

“We’re Better Together”
JPC#945 – Genesis 2:18-25, 1 Kings 19
Second Baptist Richmond – March 11, 2007

Let us pray. *God, in a room this size we can only imagine the kinds of hurt, the kinds of pain and burdens that we have dragged through these doors that we may not even be aware of. So God, today as we explore what your kind of community looks like, we ask your Holy Spirit to flow in this place and to convict and heal and to show us things we have not seen before. With all of the messages we get every week, we want to listen to you as you speak something new into us and give us courage to take away our fears. Even as we look at these ancient words, please blur the lines between these stories and our story. We want to see something bigger, something worth giving our lives to. Give us a picture the size of your cloud of witnesses, and help us to see ourselves painted into that portrait. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

All through Genesis 1-2, we see that God created things. And upon creating them, the Bible says, “it was **good**.” It was good. Over and over.

But before we ever get to Genesis 3 and the introduction of sin, after a litany of “it was good, it was very good.” There is an abrupt change. Notice Chapter 2:18: the Lord God said, “***It is not good* ...**” So before fruit, before the devil, before temptation. All of a sudden, “It is not good.”

What’s not good? “It is not good ... for the man to be alone.” In the Garden of Eden, before the Fall, we have God saying, “No, this ain’t right.”

What’s not right? Well, Adam is alone. The very first thing that the Bible ever says “is not good.” Is when Adam is alone.

Now think about this. Christians sometimes say dangerous things like, “All you need is God.” It would be nice except for the fact that God

doesn't think that. In the Bible, right away you have somebody alone and God saying, "This won't work. This is not good."

And so the foundation is set in the first story of the Bible: it is not good to be alone. God establishes that he is going to give life through other people. God creates Eve, another person, a relationship, a community.

Pre-devil, pre-fruit, pre-fall, pre-"hey this looks good, you want a bite?" You have God saying, "not good."

Now notice what happens in Chapter 3. The serpent comes along and tempts them to live outside of this way that God has made them to live. So Eve takes the fruit, eats it, gives it to Adam and he eats it. Verse 7, "***Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.***"

Now as to where does "naked" comes from, go back to 2:25, "***The man and his wife were both naked and not ashamed.***" Two people fully themselves, totally accepting, validating, embracing, and being okay not only with who they are but with who the other person is. So the *naked and not ashamed* here could be read on multiple levels. It's a condition of unconditional love and acceptance. Total naked honesty and vulnerability.

And then when they choose some other way, mainly through taking the fruit, all of the sudden they pull back from this togetherness. They

realize, “Oh my word, I’m naked,” and they cover up. Something comes between them – the fig leaf is symbolic, too – and they are not together. My Southern mother would say that they go from “naked” to “nekkid.”

Now this is the first place in the scripture where we are told about the results of the fatal choice they have made. They take the fruit and choose to live outside of how God created them to live, and what is the first place that the wound of sin appears? It’s their relationship, which is fascinating. The first thing the Fall affects is how two people get along. So if you’ve ever had conflict with another human being (which may have happened to you), this is as old as humanity itself.

Sometimes we are shocked when a relationship goes south. But this is as old as the tree, old as the fruit, old as the first primal human being. This goes back to our origins. Two people who cover up and pull apart. They try to go it alone. And everybody is miserable.

The first effect of the Fall of humans is a wedge right at the core of relationship. Where once there was unrestrained embrace, now there is restraint, distance. Where once there was intimacy, there is now doubt. Once unconditional love, now “I don’t know.” Once naked and not ashamed, now a fig leaf. Once naked, now nekkid.

This is our central problem. God created us to live honest, open, vulnerable relationship with each other. And living any other way is less than how we were made to live.

No extra charge from this little trivia fact, but does anyone here know the derivation of the word, “idiot?” It’s a medieval term. It comes from the image of the fool who was crazy enough to live outside of the community. Away from its network of relationships, apart from its protection and instruction, alone, alone, alone. As in “village idiot.” Just a thought.

Turn to I Kings, Chapter 19. Here’s how this fig leaf issue comes up again and again. A prophet named Elijah, one of the heroes of the faith, has this confrontation. And Queen Jezebel says, “I’m going to kill you.”

So Elijah runs from Jezebel, verse 4, “*He went a day’s journey into the desert.*” Not exactly where the party is happening in this world. He goes out alone. He comes to a broom tree, sits down under it, and prays that he might die. “*I have had enough Lord, take my life, I am no better than my ancestors.*” He lays down under the tree and says, *Take my life, I’ve had enough.* He just wants to die.

Why does he want to die? Verse 10 (**read**). That is interesting. Why does he want to die? What is the reason? “I’m alone. I’m the only one.” And what did God say in Genesis? “It’s not good for people to be alone.”

See, when we disconnect and put up the fig leaves, it always leads to despair. If you struggle with depression, with suicidal thoughts, where does come from? It comes from thinking, *I'm all alone*. It's a lack of hope, because God didn't set it up so it would just be us. God set it up so we would have each other.

I love what God says in verse 18 (**read**). God is like, "You're not alone. In fact there are 7000 others. Oh, and what are you doing in the desert under a broom tree?" God's solution to Elijah's depression? *Hey, there are 7000 others, go get with them*. That's God's answer.

If Christians are going to go anywhere in God's creation, then we Christians will have to go *together*. What Rob Bell, inspiration of this message calls *withwards*. Christians go through life *together*, in community.

The word *community* comes from the word *common*. Common means those things we share that are the same. Every human being, I have something in common with them. Every human is created in the image of God. I have that in common. Every human is created for a life of mission and purpose and significance. I have that in common. Every human being has limited time and then we die and we all want to understand how this life can have meaning and significance. I have that in common. I have massive numbers of things in common with every human being ever.

But it is possible for me to live outside of sharing what I have in common with other human beings. Possible for me – or even for a church – to try to fly solo. To do life, to do church as an independent. Dumb idea.

Bell tells about a friend who was in a group getting together once a week, in a kind of formal way. His friend is sitting in the group while everybody is going in a circle, telling what is going on with their lives.

And he has this moment where he's like, I can either say "*Oh, I'm fine, everything great, God is great...*" Or I can say what is really going on. So he said, "I just let it all come out. *I'm lost, I'm confused, I'm hurting, I don't have any idea what I am doing with my life.*" He says *that*.

Then somebody across the circle says, "*Me too.*" Which may be the two most powerful words humans can say to each other.

He says, "Me too." And people started pouring out how things really are. Took off their fig leaves. And discovered profound, deep community that has been here along, but we are hiding, we are moving too fast, we are masking, we are pretending that we are somebody else and we never tap into what has been there the whole time. With me?

Christians are people who go *together* on the journey. People smart enough to know that flying outside of community is really not a great idea.

Now people showing up in a building who just believe the same things? That's not community. That's a forum. That's a lecture. That's not a community. That's just a bunch of people who believe the same stuff.

There are 46 instances in the New Testament of what some call the '*one another, each other*' phrases. (They're commands, incidentally.)

- Galatians 5:13, "Serve one another in love."
- Ephesians 4:2, "Patiently bear with one another."
- Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind and compassionate, forgiving one another."
- 1 Thessalonians 5, "Encourage and build each other up."
- Hebrews 10, "Spur one another on to love and good deeds."
- 1 John 3:11, "Love one another."

46 of these 'one another' phrases. I just picked a handful; some repeat, obviously. I think there are 19 different ones.

So when the Bible talks about church, it talks about community. That's why there are 19 different of these 'one another' phrases. Pray for each other. Confess to each other. Forgive each other.

How many of these you can do on a Sunday morning between 11:00am and noon. How many of these can be done in a church service? There is one that says sing songs to each other. So we can do that one. Teach one another. So three or four, maybe, out of how many? 46?

This is why it is so disturbing when people say they belong to a church. And what they mean by that is they come to this event and then leave. And that is the extent of their interaction.

That's not church. That's going to a teaching-worship event. I think our language about church is really twisted when we come, sit, listen to somebody talk, sing, share or whatever, and then leave and say, "Well that's church." It's not. It's not what the Bible has in mind.

What the Bible has in mind is more like people gathered in each others' homes, in living rooms, at dinner tables, over coffee. What the Bible has in mind is what theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called, "Life Together."

That's the witness of God-followers to a lonely, isolated, splintered, shattered, hateful world: life together! That's what separates us from people who have no hope: life together! That's the blessing we have been given so that we can pass that blessing on to the rest of the world: life together!

From Adam and Eve to the families of Israel to the earliest church to some churches today: God has always tried to create a vision of the Kingdom of heaven, on earth as it is in heaven. And that Kingdom vision looks like life together. *We're better together ... than we are alone.*

Say it with me: *"We're better together () ... than we are alone.*

Now your fearless pastor and others have recently launched the Ray and Ann Spence Network for Congregational Leadership – RASNet.

Because of this core conviction that God’s people are better together than we are alone. RASNet will be about churches cooperating, collaborating, multiplying. About helping leaders take the journey withwards.

The dream of God is life together. And because of your leader, Dr. Spence, we’re going to have a chance to make this dream a reality for thousands of church leaders. And by helping leaders and churches do ministry together, RASNet is going to change the face of Richmond, of Virginia, of this nation and world. You heard it here first. And I hope you’ll find out what your pastor believes so passionately about it.

Here’s what I believe: We’re better together than we are alone.

What about you? Do you believe that? Are you willing to be part of something bigger than what any one can do on their own?

Invitation

God make us aware of the bonds that we have. Show us the ways that we allow shallow and silly things to divide us. Show us the bonds we have with others that we aren’t even aware of. We want to be a “together” kind of force in the world. We ask you to convict us and bring us together to do enormous things – Kingdom things. We repent of foolish, arrogant isolationism and give ourselves to the Kingdom way of life together. We pray that Second Baptist and RASNet can be a prophetic force in making this become a reality. In Jesus’ name, Amen.