

If you've been with us in this series, then I know you've been challenged to consider what it means to be an Exile in this culture, a stranger in this strange land. I've been in all kinds of conversations, listening to the tension as we ask what this all looks like. I feel that tension too - I live in it.

If you're like me, then here's what I know about you: you consider yourself a pretty good person. No, you're not perfect. You're fully ready to admit that you make mistakes, that you mess up, that you're a sinner. That you need Jesus (that's probably why you're here). But you're a hard worker, too. You have responsibilities - whether they're schoolwork, a job or taking care of your family - and you do a pretty darn good job of keeping up. It's tough, you're busier than you'd like to be. You're always convinced that the *next* season of your life will be a little calmer (once the holidays get here becomes once we get back into a routine becomes once summer's here becomes once school starts and we're back to aching for the holidays again). Maybe once we retire.

But we do a good job. And we're trying to get our minds around this Gospel of Jesus. We want to be changed, transformed. We really do. Again, if you're like me, you're thinking... I try. I really do. I'm a pretty nice person a lot of the time. I'm pretty generous. I serve (not just at Going Greene or Be the Church Sunday). I'm pretty good. Am I perfect? No. Of course not. But I'm not bad.

Are you with me? You know what that feels like, right?

Marcus Buckingham, a saucy British business guy, says there's a problem with that sort of thinking: The opposite of "Not bad" isn't "Good". Marcus points out that the opposite of "not bad" is "not good". It's average. Mediocre.

Even Good isn't good enough. As Jim Collins reminds us, Good is the enemy of Great. Good is average. Good makes us feel complacent. You don't want a good life. You want a great life. You don't want a good family, a good spouse, good kids. You want a *great* family. You don't just want to live, you want to thrive, right?

But.

There's some threshold for you. Some line you don't want to cross. Something that's keeping you from living a life that's fully imitating Jesus. Maybe you're busy. Maybe you feel like you're drowning in responsibilities, that you can't step back and reexamine your life because you don't have time. Maybe you know what following Jesus would cost you and you're unwilling. Whatever the reason, I am confident you feel that same tension I do, between the good life we have and the great life that seems like it's just over the horizon.

And you come here (me too!) and you wonder... what if? What if we could get there? What if we could cross that threshold?

Have you ever been cliff diving? You know that moment when you're right at the edge, looking down? The water's so far away and you feel this tension inside you. You want to jump. You know it'll be amazing. But you're terrified. Because here, you're still safe. Here is known.

We've been hearing this talk of living like exiles, of the life marked by the Cross, by Jesus' way of love, and we feel like we're at the edge of a cliff.

That's what Peter is calling us to. Listen to the kind of community he describes:

All of you should be of one mind. Sympathize with each other. Love each other as brothers and sisters. Be tenderhearted, and keep a humble attitude. Don't repay evil for evil. Don't retaliate with insults when people insult you. Instead, pay them back with a blessing. That is what God has called you to do, and he will bless you for it. -- 1 Peter 3:8-9 (NLT)

He goes on in chapter 4:

You won't spend the rest of your lives chasing your own desires, but you will be anxious to do the will of God. You have had enough in the past of the evil things that godless people enjoy-- their immorality and lust, their feasting and drunkenness and wild parties, and their terrible worship of idols. Of course, your former friends are surprised when you no longer plunge into the flood of wild and destructive things they do. So they slander you. But remember that they will have to face God...

Be earnest and disciplined in your prayers. Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins. Cheerfully share your home with those who need a meal or a place to stay. God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another. Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of helping others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies. Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen. -- 1 Peter 4:2-11 (NLT)

That sounds like an incredible community to be a part of, doesn't it? A place where we love each other as brothers and sisters? Where we're all committed to the same goals and cause? Where we sympathize for each other and we're kind and humble?

A group of people who knows the freedom found in discipline, who are known for how cheerfully we share with each other, and with anyone who's in need? A place where everyone knows what they're really good at, what they were designed to do, and we're all doing it together, serving each other?

I want to be a part of that kind of church. A church that's more like a family - when family is at its very best - than a business or organization. A church that is pretty weird when you get right down to it because we're so different from the community we're in. Different in the best way. But these descriptions of a Church feel like a pipe dream to us. They feel like a reality that's just too-good-to-be-true. Don't they, if we're honest?

Well, according to Peter, it's not impossible. We can be that sort of community. That kind of people. But it takes a conscious decision on our part to be vulnerable.

Think about your community. Your connections here at BCN. The people you hang out with. If you're a typical suburban American, then you probably have few significant, meaningful friendships. Let me unpack that a little bit. In our culture, it's becoming more and more commonplace to have acquaintances instead of friends. We could call this the "Buddy" culture. Most married couples don't actually hang out with anyone else. Most men don't have a person they consider a real, close friend.

Most friendships in our culture resemble business relationships. They are mutually beneficial acquaintances more than honest, sacrificial give and take. And deep down, we know that's not good enough. We know that's not what we really need.

I can't help but wonder if that accounts for the popularity of shows like *Friends* and *How I Met Your Mother*. Shows like that showcase groups of friends who are with each other through thick and thin. Who would do anything for each other. Friends who exhibit *real*, meaningful connections.

I've always called my real friends my 2 am friends. Who're the people you can call at 2 am for any reason and they'll answer? You can't do that with buddies, with acquaintances. With frenemies. You need real friends for that.

And the path to real friendship, the way to real community, is the same path we've been exploring for the past couple of weeks. It's the path of weakness, of submission.

Real friendship requires vulnerability. That's why it's so rare, so precious.

American suburban culture encourages us to be selfish. To think first and foremost about Me. You stop and say, But wait a minute! I'm not selfish! I have a family, or friends or coworkers who whomever that I love!

But the Me our culture teaches us to love can be bigger than just myself. [let's do a Me pyramid here, adding each new layer under Me. And maybe make the Me an armadillo from the beginning?] Me is whoever is part of my identity - my parents, my spouse, my kids, maybe my extended family. Some friend group - a softball team, old school friends, co-workers, etc. Maybe you have a strong loyalty to your company. You feel protective of them when you face a competitor. Maybe it's a political party or some community organization.

Whatever these are, we let these relationships support us, we consider them to be a part of identity until it costs us something. And typically, the further these relationships are from the center, the less it takes for us to abandon them. [start taking the blocks away] If a politician makes us angry, or we have a fight with someone in an organization, we'll check out pretty easily.

If a friend or acquaintance betrays us or fails us, we'll cut the ties. We all know the saying, right? "Fool me once, shame on you... Fool me twice..."

If our families make our lives too hard, or don't support us, or don't live the way we want them to, it's more and more common to see people just abandoning them (any way from actively divorcing to a more passive shunning).

We are shaped by American suburban culture to watch out for number one. And as long as people help us, they're welcome. But as soon as a relationship starts costing more than we're putting in, it's a bad investment and we're told to get out. We can give, but only until just before it starts to hurt. Once it's not beneficial to us anymore, it's time to go.

And that's actually pretty scary because behind the idea that you can do it on your own, that you should be strong and self-sufficient, that you don't need anyone and you should get rid of people that you don't need is a sad truth:

If you live that way, you end up alone. [How pathetic can we make that "ME" by itself?] You're safe... locked away inside a hard shell of isolation, a front that keeps the real you from being exposed, from the possibility of being hurt.

We're *taught* not to be vulnerable these days. We live in the era of Facebook. How many of you have a Facebook account? You know what I'm talking about then. We have profiles that are our online selves. And we've filled our profiles with all kinds of information about ourselves. What we do for fun. Quotes we like. Our favorite movies and TV shows. Pictures.

But let's step back from our Facebook profiles for a minute. We all recognize that this online Self isn't our real Self, right? Our Facebook profiles are carefully constructed digital representations of who we want to be. There's a difference between our Facebook selves and the real us. [Now the Facebook armadillo. Let's do the Facebook self - blue, obviously - over and around the "real" self below and behind the FB self. Maybe make it an armadillo?]

When you go to my Facebook profile, you see the Me I want you to see, the Me I want you to think I am. Whether that's a strong, professional business type, a loving, indulgent parent, a sassy, funny rebel, or even a person who doesn't give a crap what you think. Whichever image I have of myself, I'm putting that out there for you to see.

For instance, I have carefully crafted my own profile to make you think I have excellent taste in music. It's pretty underground, a few great metal bands, and lots of my friends who are in local bands. No emo. No indie stuff. A smattering of some pop acts.

But I didn't list on there that I love me some Kesha. I can't help it. I think she's totally trashy. But her music is really fun, and when it comes on, I don't change the station. I bob my head with the beat.

I'm a little ashamed you know that now.

Because I don't want you to think I'm the kind of person who enjoys Kesha. But I am. That's reality. It's the real me behind the Facebook me.

Why do we do that? Because we do, we all do. None of us is 100% real. We've even ritualized it in our culture. "What's up?" or "How's it going" are standard, acceptable greetings in our culture. And the correct, acceptable responses are "Not much" or "Not bad" or "Pretty good." These are sanitized, Facebook greetings.

No one wants to know how you're actually doing. You know that and I know that. Because American suburban culture thrives on appearances. We don't *want* to know the truth. We don't *want* to know how you're really doing because then I might have to share how *I'm* really doing.

And that's scary. Just like it was scary for me to admit to you that I like Kesha. Because now I'm open to your judgment.

And that's why American Suburban culture tells you to keep your distance. To do it on your own. Not to trust anyone. Don't expose your underbelly. Your real self.

But you end up alone, that way.

And that's bad because when you're trying to follow Jesus, you can't do it alone. Look at those qualities Peter encourages again:

Unified. Sympathetic. Loving. Tenderhearted. Humble. Disciplined in prayer. Cheerfully hospitable. Using your gifts to serve each other.

Remember that Peter calls us Exiles. We're immigrants here. That means the Church is meant to be a sort of Chinatown, a Little Italy. You've noticed how immigrants tend to hang together, right? Whenever a small ethnic group is surrounded by a larger majority group, the minority group clumps together. It's natural. Why?

Because it's tough to be the only one. Being alone, a stranger in a strange land, doesn't feel natural. It's almost like we weren't designed to be alone.

And that's Peter's message to us: You're not doing this alone. You're not trying to figure this stuff out on your own. The Church is that gathering of us exiles. It's a refugee camp in the midst of a culture that's not always welcoming of the way of Jesus.

The good news is that you're not alone. The good news is that you have friends with you. Look around! We are all in this together. We are all on the same journey. This is our family. This is our safe space.

But if we really want it to be that, if we want to experience genuine community, we have to be willing to be vulnerable. To come out of our shells, expose our soft underbellies.

Real friendship, real community, requires vulnerability.

I know when I say that you want to say, Forget it. I'll just stay in my safe Buddy space. I'll keep my acquaintances. I don't want to be vulnerable. I don't want to risk opening up. The idea of sharing even something small is scary.

I'm afraid of what it'll cost me.

Peter's audience was experiencing that, too. Their suffering was more physical, more intense than most of us will ever experience. Their choice to follow Jesus was at least as risky, at least as costly. Peter knows it'll hurt you to open up. To risk. To choose to be vulnerable. He knows what he's asking us to do. What he said to his original audience he says to us, and that only makes Peter's words *more* true for us. If they could do it, so can we!

Hear what Peter says to you:

Even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. -- 1 Peter 3:14-15 (NRS)

Peter says, Don't worry! Even if you choose the path of Jesus, the path of vulnerability, and you are hurt, if you suffer for your choice, you're blessed! If that's true in the world of politics, if that's true in our employment, if that's true in our homes, then it's true in our friendships.

Suburban American culture tells us that betrayal is the end of a friendship. That the cold embers of love aren't worth stoking back to passionate flame. That there's nothing on the other side of relationship deaths. That everyone will betray you at some point, so you should be careful how much of yourself you share. Stay in your shell, where it's safe!

Don't be afraid the way our culture is afraid. Don't fear what they're afraid of. **You** don't have to be afraid! Just devote your heart and life fully to the way of Jesus. Trust him. Choose to live as an exile. Choose to live alongside the other exiles. Choose real community, real friendship.

Peter can say that because of the effects real community has on us. When we choose to open ourselves, when we choose to be vulnerable, when we risk and open ourselves to the possibility of being hurt, we are actually choosing to be humble. To give away power to that person we're opening up to. We're choosing to live as Jesus lived (which is what Jonathan talked about last week).

That's what's at stake here! Choosing to enter into a true, authentic community, choosing to pursue real friendships that are deeper than acquaintances is *salvific*. When I learn to put myself last, to trust you, to love you *even* when you fail, betray or wrong me, then I learn to become more like Jesus.

When you learn to put yourself last, to trust me, to love me *even* when I fail, betray or wrong you, then you learn to become more like Jesus.

But you only learn that in community. You can't learn to be selfless when you're the only Self around. When you choose to live in shallow relationships, when you choose to pursue that Suburban American life that leaves you ultimately alone, you end up self-centered by default. That's the *easier* way to live. It's the safe way to life. You don't have to risk anything.

But as one of my favorite bands from college says, "Nothing's gained where nothing's dared." Giving up that self-centered life hurts. Dying to yourself hurts. Learning to be a selfless person who pursues true community hurts. You will be betrayed. People will let you down. And you'll have to face up to the fact that you have betrayed others. That you've failed people. Because none of us is perfect.

And Suburban America says, No one's perfect! That's why you shouldn't trust anyone! They'll always let you down!

Jesus tells us: No one's perfect! That's why you need each other. As Peter says, "**Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.**" -- 1 Peter 4:8 (NRS)

Try choosing to be vulnerable. Try forgiving. Try love. Love until it hurts. Love *after* it hurts. Peter reminds us:

Don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad-- for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world. So be happy when you are insulted for being a Christian, for then the glorious Spirit of God rests upon you. If you suffer, however, it must not be for murder, stealing, making trouble, or prying into other people's affairs. But it is no shame to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God for the privilege of being called by his name! -- 1 Peter 4:12-16 (NLT)

Now we are certainly not suffering to the same degree as Peter's communities were. But you know what it feels like to be betrayed. You've been stabbed in the back. You've been let down. Just because you're not being martyred for your faith doesn't mean you don't experience a sort of pain that's real.

And Peter says that whenever you choose to follow the way of Jesus - and that includes small choices like the choice to risk vulnerability - and you suffer for it, you should rejoice because you are becoming like Jesus. That suffering is transforming you into the Image of Jesus. Even the small pains matter in our journeys.

So will you choose real friendship? Will you choose to risk? Will you choose to be vulnerable? That means we find someone who's a buddy and open up to them. We have to risk giving up the hard outer Facebook shell, to expose the soft, vulnerable underbellies of our real Selves. [here's that armadillo again, but upside down] And it should probably go without saying that we don't lead with the nastiest skeleton in our closets, right?

About a year ago, a guy in our church family named Doug Carter started a prayer team for me. My prayer team is composed of seven guys who pray for me throughout the week. We meet together once a month and stay in contact throughout the week, pray together on Sunday mornings before EPIC, that kind of stuff.

Doug was counseling me before the first meeting about how to build some trust with the guys. He said, Be ready to share something that, if it got out would hurt you, but wouldn't totally destroy you.

Risk. Be vulnerable. Choose to initiate community. Choose to reject shallow friendships. Choose to share something risky. Not huge. Not deal-breaking. Not the end of the world. But something that's not on your Facebook profile. Something that if it got out, you'd be embarrassed. Risk it. Show that underbelly.

That's how you build real friendships. That's the soil in which real community grows.

Don't stay in the Buddy culture. Count the cost and choose to risk.

Say no to shallow, surface-level acquaintances. Expect to get hurt, and forgive in advance.

Don't choose the path that leads to isolation and emptiness. Choose the way of Jesus that embraces vulnerability. That's where salvation is. That's where unity and compassion and humility and kindness and love are. To choose to be vulnerable is to embrace the way of Jesus.

What are you going to share? Who are you going to take a risk on?

Communion

We close today by celebrating communion together. This is the meal that Jesus gave us to remember his death and celebrate his resurrection. By taking bread, we remember that he broke his body open for us. By taking juice, we remember that his blood was poured out for us.

This meal is a reminder that Jesus risked everything for us. We who were his enemies, he made his friends. By choosing to be vulnerable. By choosing the path of weakness and submission.

So today, you are invited to his table. But by coming to Jesus' table, you choose to participate in Jesus' death and resurrection. You choose to be vulnerable. To risk, and trust that the same God who raised Jesus from the dead will preserve you as an exile among exiles. As a stranger in a strange land, but gathered with your friends and fellow exiles.

Let's pray.