



September 14, 2022
A Note from Beth Palmer

Dear Friends,

I have a deep need to be seen for who I am and to belong. We all do.

We want to know that we matter to others, and that we can show up as we really are and be accepted and embraced as our authentic, messy selves.

I have always felt lucky that I get those needs met through my college and seminary friends, my volunteering friends and church friends, and my husband, Frank. (If you can be goofy in your wedding photo, you've probably found your people.)



At some point I realized I wanted even more depth. I wanted a small group of women to meet with regularly to talk about my life and where I was seeing God at work in me, and to hear their stories of faith and life. I wanted some women I could try to be more vulnerable with, to try to share the harder stuff of life.

But I was scared.

“What, tell people how I *really feel* about stuff?”

I have an Enneagram* type One personality after all (<https://hilliardumc.org/enneagram/>). We *live* to be poised and polite, rational and reasonable.

Let down my guard and share my anger and resentment, my fear and anxiety, my sadness? Are you kidding?!

Uhm... no thanks. Hard pass. Walls up.

When Brené Brown talked about vulnerability in her viral TED talk (“The Power of Vulnerability,” December 3, 2010, https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability?language=en), I laughed out loud, because her experience of absolutely *not* wanting to risk vulnerability completely mirrored my own. (Plus she’s funny!)

Brené also says, though, that “Connection is why we’re here. It’s what gives meaning and purpose to our lives.” We know this.

And what keeps us from true connection, according to her research? The fear that we’ll be excluded, rejected, if we share our real selves. (*Shame.*)

We have to risk vulnerability if we want real connections.

Then I read another thing she said, something like “Vulnerability in *you* looks like strength and courage, but vulnerability in *me* feels like weakness.”

When you share your fears and sadness with me, what I see is how strong you are for doing so. But when I share *my* vulnerabilities, I feel weak, and I assume you think I’m weak. This is true for most (all?) of us.



That piece of wisdom gave me the courage to try. **If it looks like courage and strength when you do it, why can’t it look like courage and strength when I do?**

So in 2015 I asked four of my friends to start a new ongoing small group with me.

There’s no leader, no prep, no homework. We meet weekly in the same place, on the same day, at the same time.

At first the weekly commitment was daunting. Who has time for that?! Before long, though, we all looked forward to it and hated if we had to miss.

Each week everyone answers two questions, the same two questions every week:

“How have you experienced God this week?”

And “How is it with your soul?”

In the beginning our answers were guarded, naturally, as we got to know each other. We talked about seeing God in nature, or hearing God in Sunday’s sermon or scripture text. God was *out there*. And these are all good answers. (There aren’t any bad answers.)

And we couldn’t really answer the soul question at first. Honestly it’s still hard some weeks, and we’ve been doing this for more than seven years.

Eventually we started sharing about frustrations at work, disappointments in our families, trouble with the kids, and seeing God even there.

We made a rule: don’t try to fix anything for anyone, don’t be helpful, don’t give advice. Just listen.

At some point we started bringing up stuff that’s even harder to talk about — arguments with our husbands, anxiety about our jobs, deeper insecurities. And we saw God there, too — God beyond us *and* within us.

Something helped us shift another step deeper during the pandemic.

We tried Zoom for awhile (blerg). Then we discovered a grove of oak trees at Duranceau Park, and we brought our chairs and sat under the canopy.

The squirrels threw acorns at us, and the dogs ran through our circle, but the oaks became a haven for us.

We became even more honest with each other.

We even started crying together. And let me tell you, for *this* group of smart, strong, capable, compassionate women, this was a big leap into even more trust.



I think we were all so anxious about and wrung out by the pandemic that we couldn’t help but drop our guard even more. Even our reserves were tapped out, our defenses well and truly toast.

I think each of us would say that in our group we feel seen, we feel connected, and we feel a deep sense of belonging. We've learned how to listen. We've widened our perspective on people and the world. We've done conflict with each other. We're learning to trust the slow work of God. We've healed and grown. And we laugh together. A lot!

Anyway, all this is to say that if you're looking for a place to belong, a place where you can share the real part of your life and not just your highlight reel, I can help.

First, think about who your people are. Do you have a few people you think you could be yourself with?

If you don't yet, try joining some activities at church to expand your circle of friends — sign up for a short-term class (<https://hilliardumc.org/grow/adults/learning-opportunities/>), volunteer with Wednesday Community Supper (<https://hilliardumc.org/events/community-supper/>), serve on a hospitality team once a month (<https://hilliardumc.org/serve/serving-within/>), join the choir (<https://hilliardumc.org/serve/serving-within/>)...

Once you have a few people you can picture being real with (groups of 4-6 are perfect), contact me. If you want help finding some people, I can help with that, too. I'll coach you on how to get started. (And you don't *have* to meet weekly. Whatever works for you!)

We all need companions on the journey with whom we can be ourselves. Have you found yours?

You matter, friends, and you deserve to be seen and embraced for who you are!

Much love,

Beth



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*PS If you want to learn your Enneagram type and gain some freedom from your conditioned auto-pilot responses to life, come to our **Introduction to the**

Enneagram class! 4 Tuesday evenings starting next week, in person at church (<https://hilliardumc.org/enneagram/>).

The logo consists of a stylized cross shape formed by four colored triangles: a green triangle at the top, a blue triangle at the right, a red triangle at the bottom, and a yellow triangle at the left. To the right of this graphic is the word "Hilliard" in a large, bold, black sans-serif font, and below it, "United Methodist Church" in a smaller, bold, black sans-serif font.

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