

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Come Together: Rocks and Islands”

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Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

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Last week we started this series “Come Together,” a look through Scripture on the call, the inescapable call, to share life together in the gospel, that a life seeking Jesus is not and cannot be a solitary one. That’s not the design we find in Scripture, and more broadly, not the design we find for human thriving either. So why do we resist it so often, especially in a life of faith?

We started off with some of the core underpinnings of fellowship, not in ourselves, but in the very nature of God, in the Trinity, as a God who himself exists in fellowship, in relationship, three in one, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and how that communion of the very nature of God is the very thing into which we are invited in fellowship. That means this whole church thing has some higher stakes than just hanging out with each other—we’re talking about the being of God evident among us, or not evident.

This week, we turn to the Old Testament, in what amounts to a word of caution to indulging that impulse some of us may have from time to time: to retreat, to draw back from others. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:*

*If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.*

*But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up.*

Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.

But how can one keep warm alone?

*Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.*

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

A stoic poet looked out from his apartment window in a New York City high rise on a cold day at the end of the year. He was on his own there in a fortress of his own making, and as he gazed at the world that he didn't really need, he took pride in the fact that he was beholden to no one. Being the solitary poet, he put pen to paper and wrote:

“A winter's day / In a deep and dark December / I am alone / Gazing from my window to the streets below / On a freshly fallen silent shroud of snow / I am a rock, I am an island

“I've built walls / A fortress deep and mighty / That none may penetrate / I have no need of friendship, friendship causes pain / It's laughter and it's loving I disdain / I am a rock, I am an island.”

You may have recognized the lyrics by now, but those were a couple of verses from the song “I Am a Rock” by Simon and Garfunkel. At first, it sounds like a celebration of self-reliance and independence, but as the song goes on it sounds more and more tragic, with each refrain of “I am a rock, I am an island” sounding more and more like something to be pitied.

“Don't talk of love / Well I've heard the word before / It's sleeping in my memory / I won't disturb the slumber of feelings that have died / If I never loved I never would have cried / I am a rock, I am an island.”

The sarcasm starts to feel obvious. About as obvious as the insights offered in the passage from Ecclesiastes, to the point that they can feel trite. “Two are better than one,” v. 9 says. “For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help.” “If two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone?” “A threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

Now there's a lot of profound insight and testimony that can be found throughout Scripture, plumbing the depths of the human condition and the nature of God. But I've got to be honest. As far as these few verses here: not exactly breaking any new ground here, is it?

“Two are better than one”? We can probably think of variations of that on our own. “Two *heads* are better than one.” “One plus one equals three.” “Teamwork makes the dream work.” You know, things like that; sayings that you find written across cheesy motivational posters. This isn't new information for us. It feels like a pretty obvious point, about as obvious as the sarcasm in that Simon and Garfunkel song: being together, being connected, is better than being alone, and no one flourishes in isolation. That's obvious. We all acknowledge it. And yet why do we fall for it so much?

Why is it that this commonly held wisdom of the importance of connection, of relationships, is staring us right in the face, and yet over and over again, we think, “Yeah we can make it on our own”?

Maybe we think too much of ourselves. Maybe we really do think we're better off on our own. Maybe we really do think, you know, this all could go better if I was just doing everything. Like if you've been a part of one of those group projects in school. You know how those go. There are the ones who are confused the whole time, the ones who don't show up, the ones who chime in but don't do anything, and then there's the one who actually does everything, in meantime resenting everyone else for riding coattails to a good grade. Maybe we think we're like that person, just in everything.

Or maybe we've been burned. Maybe we used to be on board with the whole connection thing, the whole relationship thing, but over and over we make ourselves vulnerable to another person only to feel belittled, ridiculed, even taken advantage of.

Or maybe we think it's just better to be on your own. I mean, my goodness, time after time, like in the verse we read from the Gospel of Matthew, we find Jesus going off to be by himself.

And make no mistake, on that point, there can be good things about being alone. And this I hope would come as good news for the introverts among us. No, the call here is not to be thrust into a never-ending social setting. Time for reflection can be good. Time for rest can be good. Time for retreat can be good.

And make no mistake too, seeking out relationship too much can be a bad thing, like if a person struggles with insecurity so deeply that they find their identity is defined by who they're with, and therefore seeks out the constant presence and affirmation of friends, family, romantic partners, you name it.

One person pointed out that it's a quirk of human language that we use the word "solitude" to describe the wonders of being alone and then use another word "loneliness" to describe the pitfalls of being alone.

Those are pitfalls that if indulged too readily can ensnare us, and make us think we're not fit or worthy of connection with another person.

I have on occasion shared with you bits and pieces of a season of my own life. I refer them as my more restless days, but it was a season in which I sought out seclusion, getting away from much of the relationships and friendships I had made in my life up to that point. Moved out of the country, to Argentina, taught English, kept my head above water, traveled solo throughout Latin America, and to my pride, at the time, but really to my own detriment, I took satisfaction in the fact that I thought I was able to pull it off. You know, go somewhere altogether new, no safety net, sink or swim, to see if I could make it on my own.

Most of the time when I speak of that season of my life it's usually in the context of a particular anecdote: this place I saw or this thing I did. Maybe I found one thing poignant, or

another funny. And instance by instance, maybe there's an appeal to it. And there were a lot fun and/or fascinating things. The world's a fascinating place, after all. But fun and fascinating aren't the first words I would use to describe it.

It was in fact a pretty isolated stretch of my life, maybe a bit counterintuitively because I was constantly encountering new, engaging people, each class I would teach, or each place I would visit would have something to discover in it. But it's a strange sense of loneliness when you meet a new best friend every day, only to part ways the next, and then meet your next best friend the next day, only to part ways the next.

I thought I would love that. By temperament, I've never been someone to seek out connection all that deeply. You can call it being introverted, I guess, because I am introverted, to which you might be thinking, "Then what are you doing in a line of work involving constant public speaking and connection with other people." I wonder that myself.

My mother teases me sometimes. She'll say, "You know how I know this is God's calling on your life, Jay? Because you would have never chosen it on your own." And she has a point—mothers often do. I would have never chosen, just per my own temperament, a life and work that is inherently verbal, social, and communal, so I think it's kind of funny in a way.

So part of my reason in sharing this, as we talk about the need for spiritual connection and fellowship, is an appeal for your help, because it does not come naturally to me. I do not gravitate to it on my own. Study, prayer, reflection, all that's good. But being called into the sort of connection in Christ that we talked about last week? That doesn't come easy for me, so I need your help.

But the other reason is because I have seen where the road of isolation leads. I thought I would have loved a life constantly on the move, solo. But I discovered, to my surprise, that I didn't. I discovered that I really wasn't fulfilled by keeping my own company all the time, and that as fascinating as the world can be, it is decidedly lonely when you share it with no one. I have seen where that road leads, so my appeal to you, if you find yourself indulging that particular bent, come back.

Come back, because it's dangerous to stay off on your own. Just yesterday, an article came out in the Wall Street Journal summarizing the very real health-related dangers of isolation, diving down to basic survival instincts. It summarized the findings of studies across decades and shares the following:

"Through all the years of studying these lives, one crucial factor stands out for the consistency and power of its ties to physical health, mental health, and longevity. Contrary to what many people might think, it's not career achievement, or exercise, or a healthy diet. Don't

get us wrong; these things matter. But one thing continuously demonstrates its broad and enduring importance: good relationships....

“Good relationships keep us healthier and happier. Period.” they came to the startling conclusion that close personal connections are beneficial for us, that the single biggest predictor in an individual’s sense of happiness, contentment, and physical and mental health isn’t career advancement, physical fitness, or a healthy diet.”

But then it also shared the inverse, the dangers of constant isolation, which has an all too real, quantifiable impact on well-being. It puts us into survival mode, because we realize, even on just a subconscious level, that it’s all on us. For every possible danger or threat, it’s on us to detect and react. It shared, “The feeling of loneliness is a kind of alarm ringing inside the body. At first its signals may help us; we need them to alert us to a problem. But imagine living in your house with a fire alarm going off all day, every day, and you start to get a sense of what chronic loneliness is doing behind the scenes to our minds and bodies.”

Yet still, with all the evidence and testimony that it’s good to be in close connection with other people, we resist it. We keep people at a distance. We know that it’s not good, but we do it anyway.

It’s telling to me that even though I might want to dismiss the words of Ecclesiastes, “Two are better than one,” as trite and obvious, the fact that the writer in the Spirit was led to put this down is compelling. You see this whole book—and maybe we’ll do a whole series in Ecclesiastes one day—is pretty skeptical. The author has sought out meaning in just about everything, and found each one lacking, deconstructing nearly everything to merely a “vanity,” a “chasing after the wind.” You might think that relationships would quickly go onto the chopping block too.

And yet even here, in this cynical view, the importance of connection holds up. Two really are better than one. A threefold cord really is not quickly broken.

And if we as the church are called to something even greater, a connection, a fellowship even greater than what we as human beings are designed for, the appeal goes out: come back. Come back to the land of the living. Don’t be seduced by a solitary life. You are no rock. You are no island. So in the name of Christ, come back.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.