

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost October 3, 2021

Genesis 2:18-24, Mark 10:2-16

It was the summer of 1990; I had just finished my first year at Catawba College in Salisbury NC and had been invited to attend a retreat with about 8-9 other students and several faculty members. It was a reading retreat, where we would have a theme for conversation based on the texts we were reading.

One of those texts, was *Habits of the Heart* by sociologist Robert Bellah, et al. This book, along with another by Bellah called *The Good Society* introduced me to the concepts that had shaped our nation from its founding through today.

It was on this retreat that I first had a concept that I intuitively knew existed named. Individualism as the defining idea of the United States, rooted in the philosophy of John Locke who held up the ideal of the autonomous individual. In Locke's view the ideal society was one that left individuals free to pursue their private satisfactions independently of one another. Bellah and crew identified four different forms of individualism, but the dominant forms of individualism in the US were ones that placed the individual ahead of any communal good or understood any communal good coming only through individual success.

As I later learned, there is also a thread within the United States- idealized in the frontier narratives of the early colonies all the way through the Wild West and onto today- of the rugged individual. Rugged individualism says the ideal is an individual who is totally self-reliant and independent from any outside assistance. You can see it in these mindsets- difficulty asking for or accepting support or help from others, a business mindset of I vs. we- rugged individualists tend to bristle at

being controlled or managed and often struggle to see their membership in any group.

These themes were present in early 1990's society as well. John Wayne still held sway as the idealized American male- tough, slow talking, independent, participating in society because they needed him, not vice versa. Yet, this dreamy eyed look at the individual was balanced at the time by a trust of and participation in institutions that kept all of us linked together in community- socially and politically. But, as one current reviewer of *Good Society* put it, "It is precisely this sense of common purpose and public spirit crucial to the guidance of institutions in a democracy that is absent from our society today. A ruthless individualism, expressed primarily through a market mentality, has invaded every sphere of our lives, undermining those institutions, such as the family, that have traditionally functioned as foci of collective purposes, history, and culture. This lack of common purpose and concern for the common good bodes ill for a people claiming to be a democracy."

We see this same thread of individualism I first read about thirty years ago clearly expressed today in the midst of the communal challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, one that threatens us all. You see it most clearly in opposition to requirements for all people to be vaccinated and/or wear a mask in public. We hear the individualism behind that opposition in the expression of trust in individuals to, "make the best health decisions for themselves and their families." Note that concern for the good of the community or the neighbor is not reflected in the decision-making process. It's not that people won't or can't do that, but what is reflected as the ideal in our society does not expect that.

One challenge of the individualism expressed comes when you think about the logical conclusion of the “go it alone” ethos. I’ll make the best decisions for myself and maybe my family and as long as I/we are okay, the heck with the rest of you. And while survival of the fittest may be Darwinian, the question for us is, is it godly?

God looks at the human God has created from the dust of the earth and says, it is not good that a human should be alone. While God tries to find us companionship and community with the creatures of this world. It just doesn’t work. They are good (as any pet owner will tell you) but they do not do for us what another human being does. So, God creates a help mate, one to stand alongside us.

As scripture shows, from the beginning, God has created us to be in community. To attend to and care for our neighbors. To have their wellbeing always within the scope of our decision making and concern. Remember back to the summer when we talked about the prophets? They all brought warnings to the Israelites when they were not caring for their neighbors, particularly the vulnerable. God has built into the structure of how we coexist, care for community, and not doing that has bad consequences.

It is not good for humans to be alone.

Jesus is asked in the Temple which commandment is the greatest and his response is that you should love God with all that you are, and you should love your neighbor as yourself. Later, on the night he is betrayed, Jesus goes on to explain that the love we show to our neighbor is the same kind of love Jesus has

shown us. A self-sacrificial love that looks to the good of the other even at some expense to the self.

The command of God and of God's Son Jesus rubs up against the individualism that is most expressed in the US and raises questions. Is it even possible to be Christian if you are not in community of some kind? How can you live out that command to love your neighbor as Jesus has loved us if you are not in community? If you are not sacrificing something of yourself (your safety net, your good, your comfort) for the good of your neighbor?

God says, it is not good that we should be alone.

Now, this is an introvert talking here. While I love my calling as a pastor, as my wife will attest, it takes energy for me to be with people. However, while I might be perfectly content in being by myself all the time, it is not good that I should be alone that much. It is good for me, and for my neighbor, for me to be in community with them. For us to be in conversation together about how God is calling us to care for one another.

It is not good for us to be alone. This is part of the reason why God calls us into community through the waters of baptism. Today, Oliver Freese will join this community that is the Body of Christ in the world. His presence is welcome and needed because he brings with him unique gifts, abilities, and talents. They may not be very evident right now, but they are in there and they are gifts that we will need to do the ministry God has called us to.

This reality is the reason why, as part of our Stewardship Campaign- *Enough* we are asking everyone to not only complete an estimate of giving card for 2022 but

also to complete a Gifts, Skills, and Talents form. We need your gifts, skills, and talents to do the ministry God is calling us to. To love and serve our neighbors in the same way God in Jesus has loved and served us. No one of us can do all of this ministry alone, but together, with each of us doing a part we are gifted for, we can do amazing things. In community with one another.

We need each other, my siblings in Christ. I think we have all discovered that over the last 18 months. We need each other for strength and comfort. To take up the slack for when we are weak, to encourage us when we are weary, to sit with us when we mourn. And part of what is so difficult about this pandemic has been that to keep one another safe, we have had to- in one form or another- separate ourselves from each other. To sacrifice the very thing that God calls us to- community that is physically present for one another- for the sake of the health and safety of those who make up that community.

From the beginning, God calls us into community. The very rules God gives us for living with one another are based on the care and respect for other people and their welfare. The God who we worship is oriented to the good of others and to follow that God and God's son Jesus means we orient ourselves in the same way. It is part of the DNA of what it means to be created in the image of God.

Yet, God makes each of us unique, with gifts, talents, skills and abilities in a combination that does not exist in anyone else. We are not clones of one another. We each have worth in God's eyes. But when we come together in our uniqueness, when we share those gifts, skills, and talents with others and let their abilities fill the gaps for us, we create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. This is human society at its best. This is the ideal that God calls us to.

It is not good that we should be alone. I need you, we need you, to be the people God has called us to be. Community will not be all sugar and spice and everything nice. Being in community can be messy because we are flawed, imperfect beings. That is why we need God come to us in Jesus. That is why we come here each week to practice living in community, confessing what we have done wrong, receiving forgiveness, being fed with the Word and finally being strengthened by the Body and Blood of Jesus so that we might go into the world ready to love it as God in Jesus has loved us.

God looks with love upon each of us and says, it is not good that you should be alone, and gives us the gift and challenge of community. May God work in, through, and around our imperfections, to bind us ever closer in faith towards God and love of one another- for the sake of the world. Amen.