intimate and shaped to our special crisis of faith. And you can’t know people significantly if you only see them in church a couple of hours a week on a Sunday… a couple times per month for many of us.

Therefore, we believe it is essential that all of us seek the kind of regular smaller-togetherness where the ‘ministry of the saints’ is free to happen.

Now from this Foundational reason for Why Community… Let’s unpack the Motivational reason for biblical community.

The Motivational reason for understanding Why Community is essential to the life of the Christian is… to stir each other up to love and good works.

In Hebrews 10:24-25 the writer exhorts us like this:

1 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 2 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. Hebrews 10:24-25 (ESV)

Notice, it does not say, "Meet together once a week so the pastor can stir you up to love and good works, and encourage you." It says, "Consider how to stir up each other… Encourage one another."

When we have asked… What forms of small gatherings of community will allow the family of Reality Ventura to fulfill this ministry? The obvious answer was: the need for healthy, biblical community groups… and the emergence of many small forms of togetherness.

History has shown that God's way of stirring up His people to great acts of love and mission has often been to draw together a small praying band who lay themselves open to Him… and get a vision for service… a vision for mission.
Where will the new works of **mission** and **charity** come from in our church (both **local** and **global**); if not from holy brain-storming in small gatherings of zealous people?

Not only does **vision** for love and good works get **stirred** up by such fellowship... but also the **strength** to see it through to reality. Love and good works are not easy to sustain over the long haul.

There has to be much **lifting up** of the downcast. As **Ecclesiastes 4:9-10** says, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!"  *Ecclesiastes 4:9-10* (ESV)

**We must take heed**... there are innumerable obstacles to love and threats to faith. We sink down... or fall down... or get knocked down again and again... and its not God's revealed pattern for us to have to ‘pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps’ in **isolation**. On the contrary... God's command, and gracious provision, is: "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ!"  *Galatians 6:2* (ESV)

In order to **fulfill the law of Christ**... we have to build close, trusting relationships... otherwise, you don't even know what the **burdens** are... let alone have occasion to share their weight.

And we believe that to **build** those relationships we must form small, regular gatherings of believers... such as community groups and other **small forms of togetherness**.

It can be easy in a church our size to allow ourselves to remain **isolated**... It is a sweet law in the Savior's kingdom that no one, **married or single, male or female, young or old**... **carry a crushing burden alone**.

This is why... we want to be a people who love each other deeply and show this by our **sacrifice** as we seek to obey all the “one another” commands in scripture such as... **carrying one another burdens**.

**In what sort of setting can we be free to be vulnerable and real with each other in order that we may love one another?** The answer is surely in a small gathering of believers... who have won our trust... who know us and love us... and have committed themselves to care for us.
Do we need any further motivation to gather in a small gathering for the up building of our faith and the stirring up of love to the glory of our Lord’s name, than this?

We were never designed to go at it alone. It was never God’s will from the beginning... **We are created and saved to be a community!!!**

Is it any wonder that Jesus sent out his disciples “two by two”... (Mark 6:7; Luke 10:1), and that Paul always traveled with his Barnabas, or Silas, or Timothy, or Luke... and that even within the twelve Jesus built that deep core of affection with Peter, James, and John? **We need one another!!!**

The biblical basis for developing **smaller forms of togetherness** in our church (such as community groups, or **small gatherings of community**) is that God intends you... **the saints** (the family of God); ‘to do the work of ministry’... care, discipleship, mission, etc... as you are equipped and encouraged by the pastor-teachers, staff and lay-leader’s of our church.

Which means we just don't show up to receive... but more importantly we show up to participate and give of ourselves ‘to do the work of ministry.’ (Eph. 4:12)

The **aim** of this this type of **small gathering ministry** is to **build up** each other’s faith and love. God's design is to use human support and exhortation to sustain the faith of His children and to lighten the burdens... **which they bear in the service of love.**

That kind of **mutually caring ministry** does not happen in big groups between casual acquaintances. Therefore, to fulfill our calling... we must see the emergence of many smaller gatherings among our numbers.

I want to encourage you with some practical suggestions and examples of moving towards community. I would say one form of “**small-togetherness**” would be signing up and getting plugged into one of our community groups. Yet, at this time, I believe they are filling up quickly and may all soon be FULL.

So, our **aim** as a church is to be as **flexible** as possible in the encouragement to pursue **small gatherings of community**. There is not one kind... or size... or frequency... or format... or group... that will fit everyone’s needs. We are happy to let the Word... and Spirit of God... go to work on and in you... to produce many different forms of small gatherings of community – “**small-togetherness.”**
For example… I can see stay-at-home mom’s going to the park weekly with their kiddos and mutually encouraging one another in the Word…. I can see several women meeting each week for lunch and prayer… I can see three or four men meeting for breakfast and accountability… I can see a group of high schoolers getting together to talk over the challenges of being a Christian in school and praying for each other… I can see two or three couples meeting together on the weekend for mutual edification and connection… I can see some singles meeting in the evening every week or two to read a pertinent book together, talk of mutual concerns, and praying… I see couples and singles (young & old) serving on Sunday’s or during the week as a form of community such as: serving in kids ministry, youth ministry, etc…

My hope and prayer for all of us as a Kingdom Family… is that the Lord might awaken us to our need for community and put the resolve in our hearts to pray for His leading in forming small gatherings of community and/or… by signing up TODAY for a community group.

May this be the beginning of an upsurge of spirit-led ministry and life-giving small gatherings among the family at Reality Ventura… for His glory and for the good of His sons and daughters… and the neighborhoods in which we live!!!

Close in prayer…

Right now we have time to respond to the Lord in worship… communion… and prayer. Carpets, Communion Elements, Prayer Team.