

If there's one thing our culture prizes, it's our rugged individualism. The quintessential American hero has always been the loner conquering the Great Unknown. Whether it was Daniel Boone or Davey Crockett, John Wayne's cowboy riding off into the Sunset, or the contemporary superheros like Batman or Superman, the people we prize, the person who best embodies our sense of who we are is the powerful individual.

What that really communicates is a fundamental understanding of who we are as people. Deep in the bedrock of our cultural subconscious is an assumption that the smallest, most basic stable unit of society is the Individual. That essentially, big groups are just big groups of individuals. That we don't actually *need* anyone else to live a full, heroic and healthy life.

Consider how thoroughly we've all bought into this story. We don't have too many cowboys anymore, but we still love the idea of the powerful individual. Whether it's climbing the corporate ladder or having the best kid on the sports team. How many of us hated group projects because you knew if you wanted a good grade you would have to do all the work? (How many of us loved group projects because that other person would do all the work and get a great grade for you?) We think in terms of me (possibly including my immediate, nuclear family) - choosing where to work, where to live, where to travel on vacation. At the end of the day, when everything else is stripped away, it's just me and mine, riding off into the sunset.

But according to the Scriptures, that's not actually healthy. According to the Scriptures, the Myth of the Lone Ranger is dangerous. Pursuing the life of the lone, rugged cowboy, the powerful individual is actually toxic to us. Far from being the healthiest choice we can make, living a solo life is unhealthy, unbalanced.

That'll surprise even those of us who grew up in the Church. I grew up hearing all the time "You don't have to go to Church to be a Christian." We were told over and over all we really need to be a Christian is Jesus. Trusty Bible strapped to my side, I was challenged to ride out into the rugged, untamed World, afraid of nothing, equipped to conquer those godless heathens, just me and God.

Too bad that's not at all how God created us. Genesis 2 is a picture of God's purpose in creating us. Starting in v7, check this out:

Then the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground. He breathed the breath of life into the man's nostrils, and the man became a living person. Then the LORD God planted a garden in Eden in the east, and there he placed the man he had made. -- Genesis 2:7-8 (NLT)

Here's the first man, alone. The perfect individual. There was never a more excellent cowboy, a loner- Lone Ranger. If our original, created purpose was to be solo, then this was it. We were done. Just Adam and God in the Garden. That's it!

Think about it: the only two around are Adam and God! Who would need anything else? Well... apparently...

Adam did.

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make an ally who is just right for him." -- Genesis 2:18 (NLT)

Adam and God. And God said "This is not good."

Just Adam and God. The original Lone Ranger. And *God* said, "Bad idea. This won't work."

We weren't created to be alone. That's not our DNA.

We were crafted to be in community. It's *not good* that we're alone. We need allies. We need each other.

That's because we're created in the image of God. Christians confess that God is by nature what we call Trinity. That means that God is one being who exists as three persons. Trinity is a big, confusing doctrine that's tough to get our heads around. Even so, what that means is that even God, when God is all alone is in community. The most basic, fundamental way we have to talk about God is not solo. It's in community, as Trinity.

That's why when God created the single, solo man, it wasn't good. We can't be whole, healthy persons on our own. We were created for community.

That's why the night he was crucified for us, Jesus prayed this prayer over his disciples:

I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one-- as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. -- John 17:20-21 (NLT)

God's desire for us is to be one.

But not the one of the Loner. Not the one of the solo cowboy riding off into the sunset. That "one" is more like an Atom. Stuff is made up of atoms - like iron. You can keep chipping away at a piece of iron, getting it smaller and smaller and smaller until you have just a single atom of iron. And that atom has all the properties of the larger chunk of iron. It doesn't need anything else to be iron. That's what an atom is.

And that's how we think of ourselves (that's why we call it the "nuclear family") - that we are essentially the same as a big group. That I am the smallest unit of humanity, that I have everything I need to be a fully healthy human by myself.

But that's not true. We're not atomic humans. In fact, the Scriptures use a wholly different metaphor to help us think of ourselves:

Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other. In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. -- Romans 12:4-6 (NLT)

According to Paul, we're not basically like atoms. We're basically like body parts. Maybe I'm a foot. You're a hand. Or an eye. Or a heart.

You aren't full and healthy if you're missing a body part. Imagine if you were missing a foot. Or a hand. Imagine not having a heart.

The Oneness God calls us to, the Oneness Jesus prayed over us, the Oneness we were created to share is not the oneness of the Atom. We're not all basically interchangeable copies of each other. We're called to the Oneness of the Body. We're all different parts. We all need each other. I can't be full and healthy without you. You can't be full and healthy without me.

That's such a different picture of life, of Church, than we have. We think of Church as an institution, as this place where we come, a gathering of a bunch of more-or-less-identical atoms. We think of Church as a top-down place. It's run by us paid staff, maybe a few influential lay volunteers. Church is a big chunk of iron composed of all these Lone Ranger atomic Christians. If a few don't show up or leave, the larger chunk is unchanged, practically unaffected.

When people say, You don't have to go to Church to be a Christian, *this* is what they mean. You don't need an institution. These walls and roof don't somehow magically make you more spiritual. And that's true.

But that's not the picture of Church the Scriptures give us. Jesus said that he's present where two or more of his followers gather. Jesus never intended for his Church to be a top-down institution. From the first days of the Church, we were meeting in small groups, sharing our gifts and talents with each other. The Church was designed to be a Body, a bottom-up gathering of people. Small Groups are the DNA of a healthy Church.

In this picture of Church, when we're not identical atoms but different body parts, I need you. And you need me. Imagine again missing your hand or foot or heart. That's what it's like for one of us to choose not to participate.

Now imagine that you're the one who doesn't have community. You're the one who isn't doing Church with others. The Lone Ranger. That's like a dismembered hand trying to survive on its own. It can't. It's impossible. We *need* each other.

Will the Church survive without you? Yeah, sure. But we won't be at our best. Can you survive without the Church? Nope. You'll shrivel up and die, spiritually, emotionally. Not without this – the institution, but without the small community meeting together.

This large gathering we do every week is so valuable. But this isn't where we connect with each other in that truly meaningful, life-affirming, life-giving way we were designed to. *This* isn't the heart of the Church. This is the icing on the cake. This is the delicious dessert, not the main course.

The meal, our bread-and-butter, so to speak, is the gathering throughout the week. For lunch. Over coffee. Sharing meals in our homes together. Running together or playing some basketball. Taking in a movie. Cheering for our kids together as they play sports.

This is not as good as Church gets. In fact, what we do in here assumes we're connecting in smaller groups elsewhere. Let me say it this way: if you're not connecting with others in this room throughout the week, then you're missing out in here.

Because we're not Lone Rangers. We *can't* do this life on our own. We *need* other people. A life that's lived disconnected from other people is unbalanced - like eating only meat, or only fruit. We need each other.

My faith without you is like missing a limb. Trying to follow Jesus on your own is like a severed limb trying to live on its own. There's an Adams Family joke in here somewhere but I can't quite figure it out.

The Lone Hero our culture values is a lie, even in those stories themselves. Even Batman has Robin. Even the Lone Ranger has Tonto.

So for the next couple of weeks, we're going to be talking about community. What it means to have true, authentic community beyond what happens here on Sunday mornings.

And it'd be cruel for us to consider the importance of connecting without providing some opportunities to connect. So here's what we're going to do:

During Lent (which begins in about 3 weeks), we're going to be exploring the so-called 7 Deadly Sins. And during the week, we've gathered some members here who have volunteered to facilitate small gatherings.

I know it's not always easy, especially in a Church this size, to find others you can connect with. So as you leave, and for the next three weeks, we have sign-up opportunities in the foyer. We have groups meeting throughout the week, and groups that do all kinds of stuff from running to meeting at 5 guys for burgers.

The point isn't to do another Bible Study. It's not to pray for an hour together. It's just to share life. To get to know other people.

So today, now, begin to consider: Are you connected to other believers beyond this larger Sunday space? Are you meeting regularly with them, sharing your life with them?

If you're not, how you will connect? Because you can't do this life on your own. You're *missing out*. Really and truly. Just like if your diet consisted only of one food group. Without real community, your life is unbalanced. You weren't created to live that way.

Brothers and sisters, we are better together.

*Closing Prayer*