Let’s start off our time together in prayer, “Heavenly Father, open our lives to the truth of your Word and your will for us. As we consider the 4 essentials of Life Groups this week and next… help us to see how good it is for us to be part of a group that focuses on the Word of God, Growth, Acceptance and Confidentiality. In Jesus name, Amen!

 Connect – Grow – Share. Those three words describe a simple process for discipleship… for being a Christian… for living a Christ-centered life. It’s an easy tool to wrap your life around. Those three words CONNECT – GROW – SHARE, serve as a template, a guide, and a way to assess where you are, and where you are going in your life as a Christian. All of us, throughout our lives, have moved forward taking next steps. Whether it is from preschool to kindergarten, high school to college, and college to the real world, pursuing a career, finding a spouse, having kids, all the way up to retirement and so on… we all know about taking next steps in our lives. Even in our jobs and careers we know what it takes to get to the next step as we increase our abilities and mature in our skills! Most often these next steps are built on what we learned before… on who we have become. Without all those steps in place we wouldn’t be who we are today…. Some of the biggest steps in my life were going from being single, to getting married and to having children. Spending time at each step was crucial… developing each step was important…

Being a Christian is also all about next steps. In fact the Author of Hebrews compares the life of a Christian to a baby who at first lives off of milk. An infant survives on milk and as he grows he eventually moves to more and more solid food, that’s a big step! Hebrews 5: 14 states, “…solid food is for the mature.” Do you still drink milk as an adult? Yes! But solid food feeds and sustains and helps you grow now way more than a diet of milk alone can! As Christians, God doesn’t want us to stay in infancy, He wants us to grow up and move on to solid food, because that’s part of Growing up, and being healthy!

Last session, pastor Tim spoke to you about the importance of the first step in your life as a disciple of Jesus Christ – CONNECT. CONNECT to God and His People in Worship! Making worship, every weekend, a priority for your life and your family’s life is a giant first step. At St. John’s the next step that we want you to take is GROW. GROW together in God’s Word Through Life Groups! If you are watching this video you most likely have taken the next step of joining a Life Group! And you took the step to come back for session two! As you take this next step toward Growing Together with other believers in God’s Word, It is my prayer that your life and the lives of those you are watching this video with will be changed forever in a powerful way!

You may be wondering why this next step of joining a life Group is so important. You see, when we look at the growth of Christianity in the early church we see some amazing things happening. If we look at the history book of the early church, the book of Acts in the New Testament, from beginning, in Acts 1:15 we see the believers were “a group numbering about a hundred and twenty.” By the end of the books, in Acts 21:20, the leaders of the church report that “thousands of Jews have believed.” The actual word there for thousands, is myriads, which means tens of thousands have come to believe in Jesus Christ. Last week Pastor Tim spoke to you about how important it is for believers to CONNECT not only to God but also to each other in Worship. Acts 5:42 tells us that the believers did that “in the temple courts…” but it also says that they met “from house to house.” In fact we see the apostle Paul in Romans 16:5 tells those reading his letter to greet the church that meets at the house of Priscilla and Aquilla! These house to house meetings of believers were the very first Life Groups. The early church CONNECTED to God and His People in Large Group settings like the Temple and they GREW together in the Word in homes. And the Church grew from 120 to tens of thousands!

From the book of Acts, we see that large group Worship and small group growth helped the early church to grow! It worked then and it works today. In fact, every growing church in America today has a vibrant Life Group ministry. And if you think about the state of things in America you know that America is in need of Life Groups. More and More statistics are coming out showing that year by year the decline of healthy families continues to escalate. People of all ages are more and more in need of strong friendships with people that accept them, friends they can trust, friends that will grow with them, friends that will gather with them around the Word of God. Many people in our city, county and country are in need of healthy biblical community, and that includes you! We all need a strong network of Christians friends who help us when we need it… who challenge us when we need it… and we all need the opportunity to help others in their faith when they need it… and challenge them when they need it as well. We see from the book of Acts that God has called us to do Life Together in this way… and for our church… a healthy life Group experience achieves that! That is why we are so excited that you have taken this next step in your life as a Christian… from Connect to Grow…

At St. John’s we believe that there are four essentials to every Life Group. 1. The Word of God 2. Growth 3. Acceptance and 4. Confidentiality. Next week we are going to talk a lot about the first essential - Word of God. This week we’ll focus on the other 3 essentials. I’d like you to hear from some friends of mine about the importance of growth, acceptance, and confidentiality in their life group experience…

**[insert video testimony]**

I hope you can see how good a Life Group experience can be for you and for those in your group. Let’s take some time now to dig a little deeper into God’s Word. I’d like to talk a little more about 3 of the 4 essentials of a life Group, growth, acceptance and confidentiality. next week we will look more in depth at the remaining one, the Word of God.

First, let’s talk about Growth: As part of a life group you want to grow and see your life transformed to be more like Christ’s. As part of this growth you seek to not only pray for each other but encourage each other and hold each other accountable in the steps of discipleship – CONNECT – GROW – SHARE. Hebrews 10:24 and 25 states it this way: *24 And let us consider how we may* ***spur one another on toward love and good deeds****. 25 Let us not give up meeting together,as some are in the habit of doing, but let us* ***encourage*** *one another- .*  I was part of a life group for a few years when I lived in St. Louis. Recently, I flew to St. Louis to make a very important presentation. I stayed with a family in my Life Group and they prayed for me and encouraged me in a powerful way, just like they had done so many times years ago. That was such a huge blessing to me. I also remember a time when I was part of a Life Group experience when I served as a Youth Pastor in northern California. As a young 22 year old fresh out of college I was in need of some character refining. My friend in my life group called me out on some things I was saying and guided me down a better path… she was holding me accountable… spurring me on toward love and good deeds! And I’m grateful that she was bold enough to love me in that way. Every Life Group I’ve been a part of has helped me to Grow!

Another essential to life Groups is Acceptance: (cheer’s song?) As a part of a life group you seek to accept each other unconditionally, as Christ has accepted you. We do this to build strong friendships that are rooted in Christ. Acts 2:46 says some great stuff about the early church, “They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts…” although my presentation in St. Louis went well and it was meaningful for me… looking back on it… the best part of my trip to St. Louis was sitting around the dinner table with my friends from my life group, playing the piano with their kids, staying up late and talking about life, and sleeping on an old futon in the basement! That was the best… my friends opened their home to me, we ate together with glad and sincere hearts… They accepted me as Christ would! Acts 2:45 speaks of how the early believers gave to anyone that had need. In a life Group you have a chance to really help the needs of others and receive their help too! Acts 2:42 talks about the early church; it says that the disciples devoted themselves to the fellowship. That’s kind of a churchy word but it is really powerful. Fellowship is a result of that Acceptance of each other the way Christ accepts us. It is a unity, a communion, a close connection, a close knit community or network of Christian friends. When you devote yourself to something like that… be ready for some powerful things to happen in your life.

The last essential I want to talk to you about is Confidentiality. Everything shared in a life Group… stays in the Life Group. In a world where Gossip and slander run rampant… the Life Group is a place where we can bring tough decisions and issues about life. There are some things that we don’t want to broadcast to the whole world but we still need input from others or we just need to get it off our chest and tell somebody. Proverbs 11:13 says *A gossip betrays a confidence,but a trustworthy man keeps a secret*. Life Groups keep everything in confidence and seek the best for each other.

Life Groups come in all shapes and sizes, some have 4 people some have 12. What’s most important is that you are taking that next step in your faith as a follower of Christ. I have been a part of all sorts of Life Groups since I was a junior high kid here at St. John’s. The life group I’m meeting with right now is in the beginning stages but I’m looking forward to growing together with them in the Word and seeing where God leads us! I’m looking forward to hearing where God leads you and your Group as you step forward from Connect, to Grow, to Share. Looking forward to next session!

(Conclusion: maybe include Hope’s Birth/Baptism story)