

# Devoted: Becoming the Church Christ Has Redeemed Us to Be (Part 2)

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## Introduction

### The Text

<sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common. <sup>45</sup> And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> 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)

### Jumping Back In

- A. This is now our second week looking at this incredible text.
- B. If you were here with us last time, you'll remember I began by first sharing my attempt at a definition of the church. I'll give it to you here again: "The church is that blessed assembly that exists in the presence of God, as the people of God, for the purpose of God." One assembly with three aspects.
  - 1. My definition is, as I said, self-consciously general and broad in its language and terms.
    - a. And this is because I don't think of the church as a NT reality merely, as if the church was born on the day of Pentecost. The Christian church was born then. I have no problem saying that.
    - b. But this idea of the church, as I made the case for last time, is really something that spans both the New and Old Testaments.
      - i. So I needed a definition that could work in both testaments.
- C. You see, from my thinking, this idea of the church really does take us all the way back to the beginning and the opening pages of Genesis.
  - 1. In other words: I believe that God created us—humanity, Adam and Eve—at the start to be the church. Humanity was to be a blessed assembly existing in the presence of God, as the people of God, for the purpose of God.
- D. But of course we know what happens in [Gen. 3](#) with the fall and what's played out ever since on repeat throughout the history of mankind. In our sin, we've rejected such things. We'd declared war on our Maker and his ways.

1. And, as such, we're thrust out from God's presence; we break fellowship and divide off from one another; and we no longer live for him and his purposes, we live for ourselves, full stop.
- E. Now I brought all this up then, and I bring it up again today, because what we see in [Acts 2](#), in this summary we're given here by Luke regarding the early Christian church, is that in Jesus, by way of the cross, God is actually redeeming us to be what we were at first created to be but lost in Adam.
1. There's this restoration taking place in Christ here. And it's moving along the lines of those same three aspects: presence, people, and purpose.
    - a. So we get this sense that these early believers are being brought back into God's presence and they're developing that relationship with him. Hence, we're told they're devoted to ["the apostles' teaching"](#) (God's Word) and to ["the breaking of bread"](#) (or the Lord's Supper) and to ["the prayers"](#) (v. 42).
      - i. This is the upward trajectory of our redemption, and it was our sole focus last time.
    - b. But, of course, we also see that their relationships with one another are being repaired as well. They're being restored as God's people in God's presence. So we see that they're devoted to ["the fellowship"](#) (v. 42) and they're sharing possessions and food and their lives with each other ([vv. 44-46](#)).
      - i. This is the inward trajectory of our redemption.
    - c. But then, at last, what we see there at the close in [v. 47](#) reminds us that it isn't just the first two aspects that are being restored in Jesus, it's this third aspect as well. They have a purpose, so much bigger than themselves. As they live in God's presence, as his people, others are seeing it and hearing of it and being ["added to their number"](#) or ["being saved"](#) as well.
      - i. This is the outward trajectory of our redemption.
- F. And, as I said last time, here at Mercy Hill, we've taken these three aspects of the church—that which we've been created to be in Adam and have now been redeemed to be in Jesus—and we've tried to integrate them into our mission statement and core values as a church.
1. So, with regard to presence, we talk about the core value of Faith—we're pressing up.
  2. And, with regard to people, we talk about the core value of Community—we're pressing in.
  3. And then, with regard to purpose, we talk about the core value of Mission—we're pressing out.
- G. In the first sermon, I drew out the things from this text dealing with Faith in particular.
1. Now, this morning, in this second part, I'd like to deal with the latter two of our Core values: Community and Mission.

## Core Value #2: Community

### An Epidemic of Loneliness

- A. Just a few months back, the U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released an advisory attempting to identify and address what he calls the “epidemic of loneliness and isolation” that’s taking place in our country right now.
1. Really, they were talking about this even before the pandemic, but it’s only gotten worse since.
- B. He starts the 82 page document with a personal letter to us, the American people. And I wanted to just read to you a little bit from it . . .
1. “When I first took office as Surgeon General in 2014, I didn’t view loneliness as a public health concern. But that was before I embarked on a cross-country listening tour, where I heard stories from my fellow Americans that surprised me.  
People began to tell me they felt isolated, invisible, and insignificant. Even when they couldn’t put their finger on the word ‘lonely,’ time and time again, people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, from every corner of the country, would tell me, ‘I have to shoulder all of life’s burdens by myself,’ or ‘if I disappear tomorrow, no one will even notice.’  
It was a lightbulb moment for me: social disconnection was far more common than I had realized.  
In the scientific literature, I found confirmation of what I was hearing. In recent years, about one-in-two adults in America reported experiencing loneliness. And that was before the COVID-19 pandemic cut off so many of us from friends, loved ones, and support systems, exacerbating loneliness and isolation.  
Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling—it harms both individual and societal health. It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death. The mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, and even greater than that associated with obesity and physical inactivity. And the harmful consequences of a society that lacks social connection can be felt in our schools, workplaces, and civic organizations, where performance, productivity, and engagement are diminished.  
. . . If we fail to [build more connected lives and a more connected society], we will pay an ever-increasing price in the form of our individual and collective health and well-being. And we will continue to splinter and divide until we can no longer stand as a community or a country. Instead of coming together to take on the great challenges before us, we will further retreat to our corners—angry, sick, and alone” (Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation).
- C. It’s a fascinating thing, isn’t it?
1. Loneliness isn’t just some emotionally unpleasant experience, it’s actually bad for our health. You’d almost be better off as a chain-smoker, smoking 15 cigarettes a day, than going about life alone.

- a. People are dying earlier because of it. In fact, some connect all of this to the surprising trend that in the U.S. life expectancy has started to decrease for the first time in many years.
  
- D. But, of course, all this isn't just fascinating, it's also devastating. We live in an isolated and fractured society. Oh we may be all connected via our devices, but we struggle to have real relationships.
  - 1. I mean, maybe this isn't just a statistic for you. Maybe it's where you're at. You just feel alone.
    - a. Maybe, when the Surgeon General referenced what people were saying to him, you thought to yourself: "That's me." "I have to shoulder all of life's burdens by myself." "[I]f I disappear tomorrow, no one will even notice." Is that you? Is that how you feel?
      - i. One in every two adults in America would say they are lonely.
      - ii. And the rates of loneliness are highest among those adults who are youngest.

(1) I'm sure there are some here in that camp.
  
- E. And, now, biblically we understand why this is such a big deal for our emotional and physical health, why loneliness has such an effect on our hearts and our bodies.
  - 1. As I just got done saying: we have all been created, not just for relationship with God, but also for relationship with others, for community—to exist in the presence of God as the people of God.
    - a. As I referenced from [Gen. 2:18](#) last time: "It is not good that . . . man should be alone."
      - i. It's no surprise to me that the statistics bear this out. When we're alone and isolated, we're unhealthy. We're not operating as God created us to.
  
- F. But the bigger question that presses in upon us now then isn't so much why it's bad for us to be alone, but what should we do about it? How do we fix it?
  - 1. Well, the Surgeon General certainly has his ideas. He goes on in his advisory to advise us. He outlines some semblance of a plan discussing what he calls "the six pillars to advance social connection."
    - a. And there are some good ideas in there, to be sure. But none of them go deep enough.
  - 2. None of them will get us to the kind of thing we see happening here in [Acts 2](#). Because none of them identify the ultimate solution at bottom of it all: namely, Jesus, the gospel, the cross, the Spirit of God, the remaking of our hearts, the redemption that we can have in him.

- a. That's what restores us to community in the deepest sense. That's what takes a person from being isolated and alone and thrusts them into a family, a new humanity, a new people God is constituting around his Son.

## Devoted to "the Fellowship"

A. So we read there in [v. 42](#) that these early Christians weren't just devoted to those upward activities of spending time in God's Word and partaking of the Lord's Supper and praying.

- 1. Oh no, we see here that they also "[devoted themselves to . . . the fellowship . . .](#)"

B. There's a community forming. And there's a profound togetherness where there once would have been isolation and division: "[And all who believed were together . . .](#)" ([v. 44](#)).

- 1. And you've got to remember, this fledgling community here is composed of people from all over the world.

- a. That was the point of the speaking in tongues we saw earlier in [Acts 2](#). The gospel was preached in the various languages of the nations because these were people who had come out from the nations. These were men and women from the diaspora come back to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost.

- i. To be clear, they were Jews, but they had no doubt many differences now linguistically, culturally, and so forth.

- 2. And, of course, we know we're only a few chapters away from adding the Gentiles into the mix as well.

C. So there was plenty of potential for things to go wrong, for people to step on toes and all this. And we'll soon see, they definitely hit their rough patches.

- 1. But, even still, regardless of all the differences, and all the reasons one could have to divide and fracture and isolate, instead they "[devoted themselves to . . . the fellowship . . .](#)" ([v. 42](#)).

## Unpacking Koinōnia

A. Now, let's consider that word "[fellowship](#)" for a moment. It's kind of a churchy word. We like to think we know what it means, but I'm not so sure we really do, at least not at the depths of it.

- 1. We tend to use it to refer to whenever Christians are just casually hanging out.

- a. "We're having some good fellowship"—playing cornhole or Twister or whatever.
- b. Or churches with big buildings will often select a room and designate it their "Fellowship Hall." It's where they have donuts and coffee and maybe an occasional meal or something. That's fellowship.

- i. And there's truth to this. Don't hesitate to use the word in these contexts. That's fine.

2. But there's a lot more to it. And our understanding of it will be somewhat shallow and miss the mark if we stop there.
    - a. You see, in our text we're taken much deeper into the meaning of it—much deeper perhaps than any of us really even wanted to go, if we're honest . . .
- B. It's interesting, there's a linguistic connection in the original language that really makes this plain for us.
1. You see, "fellowship" in the Greek it's the word *koinōnia*.
  2. It's derived from the Greek word *koinos* which means "common." And, wouldn't you know it, it this very word that also shows up down in v. 44.
    - a. And I think we're supposed to connect the dots.
      - i. He gives us the term "fellowship" in v. 44.
      - ii. But he unpacks it, he helps us get a sense of what it really means, with what he goes on to say about this early community down in vv. 44-46 in particular: " <sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common [Gk. *koinos*]. <sup>45</sup> And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts . . . "
- C. So, then, let's be clear: This fellowship we're talking about, it's not just hanging out for a few hours on a Sunday or an occasional night of the week and then going our separate ways. It's this profound sharing of our lives with each other.
1. That's why the word *koinōnia* is defined in the standard Greek lexicon as: "close association involving mutual interests and sharing."
- D. Look at what they're sharing with one another here. I see three layers to it.
1. First, they're sharing their stuff. They "had all things in common" (v. 44). They were selling their stuff and giving to those who had need.
    - a. They weren't owned by what they owned, they were not possessed by what they possessed. They were free and they gave freely in love for others in the church.
  2. But then check this out, secondly, we see that they didn't just share their stuff, they shared their tables. They were "attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes . . ." (v. 46).
    - a. In other words, they didn't just write a check, hand it to the person in need, and then go about their separate ways. Sometimes that's easier, right?
    - b. No, they shared their stuff, but they also shared their table. They opened their doors, opened their homes, to one another.

3. And, of course, this just takes us to the deepest layer of all, thirdly, they shared their hearts. What do you do around a table? You don't just eat food. You get to know each other. You share what's really going on in your life. You share your heart.
    - a. This is why Luke will say later in yet another summary statement of this early church: "Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common" (Acts 4:32).
- E. Now, to be clear, this is not some early form of Christian communism.
1. They're not being forced from the top down to put everything into a common purse or something like this (this will become especially clear later with Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5).
  2. It seems to be entirely voluntarily, Spirit-led. There's a freedom to it.
    - a. So it's not manipulation or compulsion. It's radical generosity. And it's enough to make us tremble a bit, I think.

## Don't Flinch

- A. So that's why I just want to pause right here and consider ourselves in light of all this for a moment . . .
- B. Because you see, it seems to me, when we come to texts like this in the Scriptures, we often, as a reflex, try to quickly rationalize it all away somehow.
1. We flinch.
  2. We come face to face with the radical call of gospel living and, at the last second, we blink. We can't bear it.
  3. It's like a game of hermeneutical chicken—we approach the text, we try to see just how much we can take in, but at last we veer off, we can't hold the course, we get scared. We find ways of excusing ourselves from the equation. Somehow this all must not apply to us.
- C. So we say things like:
1. "Ah, this must have just been for the early church. It was a unique call for a unique time."
  2. Or "Oh, I've seen cults and things abuse this idea so it's probably something I should hold at a distance."
  3. Or we console ourselves: "Surely God doesn't want me to sell my things. That would be foolish. I wouldn't be a good steward if I did that."
    - a. We come face to face with it, and we flinch, we look away. We quickly excuse ourselves from it all and we move on—with our consciences unbothered and our comfortable American lives unchanged.
- D. But my job as your pastor is to hold your face to the text, in love, and not let us off so easy.

1. Are there some things here that uniquely apply to the early church because of their special situation under the authority of the apostles? Sure, I imagine there are.
2. Has this stuff been abused by leaders and churches throughout history? Sadly, yes. And it's made countless people now hesitant to even enter a church, let alone live together with other believers in the manner in which we see here.
3. Does God call you to be a good steward with what he's given you? Certainly.
4. But does that mean there's nothing here in this text for us today? Of course there is.

## You Can't Even Start

A. The principle of radical generosity, the call to share our stuff, and our tables, and our hearts in love for one another—that's Christianity 101. You can't even really get started if you're not willing to step into this. Do you realize that?

1. That's why Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: “<sup>19</sup> Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,<sup>20</sup> but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.<sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. . . .<sup>24</sup> No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Matt. 6:19–24).
2. Or as he puts it most pointedly in [Luke 14:33](#): “[A]ny one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.”
  - a. You can't even start with Jesus if you're not willing lay down whatever it is you're white-knuckling and lay hold of him alone as your treasure.
    - i. “‘You can have all this world, just give me Jesus.’ Whatever else I do have, therefore, I'm going to leverage to make him known. I'm going to use it in love for God and others.” That's it. That's the call.

B. And, now, I want to tread carefully, but I do want to say something that may come in a little sharp at first. I want to bring together all we've been discussing to this point and help you see how it relates.

1. It seems to me, sometimes those same people who would've said at the beginning, “Yeah, I'm a Christian, but I still feel lonely and like a don't have good relationships,” and all this—sometimes (not always, so you'll have to search your own heart and see if the shoe fits, but sometimes . . .) they're the very same people who gloss over this call to give themselves away radically in love for others.
  - a. Because, so far as I can see, chances are, if we really did that, I don't think we'd often find ourselves lonely.
    - i. There are so many people to care for—so many people who would appreciate your time, your concern, your generosity, your love.



(1) But, of course, here's the catch: they might not be the people you want to hang out with. And therein lies the problem, I think . . .

- C. A lot of times, what sets us up for loneliness is we approach relationships primarily with a view to what we can get.
1. We want everyone else to share with us but we're not all that interested in sharing with them—or, if we do, there are strings attached, and it's only so that we can get something from them in the end.
  2. And furthermore, as I've said, we have only certain people in mind. We don't just want relationship with any of God's children, we certainly don't want the needy people, the ones who take from us, we want the cool people, the in people, the people we relate to, the people who can help our resume, or whatever.
    - a. And so sometimes we're lonely, but it's because we're not willing to love in this [Acts 2](#) sort of way. We don't want it to cost us.
- D. I thought of this punchy little quote I came across from Michael Horton the other day, where he says this: "Everyone wants to change the world, but nobody wants to do the dishes." You get that? We want to be a part of something big. We want to make a difference. But we don't want to do the dirty work required to get there.
1. And I'd say it's the same idea with relationships. Everyone wants the benefits of a good relationship, but no one wants to give radically of themselves to get it!
- E. Now I say all this, and to be honest, I'm really proud of this church (hopefully the good kind of proud ; ). I see a lot of this radical generosity happening all the time—people sharing stuff, sharing tables, sharing hearts. I'm amazed at the compassion and the self-sacrifice. You inspire me.
1. So I don't mean to be discouraging, but I do mean to be challenging. I want to grow more in this. I know you do too . . .

## Where Does This Come From?

- A. So how do we do it? Where does this kind of radical generosity come from?
1. Well, I'll tell you one thing: It doesn't come from just trying harder. "The pastor scolded me into submission. I better suck it up and do it." No!
  2. This is where our core values start to connect and interact with each other. Faith, or this relationship we have with God through Jesus, it's what flows into and creates and sustains this kind of Community.
- B. We devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching, well what do the apostles teach? They teach us of the One who gave himself away in love for us.

1. Before we are called to show radical generosity towards one another we are called to receive the radical generosity of Jesus towards us in grace.
  - a. We can go and share our stuff with others . . . because Jesus first shares his stuff with us.
    - i. So Paul, when he's encouraging the Corinthian church to give of their money to help the suffering Christians in Jerusalem, do you want to know what he does? He points them back to Jesus: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).
      - (1) That's what the cross is. Jesus set aside all he had in love for needy sinners like you and I, so that we could be swept up and into his kingdom—given an inheritance that is, as Peter would put it, "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you . . . (1 Pet. 1:4).
  - b. We can go and share our table with others . . . because Jesus first shares his table with us.
    - i. Jesus gave of himself. He let his body be broken like bread and his blood be poured out like wine so that we could come and sit with him at his table.
    - ii. And, you know, now we can give of ourselves, incur the cost, and invite others to come and sit with us around ours. He pulled out a chair for me, I can pull out a chair for you.
  - c. We can go and share our hearts and our lives with others . . . because Jesus first shared his heart and life with us, even unto death.
    - i. So, on the night before his crucifixion, John records Jesus as saying to his disciples: "<sup>12</sup>This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.<sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:12–13). We know his self-sacrificial love for us and it enables and empowers our self-sacrificial love for each other.
- C. In other words, we can sum it all up this way: we can have deep and meaningful fellowship with one another because we have fellowship with God through Christ!
  1. As John says in 1 John 1:3: "[T]hat which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship [Gk. koinōnia] with us; and indeed our fellowship [Gk. koinōnia] is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."
    - a. It makes sense that our church community should be marked by radical generosity because it is a community centered around a radically generous God!

## Core Value #3: Mission

### Faith → Community → Mission

- A. So we've just seen how our core value of Faith flows into Community. Now, with what little time remains, I want to show you how our core value of Community flows into our core value of Mission.
1. And it makes sense I think. Because our radical generosity is ultimately enabled by our radically generous God, when those outside the church see that in us, they come to truly see something of him.
    - a. Mark Dever puts it this way: "Christian proclamation might make the gospel audible, but Christians living together in local congregations make the gospel visible. The church is the gospel-made-visible."
      - i. They look at us, but they see him. My self-sacrifice points to his . . . for them.
- B. It was this way with the early Christian church as we see here in [Acts 2](#).
1. Look at how our text ends there in [v. 47](#). As they lived together in such striking community, they were given "favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."
    - a. You don't have to choose between Community or Mission. The two go together. Those outside saw what was happening with these people and, consequently, they were attracted and at last came to know their God.
- C. And it carries on like this through the centuries.
1. There's one particularly fascinating quote. It was written by Aristides, an Athenian philosopher, who himself was drawn to Christianity. And he writes this letter to the Roman emperor at the time, Caesar Hadrian. It would have been somewhere around 125 A.D.—which is about 90 years after this scene in [Acts 2](#). His goal in writing was to defend Christianity and to encourage the emperor to stop persecution that seems to have been flaring up at the time.
  2. But here's what he writes of the Christians he's witnessed: "[T]hey love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. . . . And if they hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him they set him free. And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food. . . . Every morning and every hour they give thanks and praise to God for His

loving-kindnesses toward them; and for their food and their drink they offer thanksgiving to Him. Such, O King, . . . is their manner of life. . . . And verily, this is a new people, and there is something divine in the midst of them.”

- a. Did you catch that? When you see the way they live together, you’ll come to see the God who is in the midst of them.
- D. But, you know, it’s still this way today—especially today, given what’s been said about this epidemic of loneliness we’re facing here.

1. As we bring things to a close now, I just wanted to read to you one more quote, this time from Sam Allberry. He connects the dots for us quite nicely and really sums up all that we’ve been saying this morning.
2. His article is titled: “With Friendship in Decline, Belonging Is a Powerful Apologetic.” And here’s what he writes: “We live in a lonely and anxious age. Major studies reflect the same dismal trend: people are increasingly isolated. A 2021 study by American Perspectives exposes the sharp decline in friendship in the U.S. over the past 30 years. They found that 10 percent of women and 15 percent of men report they don’t have a single friend. The percentage of women with more than 10 friends has dropped from 28 percent to 11 percent, and for men, from 40 percent to 15 percent. We’re more and more isolated, and we feel it deeply. According to another report, 61 percent of adults in America feel lonely, and the rates of loneliness are highest among those who are younger. In the U.S., life expectancy has started to decrease for the first time in many years.

This context makes the words Jesus said to his followers shortly before his death more urgent: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). These words have always been binding on the people of God, but they have unique relevance for us today. They call on the church to be a place not only where truth is made known but also where a unique form of love is found. In reaching the Western world today, few things can be as important.

In John 13, Jesus ties the plausibility of the Christian faith to the extent to which the world observes his love in the church. Love isn’t unique to Christian communities, of course, but this verse suggests there should be something uniquely compelling about the kind of love Jesus’s disciples embody. Our friendship makes the reality of the gospel unignorable to the outside world.

. . . The church upholds the truth by embodying it. The life of the church is meant to make the gospel plausible, and the church won’t be an effective communicator of the truth if it isn’t an effective community.

. . . Many tasks before the church are urgent and essential—defending the faith’s rationality and goodness against attacks, learning to articulate the gospel in various subcultures, caring for the poor and needy in society, bringing the gospel to unreached groups and regions of the world. But nothing can be more urgent or essential than attending to what Jesus says in John 13:35. Arguments can change minds, but the beauty of Christ’s love shown among us will turn heads like nothing else.

- E. Don’t you want to be a church like that? That’s who God in Jesus is restoring us to be. It’s going to be hard, it’s going to cost us, but it’s going to be amazing. So let’s lean in . . . TOGETHER!