

One of the most pervasive American myths is the individual. Since our founding, we've idolized heroes like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett. These days, it's Jack Bauer or John McClain or even Batman and Superman.

Deep in the soul of our collective identity is a conviction that I should be able to make it on my own. To ask for help is weak. Whether it's bread-winning or child-raising or college-paying-for. Whether it's American Idol or the MVP or Heisman trophy, we love to single out the best individual. The person who rises above the rest.

The same goes for failures, too. I grew up in Kansas City in the 90s, when the Chiefs were always *almost* good. They went to the playoffs every year and managed to lose every year. And every year, after they lost, the whole city would find one guy to blame for the team's failure - one year it was Lynn Elliot, another Steve Bono and finally Marty Schottenheimer, the head coach.

Anytime a business fails, or a marriage or anything else, we find a single person to blame it on.

Rationally, we know that's not true. We know that one player can't totally succeed without the rest of the team. Neither can they destroy a game for a whole team. We know that when a business succeeds or fails, it's almost never because of a single person. We know that marriages are way too complex to reduce to one person's great or poor decisions. We love to blame the president for the state of our country when we all know good and well that we have 538 grown adults in Congress who apparently missed that day in kindergarten when we learned how to compromise.

And yet again and again we single out the one person. Again and again, we try to make it on our own, refuse help, run from any scenario in which we might have to rely on someone else.

All of this because deep down, we are convinced that the individual is the basic building block of a culture. That I ought to be good enough on my own, that I shouldn't need anyone else to be me, to succeed as a person, to have a full, rich life.

That complicates discussions like we've been having in this series because when we talk about bearing the Image of God, for instance, like we did last week. Because we think, Okay, what do I need to do to bear the image of God?

We take that framework of individuality and put it on the Scriptures - because I think in terms of me, myself and I, that must be what the Scriptures are talking about.

But the Scriptures don't let us take that and run. If we read carefully, we see that God actually never intended for us to function purely as individuals. We were actually created to need other people.

Let's look again at the creation of humanity in Genesis 1:26-27:

God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like ourselves. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground." So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. -- Genesis 1:26-27 (NLT)

God's image is not the man alone. God's image is not the woman alone. God's image is the two of them together (and there's so much we could say from the texts we're looking at today about gender and marriage and all that, but for today, I want to take a step back even from there and focus on individual vs. community).

In the first week of this series, we saw that Genesis 1 is a progression. God is imposing order on the chaos of uncreated reality. As we move through the days of creation, we see the world taking shape more and more clearly. And the final piece of the puzzle, the crown jewel on the whole thing is humanity, created in God's image.

If creation reflects the Way, the Order, the divine Logic of God, then humanity in community part of God's plan, God's Way. You and me, together, is God's Way. The natural law for us is that individuality is toxic to our full humanity.

That's confirmed in the next creation story in Genesis 2. Here, look at how God talks about us:

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... The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it... Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper an ally who is just right for him." -- Genesis 2:7-18 (NLT)

God makes the man, then God plants a garden and puts him in it to tend it. That echoes what we saw last week, that being made in God's image makes us God's partners, not God's slaves. Here, God is a gardener, and God makes us to be gardeners, too.

But God doesn't put the man there, shrug and say "Good enough!" In fact, instead, God says, No no no. This won't do. This isn't good. So God decides to make a "helper". 'Helper' is a poor translation of the word used there - helper sounds like sidekick to our ears (and in fact this is how some Christian authors have described a woman's role in a man's life - she's supposed to be his sidekick, *help* him achieve his goals and dreams). But this word is used 14 other times in the Old Testament, almost always in reference to God. A better sense of this word is "rescuer" or "ally".

What God is saying in Genesis 2 is that by himself, this man he's created can't succeed. He needs someone else like him and yet unlike him. Another human, but a person who is strong where he is weak, a balance. He *needs* an ally. He can't be fully himself by himself. He can't succeed alone. He needs another.

I know now you're thinking, Ooooh. *This* is where Jerry McGuire got it. As though when God brings the woman to the man, he says, You complete me! and she's a little misty-eyed and says, Stop. You had me at, Hello.

But this is the tension we feel in this discussion. Are we complete by ourselves, or do we need other people to complete us? And according to the Scriptures, the answer is Yes. We can't choose one or the other. We need to be whole in and of ourselves, and we also need other people to be whole. If we choose either path by itself, we end up in a bad place.

If we say that we don't need anyone else, we end up in a culture of selfishness, one that praises the individual at the expense of the group, one that diminishes the importance of community and

elevates the person. You know... sort of like what we have today. We're not free to have healthy relationships because we're always trying to make sure I don't give too much to the other person, that I come out on top in the relational transaction (because I'm the most important).

But the other extreme isn't good either. In the *Jerry McGuire* model, you end up with pathological insecurity and neediness. People who *need* other people to be whole. We aren't free to have healthy relationships because we're always trying to get what we need from the other person. Any thought of giving to them becomes secondary.

Selfishness on one side, Insecurity on the other. We find balance in God, in understanding that we are created in God's image. When we take in the witness of the whole of the Scriptures, we find a God who is revealed to us as a paradox. God is both a single person, one god, and also three persons - Father, Son and Spirit.

We don't worship three gods. And God is not one person who merely fulfills three roles - like I am a husband, a pastor and a friend. God is three persons who are also one God. It's not either-or. It's both-and.

So too with we who are created in God's image. We are both whole individuals, and part of something bigger than ourselves. We cannot choose one or the other. We must maintain the tension of the two.

Metaphors can be helpful here. Consider chemistry with me: atoms are the smallest unit of matter. That means that, with iron for instance, you can keep cutting a piece of iron in half (you know, if you're really strong) and it'll get smaller and smaller and smaller and eventually you'll be left with a single atom with 26 protons and 26 electrons. And this single atom of iron will have all the properties of that big block you started with. It's essentially identical.

That's how we tend to think of societies and people. We're individual atoms that are basically the same as the larger society. We assume that cultures are like elements, that they can be broken down to a single individual.

But cultures are more like compounds than elements. Compounds are comprised of molecules, not atoms. Take water, for instance: water is a compound of hydrogen and oxygen - H₂O. Once you've divided water down to a single molecule of H₂O, you can't divide it anymore and maintain its identity as water. You can reduce it to hydrogen and oxygen, but those two elements have very different properties than water. They're not water.

So too with us. The Image of God is a compound. God's vision for you and for me is not to be isolated elements out on our own. God's Way, God's Order for our lives is for us to be a part of the same community. You might be hydrogen and I might be oxygen or neon or some other cool element. But we are called to be together.

You can't be the Image of God without me. Just like hydrogen can't be water without oxygen. And in fact you need me to be oxygen. And I need you to be hydrogen. I need you to be full and complete in and of yourself and you need me to be complete in and of myself.

And then we both must come together to be what God calls us to be.

This is why we value small groups here, why each of our staff and leadership participates in them, why we keep offering the chance to sign up and join a group over and over.

Intentionally pursuing meaningful community is more and more counter-cultural. We get that it can be intimidating, challenging to join a new group. There are tons of barriers, so we try to remove as many as possible. Our groups are low commitment - they only run six weeks. And the point of our connection groups isn't to make you all best friends - it's to connect you. Help you to meet other people who are trying to figure out what it means to follow Jesus the same as you are.

Our connection group environment is designed to be a low-threat, easy way to connect with other people. You don't bear your soul, you just make friends. I meet with a great group of guys on Tuesday nights. We usually hang out at the Greene somewhere. We always have new guys joining us, other guys who have to bail for soccer season or whatever.

And the friendships that have formed out of that group are the best part. Every guy in my group will tell you how vital those friendships are to our spiritual lives. How much more vital our faith is because of the time we've invested in that Tuesday night group.

What we're talking about isn't magic. There's not some big secret. It's just that we're better together. I wasn't created to be alone. Neither were you. We need each other to be the full image of God. The Church is a compound, not an element. We're a body, and each of us are parts.

Examine into Greeting

At the end of our time together today, we have some space to consider our own lives. This is a version of the Prayer of Examine, which is just a space for you to consider prayerfully how you'll respond to what you've heard today.

1. Do you tend toward selfishness or neediness?
2. How much meaningful community do you have in your life right now?
3. What strengths do you bring to a community?
4. What weaknesses do you have?
5. What opportunities can you take advantage of this week to connect with other people?

Greeting: You're not making new friends. You're just connecting.