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METHODOLOGY: ADD TO THE COMMUNITY

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We are engaging in a yearlong series called *The Praxis Experiment*. Praxis is a just fancy word for practices. Each week we are talking about one of the five exercises and then, in the coming months, we'll be spending longer blocks of time in each of those. So if you look at the word praxis as an acronym, you'll see that it is P-R-A, the X is for Christ, -I-S. If we took these seriously, if we engage in the experiment would it bear fruit, would it have a benefit, would it be a measureable difference in our lives and in the life of the world.

So, the five experiments are simply this. The first is to pray for the entire world. The second is to read through the entire Bible. The third that we are going to talk about today is to add to the

community. The I is to invest in the Kingdom and the S is to send or to be sent to the nations.

Now in that regard today we are looking at the third – add to the community. And in that context there are two incredible passages for us to consider this morning as we seek to add to the community. The first is in the 12th chapter of the book of Genesis. Now, Abram, whose name is later changed to Abraham, is child of where we would basically call Ur of the Chaldeans. It was more than likely in what would be known as ancient Babylonia and more than likely it would be in some area of modern day Iraq.

Abram was a man who really had a pretty good deal. His father was a man of obviously some success, of some prominence. Abram tended to have land, he had sheep, and he had a wife whom he loved. He has a good life. The only downside in his life was that he was without a child. Now we will read that he is seventy-five years old. But, keep in mind his father was seventy when Abram was born. And God comes to him and says this, beginning with the first verse of chapter 12:

Genesis 12:1-4

*Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'**

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Now, in the New Testament, at the end of the gospel of Matthew we'll read the first ten verses and then we will skip to the sixteenth verse. This is the account of Jesus' resurrection in the gospel of

Matthew. You'll find that in the gospel of Matthew Jesus, in the understanding of the resurrection, comes to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. And notice what they are asked to do. I will tell you right now so you can just be attuned to it. They are told to go and see and then go and share. And then they are told to tell the disciples that Jesus is going to be in Galilee. And then you will see what happens with the disciples.

Matthew 28: 1- 10, 16-20

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.

But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you.'

So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

This is the Word of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

There is a famous clip—I think it started as a podcast by the illusionist/comedian Penn Jillette from Penn & Teller. I am going to show part of it to you; you can easily find it on Youtube if you want to see the whole thing. (The entire video can be watched at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhG-tkQ_Q2w).

Here is the background for it. Penn Jillette is an atheist, a libertarian, definitely an Ayn Rand devotee. An interesting guy. But at the same time as a libertarian, even though he is an atheist, there is an openness to him. So he tells a story, and I want to give you the background for it.

A guy had been in their stage show where they will often pull people out of the audience to do things. So a day earlier a guy had been pulled out and they give him these props when it is over. So a day later, a night later, they go out after the show and there are people gathered out there—sort of the autograph people. And they notice this guy who has the props. He has the props, and he comes over and starts talking to him.

The guy says to him, “I have something that I want to give you.” He gives him a little Gideon’s Bible, a New Testament and the Psalms. And he looks at him and he says, “I’m not crazy, I just felt called to give you this.” This is how the atheist took that:

... He looked at me right in the eye when he did all of this. It was really wonderful. I believe he knew that I was an atheist. But he was not defensive. He looked me right in the eyes. He was truly complimentary. He wasn't in any way; it didn't seem like empty flattery. He was really kind and nice and sane and looked me in the eyes and talked to me and then gave me this Bible. And I've always said that I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there is a heaven and a hell and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or

whatever and you think that it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward.

An atheist would think that people shouldn't proselytize. Just leave me alone just keep your religion to yourself. How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that. If I believed without a shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming at you and you didn't believe it and that truck was bearing down on you. There is a certain point where I tackle you.

This is more important than that. I've always thought about that; I've written about that conceptually. This guy was a really good guy. He was polite and honest and sane and he cared enough about me to proselytize and gave me a Bible which had written in it a little note to me. Not very personal but liked your show and so on. And then like 5 phone numbers for him and email address if I wanted to get in touch. Now I know there is no God and one polite person living his life right doesn't change that. But he was a very, very, very good man. And that's real important. With that kind of goodness it is okay to have deep of a disagreement. I still think religion does a lot of bad stuff but man that was a good man that gave me that book. (an excerpt of the video)

If you believe there is a heaven and a hell and it is socially awkward... but here is the line that stuck with me in this. "How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize?" We'll come back to that.

I shared with you a little bit last week of a couple of experiences I had when I was backpacking out in the Sierras. I have another one today it is not about backpacking; it is about what happened afterwards. I never want to include anybody in any negative way. So if this story involves Jim Dille or **Steve Cyrus** just forget those names because that's not relevant to the story. But let me tell you this, we finished backpacking, weak, worn out, tired, unclean – all of that. And we get

into the car and we were going to drive about five hours back to San Francisco, spend the night in a nice hotel in the central part of San Francisco, and then fly out the next morning.

So we have this huge Yukon that we had rented. That car was unbelievable. And it is like a Sherman tank. We decide we are going to go in and we have three alpha males in this vehicle. There are only three people in the vehicle, three alpha males, and I hate to admit I'm part of that. And then I'm always reminded that when you put A-A-A together; three A's you come up with the triple AAA battery. Which is a really small battery so I think that like three alpha males means small brain or something.

So just forget the names of Jim Dille or **Steve Cyrus** in the context; just blame me. So we decide we are going to go into San Francisco and we are going to find this hotel. I haven't been there in years and years; one of us hadn't been there at all. In San Francisco, you can find your way around, right! So we are just going to drive into the San Francisco rush hour traffic in this honking, huge Yukon. So I'm not feeling really comfortable about this.

So, I called Becky Lyle Pinkard on the sly and say, "Okay Becky, my sister," I said, "we are in trouble, I need - can you Mapquest me real fast. I need a Mapquest." And she does, and she sends it to me on my Blackberry so that now I have every detail from where we are, how to get into town, everywhere. Well, no. Guys are not going to follow directions that are girl-sent. Now here is what made it even worse.

We didn't even have a map of San Francisco. But, we were going to find our way. Here is my point. In the midst of all of this, we totally, had no idea where we were. Well, Jim is going to say, "I always knew where I was." We had no idea where we were. But we weren't really lost. We were at the beginning of being lost. The reason I think we weren't really lost is this: we were at the beginning which is being disoriented. We didn't know where we were. We didn't quite

know how to find our way. We were disoriented. But that's not ultimately what being lost is.

I don't know if you've ever had this experience? I was at an outdoor mall in Miami, FL as little kid. It is one of my earliest memories. Now my mom always knew where I was. It is not that she didn't know, but there was just a moment in time where I looked around and I couldn't find my Mom, my sister, anybody I knew. And I still get this feeling, right in here, of what that was like. That is being lost. It's not just being disoriented, it's being isolated.

As long as the three of us were together in that huge, huge Yukon, we were disoriented but we weren't isolated. We had some camaraderie. We could argue with each other. We could gripe about who made the right or the wrong turn and all that kind of stuff. We were in community.

I once was lost in an overwhelmingly serious spiritual way. If you know me you know a lot of my story. I had a godly mom but I wasn't engaged in the life of anything in relationship with God. And I spent the early part of my life, those formative years especially the high school and college years being totally lost. Not just disoriented, but isolated. I came to realize that all the things that I thought that I was watching and seeing and things that in my whatever parts of my body felt like you are supposed to do this, or you are supposed to go get that, or you are supposed to accomplish this, every time I would do that every time I would follow up that inclination-- whatever it was: whether it would be girls or whether it would be cars, doing school, doing well, or whatever it was. Every time I would accomplish that or capture that, there was still something missing.

And over time I came to realize, though I had a lot of friends and went to different parties and all that kind of stuff, that I was increasingly isolated. I had no one to talk to, really, about what really mattered to me. We had to put on the bravado. I was totally lost.

And then I encountered Christ. Or Christ encountered me in a new way. And it changed everything in my life. I've had a lot of struggles in my life; I've had a lot of ups and downs. Understand I'm not in any way saying that I can compare mine to some of the struggles a number of you have. But, I've had my share.

Every time I think about that I realize what would I have done without Jesus? And almost as importantly, what would I have done without his Church? We have lived in our neighborhood for 12 years and we still go in and we close our doors, and it is hard to get to know each other. Everyone's decks are in the back. There are not front porches anymore. I start to think about the people in my neighborhood, and you know there are those who are struggling with losing their job, or those who are struggling with a child that might be ill, or those who are struggling with an issue of addiction in their family. Or whatever it is. How in the world do they make it?

Those who aren't connected, those who don't have a relationship with Christ, those who aren't connected to his Body in any way – how in the world do they make it? I honestly don't think I would have made it. I even mean that physically. I really don't believe I would be alive today. I know what it was to be lost. Not just disoriented but overwhelmingly isolated. And praise be to Him I know what it is to be found.

Now the word "lost" is interesting. The word "lost" in the New Testament actually only shows up in two chapters in the entire New Testament. It is not in our text today but in the Gospel of Luke in the fifteenth chapter and the nineteenth chapter. And the key is the fifteenth chapter. It is what we would call the "lost chapter," by the way. Go and read it at some point. The reason we call it "lost" is not because we can't find it – it is between fourteen and sixteen.

But it contains three stories that Jesus shares about being lost, about something or somebody being lost. The first is a woman who has lost a coin. And she sweeps looking for that coin. It is significant that Jesus tells a story about a woman because he is comparing that

woman to God. He is really tweaking, poking. The second is about a lost sheep and a shepherd who leaves and goes and seeks and finds. And the third is about lost boys. We call it the story of the prodigal son, but it is actually the story of two lost sons. The thing that I find so interesting in the fifteenth chapter is that the things that are lost are precious--cherished and loved by God.

It is very easy for me to say I know what it was to be lost because I do know that experience. I know from a personal, subjective experience what it was to feel totally lost, to be disoriented and isolated. But for those of you are gathered here today, who perhaps are here because someone made you come today. Or maybe you're not sure why you're here; maybe you're checking it out. If I say to you that you are lost, you might not respond very favorably. I certainly didn't--before I had been found. I didn't like that phrase. It sounded judgmental.

And so here is what I want to say, maybe we don't need to even use the word "lost." It actually only shows up in two chapters. Maybe we instead need to say this - missing. That there are people in this world who are missing. Missing from the glory and the presence and the table of Christ, the table of God.

Now I think about that and I go back to 9/11 and the day and the subsequent days that followed 9/11 when we had this disaster, this evil inflicted upon us. And I don't know if you remember but, back in that day, there were people who would put these signs all over around where the Twin Towers had stood. (We aren't suppose to call it "ground zero" anymore). They would put these signs up with the pictures of loved ones. And to my knowledge, without any exception, none of those said "lost." They all said "missing."

Even though it was more than likely that that loved one had died, had been killed in that devastating evil. They used the word "missing" because, as long as the word "missing" was used, there was still a sense of hope. And if the one thing we are to communicate as believers of Christ is hope. It seems to us that perhaps the word

“missing” might be meaningful for us. Because what is missing is that which is precious, that which is cherished and loved by God.

Now when God calls Abram in the twelfth chapter of Genesis, Abram sort of has this progression of cause. But the covenant comes a little bit later. But when God first calls Abram he does something very, very interesting. We can't pass over this. He says to him in the midst of the calling, *“You will be a blessing.”* And then in the next verse, *“In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”* What God is telling Abram from the very beginning is that there are nations, there are people, who are precious to me. And I'm going to use you to bless them.

Unfortunately, somehow, the preciousness of the nations was lost on us. Perhaps because we were a people who were in that ancient crossroads between two incredible powers. All the powers that seemed to exist on the North--or whatever country it was or nation it was that was occupying at the time--and the power of Egypt in the south, and we were in that crossroads. So there was all the commerce, but then all there were all the battles that took place....

Perhaps because we were beaten and oppressed, perhaps because we were actually defeated and spread out, but what happened was we lost the preciousness of the nations somehow. And we started to increasingly identify ourselves as an ethnicity, as a race--as a people defined by, over time, more by our ethnicity or by our race than by anything else, even than by the Covenant of God. And so we lost that preciousness. And when we lost it, we lost our identity. We lost the blessing that God had for us so that we would be a blessing to others.

And so then you start to realize that when Jesus comes, everything changes. Now it changes initially because Jesus loves everybody. So he gathers the sinners, the tax collectors; he relates to those. The stories are filled with relating to those who are not of our ethnicity or of our race or of our tribe or of our clan or whatever word we want to use. That is meaningful, but that is *just* meaningful.

What changes it all is our passage today. What changes it all is the resurrection. Because when the resurrection occurs now the preciousness of all life is eternal. So it's not just that, "Wow, we have these ways, we have these laws, we have these orders for our community and our society." That would be wonderful if others followed that. We're a city on a hill that serves as a witness. So, if people looked at our ways, the laws that we have, the way we ruled ourselves, the way we governed ourselves,... as meaningful as that is, that is all temporal. That is all here on the earth. That's all really cool for people. They would really benefit by learning from us. See how we care how we love, all of that. But now it's eternal.

And so I go back to Penn Jillette who says that if you believe that there is a heaven and a hell, if you believe that Christ is the way of salvation, no matter how socially awkward is it, how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? And I think he is on to something because when it changes with the resurrection, it is not just about that your life would be so much better if you had Jesus. You'd be able to keep it together. You'd be able to have someone with whom to pray. Your life would be formed in a way ... With the resurrection, it's about eternity.

And we are filled with joy and thanksgiving for that. Here is perhaps the key for us. Maybe the word "lost" isn't one we really want to claim too clearly unless it is about us. Maybe we want to talk about those who are missing; maybe we want to talk about the preciousness of those who are missing and the searching and the seeking and the love that God has for it. But here I think is the key also, a point of this. Perhaps those who are missing are so precious to God that we have to depersonalize our approach.

Now bear with me for a moment. In the Twelve Step movement we call it "detaching." Here is my point. How many times do we as Christians in a very loving way say you know this person is just missing out on the joy that God has. The best that God has for her and her life. She is not in a relationship with Christ; she doesn't know him; she doesn't seem to want to know Him. And so we do

this. We go and pray and we say, “Lord, give me the words. Let me know the moment,... give me the opportunity to be able to share the good news of Jesus.” We base that kind of a passage on First Peter. “Be ready to make your testimony” in a sense. Now there is nothing wrong with that. But let me say I believe that that’s at least secondary if not tertiary.

What I think comes first is this. What if we looked at someone who was missing--missing out on joy, missing out on love. Feeling not only disoriented but isolated in their life, whether they are around people or not. What if we looked at that person and we prayed for that person as, C.S. Lewis would say, “with the intensity of a dog staring at a bone.” And what if we prayed for them in the same way we would pray for someone who was in the throes of cancer, for someone who had a child who was diagnosed with a disease that could be life threatening, or someone who was in the throes of a poverty or an impoverishment where they were not able to provide for their own family, or someone who is in the midst of a domestic abuse situation in which their very life was being threatened....

What if we prayed with the intensity of a dog staring at a bone for those who are missing the joy and the presence and the kingdom of God? And what if wasn’t about *me* having the right words necessarily. What if it wasn’t about *me* being ready? What if it wasn’t about me knowing when I was supposed to talk? Because you see what starts to happen is that it all starts to become about me. Am I ready? Is it another notch that I can put in? Now that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t be ready. It doesn’t mean that there’s not going to be a point where Christ is going to give us that opportunity and we should be prepared. I’m not saying that.

But if we began with praying for those folks with the intensity of a dog staring at a bone in the same way we would for those who are struggling with the physical illness, and thought about it and realized that this is an eternal issue. And this is no way an issue of judgment. This is in no way an issue of exclusion. This is always an issue of inclusion. Of welcoming, of filling, of being part of, of bringing joy

into the world and into the lives of those who are in desperate isolation. That is what I think is the key to this whole thing for us. It is to truly believe that, and to let it be Christ. It is not about me anyway. It is not about me, what I am going to say, as meaningful as it might be for Christ to use me in that way.

It is all about him. When I came to Christ I had so many people share him with me in loving ways. My wife Sheryl did. So many others would share him in loving ways and that was all meaningful. And it was all part of my formation, I understand that. But let me tell you there was a day when I didn't need anyone to tell me about Him. I knew Him! And the very first day when I knew him, beyond any shadow of a doubt, it was almost as if he said, "Jim, you've been missing so long. You've been missing so long and when I finally saw you turn, I didn't even say, 'Come to me.' I ran to you." I don't know if you've ever had that experience but if you do, it rocks your world. And nothing has been the same ever since. That's what we have to offer to this world.

I've had the privilege of following great men of faith in ministry. One of the first of those was a man named Ed Schulte. Ed was a pastor of Allentown Presbyterian Church in a little colonial town of New Jersey, not in Pennsylvania. He was there for 33 years. I worked as a student in seminary when I was at Princeton for two years with Ed. And then I served as a co-pastor with him before he retired. And then I became the pastor. And Ed was one of the most wonderful, godly men. But Ed would do things that would really surprise me and throw me off.

For example, the very first time I was serving communion with him was such a time. I was a student; I was just sitting there. He had these old, tattered robes we would put on. He'd used them for students for years and years and years. I'm sitting there, and after Ed started communion he sat down for a minute. I was wondering why he was sitting down when he looks over at me and says, "You are going to have to finish up." What!? Well, this is my first week of seminary, come on I don't know what I am doing! And so that is

where I adopted the theory to fake it till you make it. Anyway, he left. He got up and he left the church. Okay, everybody is looking at me. So I get up and say, "People of God,..." Think, think, think ; okay there is juice, there is bread, let me figure it out.

Here is what happened. It was a little town - one square mile, a couple of thousand residents. An active member of a church board of another church, active in the community, professional, highly well known politician all of that, an all-around great guy had done something a couple of weeks earlier that had discredited everything in his life. He had done something that dishonored himself, dishonored his family, dishonored the business, dishonored his community, dishonored his children, everybody, everything. It was a small town and it was a horrible thing. And because of prosecution and legal issues and all these things, he wasn't allowed to leave this tiny little 2,000 person town, a town whose middle name was "Gossip."

It was a couple of weeks afterwards, about 10 to 15 minutes into the service, when this guy came in and sat down in the very back row where no one was. Ed preached, and then Ed got to the point where he was to serve communion. And when Ed started to move down from the pulpit to the table, this guy realized that right then was a good time for him to be able to skate out without anyone seeing him. Now, everyone had already seen him.

Have you ever been in those settings where something is going on behind you but you know you aren't supposed to look back? "No Honey, you look back and tell me what it is." All of that was going on. There was such a buzz in this tiny, little church, this old colonial little church..... "He's here." "He's here." "He's here." "He's not even in his own church, he is in our church." "How dare he." He left.

As soon as he left, Ed Schulte, who was standing at the table beginning to give the words of institution, saw him leave. Ed said to the young punk seminarian, "You finish up." And here is what Ed

did. Ed took two of those little plastic cups with the juice in them and two little square pieces of white bread that this lady who was 123 years old cut every time we had communion. He took them and he left. And Ed went out to find him.

And, sure enough, this old colonial church had a colonial cemetery right next to it. And, sure enough, this guy had gotten out just in time. He sat down on a bench in the midst of that cemetery and Ed Schulte came up to him and sat down. Ed didn't say a word to him but just sat down and put those two little plastic cups on the bench between them. He laid those two pieces of white bread there on that bench. The man looked at him and said, "I don't deserve that." And Ed looked at him and said, "Neither do I. This is the body of Christ. This is the cup of forgiveness."

It is hard for me to share communion without remembering that sometimes the most powerful expressions of it are not inside but outside. What we take out--how this Table fills us in such a way that we have the ability, the courage, the privilege to be able to go out and share it.

God had a long process in that man's life of admission, forgiveness, and redemption; but, to this day, he will tell you that story was the beginning of a new life for him. That someone would journey and leave the confines of all that he was supposed to do, all those things that he was suppose to preside over, all those people that were there to be filled. And he would literally leave all that in the midst of it to go and to be able to share something of the Good News. Something that he didn't deserve. But only by the privilege and the power of Christ was he able to share.

And so here is my question to you today, it is simply this: who is it in your life that is far off? Maybe it is you right now. Maybe there is something in your life that you feel as if you just don't deserve it and you don't. But he gives it to you freely. Who is it in your life today that is far off? Who's not experiencing the joy that could come to their life? Who is so far off that perhaps that distance would be

eternal for them? Who is that in your life? Maybe it is someone seated next to you. Maybe it is someone in your own home. Maybe it is a neighbor. Maybe it is someone with whom you work. Maybe it is a student, a classmate with whom you sit next to in school, wherever it is.

Who is that? And how much do you hate them? I mean that. How much do you hate them not to say there is something better? Christ wants something better. He has something to offer that will rock your world. He is saying to you today, "You are missing. You are missing from the table of forgiveness and grace. And there is still hope. Because even though you are missing, you are so precious to him. And you are precious to me."