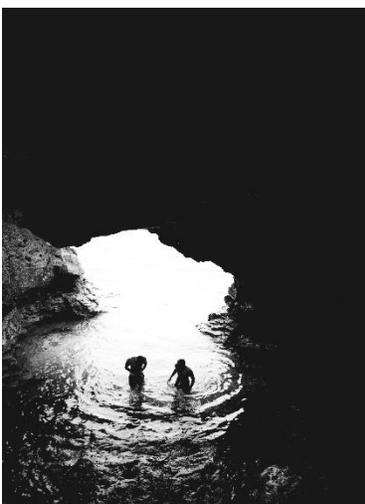


September 9, 2018
16th Sunday of Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Wired for Belonging”
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Genesis 2:4-9, 15-25

Translation: The Inclusive Bible, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007.

At the time when YHWH made the heavens and the earth, there was still no wild bush on the earth nor had any wild plant sprung up, for YHWH had not yet sent rain to the earth, and there was no human being to till the soil. Instead, a flow of water would well up from the ground and irrigate the soil.

So YHWH fashioned an earth creature out of the clay of the earth and blew into its nostrils the breath of life. And the earth creature became a living being.

YHWH planted a garden to the east, in Eden — “Land of Pleasure” — and placed in it the earth creature that had been made. Then YHWH caused every kind of tree, enticing to look at and good to eat, to spring from the soil. In the center of the garden was the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Then YHWH took the earth creature and settled it in the garden of Eden so that it might cultivate and care for the land. YHWH commanded the earth creature, “You may eat as much as you like from any of the trees of the garden except the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. You must not eat from that tree, for on the day you eat from that tree, this is the day you will die—yes, die.”

Then YHWH said, “It is not good for the earth creature to be alone. I will make a fitting companion for it.” So from the soil, YHWH formed all the various wild beasts and all the birds of the air and brought them to the earth creature to be named. Whatever the earth creature called each one, that became its name. The earth creature gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of the air, and all the wild animals.

But none of them proved to be a fitting companion, so YHWH made the earth creature fall into a deep sleep, and while it slept, God divided the earth creature in two, then closed up the flesh from its side. YHWH then fashioned the two halves into male and female and presented them to one another.

When the male realized what had happened, he exclaimed,

“This time, this is the one!

Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh!

Now, she will be Woman, and I will be Man

because we are of one flesh!”

This is why people leave their parents and become bonded to one another, and the two become one flesh.

Wired for Belonging

Recently, I came across some surprising statistics. We all know that human beings are dependent on food and water and oxygen to survive and thrive, and we know that not having clean air or enough food or eating and drinking things that are bad for you can shorten your life. But listen to this: living with air pollution increases your odds of dying early by five percent. Living with obesity increases those odds by twenty percent. If you regularly drink alcohol to excess, you increase your odds of dying early by thirty percent. But if you are chronically lonely? Your odds of dying early increased by forty-five percent.¹ Of all those things, loneliness is the greatest hazard to our health.

Eventually, every one of us experiences loneliness. For some, it happens during our childhood, because for whatever reason our family is not a place where we feel understood. For others, it might happen the first time we leave home when we are living on our own and forming new relationships. For others, loneliness hits when we find ourselves surrounded by people. But research shows that loneliness is not just unpleasant; it can be toxic to our mental and physical health. For the next four weeks, we are going to consider how the Bible addresses loneliness and belonging. To be clear, there is an important distinction between being alone which for many of us, particularly the introverts among us, is a positive and even restorative experience and being lonely. For one thing, you don't have to be alone to feel lonely; sometimes the most difficult experiences of loneliness come when you are in a group of people, whether big or small and yet somehow don't feel like you truly belong. We know how foundational loneliness and belonging are to the human experience in part because the Bible addresses them in a myriad of ways from the book of Genesis to the book of Revelation.

The scripture we heard today is the second of two accounts of creation. In the first story, which might be more familiar, God creates the world from a swirling mass of watery chaos, and at the end of each day of creation, God declares all these new things good. But, if you remember, in that account, things are good when they are in balance: light and darkness, land and sea, sun and moon, day and night, and, finally, on the sixth day, male and female human beings, who are declared the pinnacle of God's creation. But in Genesis chapter two, the human or the earth creature, as our translation calls it is created much earlier, and

¹ Brene Brown, "High Lonesome," *Psychotherapy Networker*, November/December 2017.

this creature is not gendered; it is profoundly alone. And God says, “It is not good that the earth creature should be alone,” and then goes about creating all kinds of animals and birds and parading them before the earth creature to be named and evaluated as potential partners. But none of them is sufficient. Although we may not pick this up from the English translation, the Hebrew is clear: the earth creature is looking for a partner not just to help get work done, but for the purposes of procreation, to grow together as a family. It is only when the God splits the earth creature in two and creates two human creatures from one that the earth creature can declare, “Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh,” which Hebrew scholar Rolf Jacobsen says would be better translated, “Now that’s what I’m talking about!”² The earth creature has finally found a partner, someone with whom life can be shared in the form of family. When one earth creature becomes two, humanity experiences belonging for the very first time.

Just as we all experience loneliness at one time or another, we also all experience belonging that feeling of connection, of being, as we say, “at home” with others. We all long for connection with other human beings who truly see and understand us. This is the very longing that we see in this story in the earth creature’s desire for a human partner. This yearning for connection is currently shaping our cultural landscape. In a time when we are increasingly isolated from one another for all kinds of reason, a longing for connection has fueled the growth of tribalism, sectarianism, and extreme partisan thinking. This longing for connection feeds our addictions to sports, to pornography, to drugs, to violence, to social media. Like the animals God parades before the earth creature, there are countless options for meeting our longing for connection, but none of them is an adequate substitute for true connection with other human beings.

On a trip to the Northwest coast as a teenager, I saw giant Redwood trees for the first time. They were astonishing to behold, huge and majestic. Redwoods typically grow and reproduce in groves known as family groups or cathedrals. Family groups are stronger than isolated trees because they anchor one another. The root systems of Redwood trees are shallow, but the trees in a family group weave their roots together so that if one gets partially uprooted, the remaining

² “I Love to Tell the Story,” podcast on the narrative lectionary for September 13, 2015.
http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=658

trees can help it to keep standing, allowing family groups of trees to withstand catastrophic events better.³

In Genesis, chapter two God creates the first family group. Over the centuries, much has been made of the fact that some translations of the text make it sound as if the woman was created for the sole purpose of being a helper for the man. But the word for helper or helpmate, the Hebrew word "ezer," is used most often in the Hebrew Bible to refer to God. Although in English, "helper" can have the connotation of a subordinate, in Hebrew that is not the case. When God is referred to as our "ezer," it has more of the meaning of "sustainer."

When we set aside our assumptions and cultural norms around gender, we discover that this story describes something profoundly important about what it means to be human. It teaches us that we are wired for belonging. We are, literally, made for each other. We need the love and support and sustenance that comes from being in a relationship with our fellow human beings. Our lives actually depend on it.

A couple of months ago, I was climbing a flight of about fifteen stairs that led to the entrance of a coffee shop. At the bottom of the stairs was an elderly woman with a toddler; I assumed it was a grandmother and granddaughter. The toddler was painstakingly navigating the steps with one hand barely able to hold on to the railing and the other repeatedly swatting away her grandmother's outstretched hand. The little girl kept saying, "No. I'm independent!" When I heard it, I laughed out loud. The woman gave me a wry smile and said, "Her mother taught her to say that. I told her she's going to be sorry she did!"

I laughed, but it got me thinking about my own childhood. I grew up in the 1970s and 80s in what feels like one of the last traditional families. My dad was at work most of the time, while my mother ran the household, cared for the kids, and volunteered for hours and hours every week at church, at our schools, and at other agencies around town. The older I got, the more I viewed this arrangement with the kind of skepticism teenagers are really good at. I vowed to hold on to the independent streak that was legendary from my own toddler-hood, when my

³ Kelly Hough Rogers, "Abundance Born Out of Scarcity," sermon on Day1.org, July 29, 2018. http://day1.org/8241-kelly_hough_rogers_abundance_born_out_of_scarcity

go-to pronouncement was, "I can do it myself!" And I certainly didn't want to be anyone's helpmate.

What didn't occur to me at the time was that if I weren't anyone's helpmate, then I also wouldn't have a helpmate, someone to love and support and sustain me, especially in those moments when I simply didn't have the knowledge or skills or strength to go it alone.

In her book *Braving the Wilderness*, Brene Brown discusses the research of John Cacioppo, who studies loneliness, and whose research reveals that the American myth of rugged individualism is a toxic lie. Strength doesn't come from our independence, Cacioppo says, but "rather from our collective ability to plan, communicate, and work together. Our neural, hormonal, and genetic makeup support interdependence over independence." For the members of a social species, which all humans are, to reach maturity is actually NOT to become "autonomous and solitary, it's to become the one on whom others can depend."⁴ We are wired for belonging. We are made for each other. This is why our brains warn us when our ability to thrive and prosper in a community is compromised. So when we need food we feel hungry, and when we need water we feel thirsty, and when we need a social connection which is as vital to our health as nutrition, we feel lonely.

When the first human creature looks at all of the animals God made and does not feel a sense of connection or belonging with any of them, God responds. God goes back to the drawing board and refashions that creature in such a way that where there was one, there are now two. This story is not a historical fact or science; it is a metaphor. It is a story that reveals how God created us for each other, to help and hold and sustain one another in a way that is literally, life-giving, life-sustaining, even life-saving. It is a story that is played out throughout the Bible, as God's people seek ways to create and sustain meaningful connections and communities, a story that culminates in the creation of the church, the Body of Christ, a family group woven together by our identity as God's children, as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Frederick Buechner recalls an especially dark time in his life

⁴ Brene Brown, *Ibid.*

when one of his children was very sick, and his worry was making him almost as sick as she was. One day, the phone rang, and it was a minister Buechner knew, but not very well. This minister lived in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Buechner assumed that's where he was calling from, but it turned out he had driven nearly eight hundred miles from North Carolina to Vermont and had checked in to an inn about twenty miles from Buechner's home. "I hear you're having some troubles," he said, "and I thought it might help to have an extra friend around for a day or two." "For a day or two," Buechner writes, "he was there with me. He was there for me. I don't think anything we found to say to each other amounted to very much or had anything particularly religious about it. I don't remember ever spending much time talking about my troubles with him. We just took a couple of walks, had a meal or two together and smoked our pipes, drove around to see some of the countrysides, and that was about it. [But] I have never forgotten how he came all that distance just for that...I also believe that although as far as I can remember we never so much as mentioned the name of Christ, Christ was as much in the air, we breathed those few days as the smoke of our pipes was in the air, or the dappled light of the woods we walked through. I believe that for a little time we both of us touched the hem of Christ's garment, that both of us were, for a little time anyway, healed."⁵

Amen

⁵ Frederick Buechner, *The Clown in the Belfry*. Shared in the "Frederick Buechner Quote of the Day" email on November 30, 2015.