

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on October 3, 2021.

CREATED FOR COMMUNITY

It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.

Genesis 2:18

Today we continue our series on the core stories of the Bible. These are those narratives that shape our lives as followers of Jesus. This morning we focus on words from the second creation story. I have often had people ask me why there are two stories of creation. There appears to be one narrative of creation in Genesis chapter one and a second portrayal of creation in chapter two.

I believe that the two stories of creation are complimentary. The truths about God and creation are paradoxical and cannot be told in one narrative. In the first story God is transcendent and above and outside creation, in the second story God is imminent and present in creation. In the first story God is portrayed in abstract ways, in the second story God is almost anthropomorphic walking in the garden. In the first story human beings are created in the image of God, in the second story human beings are shaped from the mud of the earth. All of these are true. Truth often comes to us in mystery and paradox.

I believe that one of the reasons that most people prefer the first story of creation is the value it places on the individual. We are told that we are created in the image of God and have value. This story reaffirms our American cultural celebration of the independence of the individual.

One of the great books of the 1980's was called **Habits of the Heart**. This book was written by Robert Bellah and friends. In a new introduction to the book Bellah explains the thesis of their book. He writes:

In Habits of the Heart we attempt to understand this cultural orientation. Following Alexis de Tocqueville, we called it individualism. Individualism is the first language in which Americans tend to think about their lives, values, independence and self-reliance above all else. These qualities are expected to win the rewards of success in a competitive society, but they are also valued as virtues good in themselves. For this reason, individualism places high demands upon every person even as the open nature of American society entices with chances of big rewards.

Bellah makes the point that the primary way we Americans look at the world is through the lens of individualism. This does not change when we approach the Bible. Most of us, when we read the Scriptures, focus on God's message to us as individuals. We understand God's gift of salvation in terms of only our personal redemption. The great theme which we perceive through the Bible is God's attempt to be in a personal relationship with us. We love the first story of creation because it supports this view of the world.

This emphasis on the first chapter of Genesis led the songwriter Tom T. Hall , who died in August, to pen in 1974 a song that began:

**Well, me and Jesus got our own thing going'
Me and Jesus got it all worked out**

Me and Jesus got our own thing going' We don't need anybody to tell us what it's all about

These words proclaim what I consider a heresy that is common among many Protestants. Protestants have sometimes developed the idea that Christianity is only about the personal relationship of Jesus and the believer. We can sometimes think that we can live out our faith in Christ by ourselves. Give me a Bible, prayer and reason and I can navigate the choppy waters of life.

This approach overlooks the second story in Genesis. In the second chapter of Genesis we learn a second truth about the creation of human beings that balances the first. The man is shaped out of the earth and the breath of life is breathed into him. Yet creation is not complete. God says it is not good for the man to be alone. Therefore woman is created to be a companion and partner of the man. God creates the first community, which is the family. When we are born into this world we do not arrive on the scene as completed individuals able to care for ourselves. We were born as helpless infants that needed others to enable us to survive and grow.

Genesis 2 introduces one of the great themes in Scripture which is God's attempt to create community among individuals. In Genesis 2 God says **It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner** and the first community is formed. In Genesis 12, God tells Abraham that he is going to create a chosen community through him. The rest of the Old Testament is the story of that community.

In the Gospels one of the first things that Jesus did, after his baptism by John opened his public ministry, was call his disciples. Then at Pentecost the new community, the Church, was born. Throughout the Bible, faith is lived out in community.

So you and I are called to Christian community. Koinonia is a Greek word used more than twenty times in the New Testament. It refers to the community or fellowship between Christians and God. For our faith to thrive, we must be part of a Christian community.

Why is Koinonia or Christian community so central to our faith?

In the abstract, Christian Community is a reflection of heaven. On the cover of our bulletin is a copy of a famous Icon by Rublev. The Icon portrays the Trinity. Three figures living in perfect community. Heaven means participating in the same divine love. Heaven is perfected community.

I believe that for many Americans, heaven is pictured as being about Jesus and me. The popular hymn **In the Garden** contains the words **And he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own**. This is one part of the image of heaven that many of us share. Heaven will be Jesus and me walking hand in hand for eternity. It is personal salvation that comes to our mind. But this is not the primary image of heaven in Scripture.

The Book of Revelation has many images of heaven. These images are not of individual people in solitary relationships with God. In one image heaven is described as **the holy city, the new Jerusalem**. In other images heaven is full of choirs and crowds of people. There is music and joy and crowds. In short, heaven is the perfect community of God.

In heaven we will all be individuals. We will not cease to be the men and women that we are. God does not seek to destroy our identity, yet we will become part of his perfect community. The love we share for Christ will unite us around him. We shall share his perfect love with each other and with God. The two great commandments to love God and neighbor come to perfection in God's heavenly kingdom.

We gain a foretaste of heaven by living in Christian community on earth.

Secondly we discover truth in community. Think of the experiences of Jesus' disciples on Easter and the days following. There had been reports from Peter and John that the tomb was empty. Then Mary Magdalene had come saying that she had seen the Lord. She was actually saying that she had seen Jesus. They knew that he had been killed on the cross, how could she be saying he is alive.

So they gathered in the Upper Room to think, to ponder and to reflect. All of the events in the last days had transpired so quickly. They had been with their leader Jesus in the countryside. Then they came to Jerusalem and events got out of control. It was all over so quickly. What did it all mean?

So these followers of Jesus gathered together to talk over these events. They must have wondered about Mary. She had loved Jesus so much. She had been so emotional over his death. Her grief was so deep, could her experience of seeing Jesus alive have been only wish fulfillment. Yet Peter and John had reported the tomb was empty. What was the truth? The followers of Jesus came together to discover the truth.

So you and I need others to help us understand our experience of God. We cannot fully understand God on our own. We need the Church to help us understand and interpret our experience. One isolated experience that we might have cannot be trusted. It must be understood in the context of God's interaction with his people through the years.

The practice of Christian community teaches us that we need each other as we struggle together to understand God. We learn about God in community.

Lastly and most importantly we learn that there can be great nurture and power found in Community. In his 2008 best seller, Author Malcolm Gladwell opens his introduction with a chapter called the Roseto Mystery. In this chapter he describes the small town of Roseto which is in Eastern Pennsylvania near Bangor. This town was founded in 1882 by immigrants from a small town in Italy.

In the 1950's a Dr. Stewart Wolf a professor at the medical school at the University of Oklahoma spent his summer vacations at a farm near Roseto. One day he was having a beer with a fellow physician who said, "You know, I have been practicing for seventeen years. I get patients from all over, and I rarely find anyone from Roseto under the age of sixty-five with heart disease."

Wolf was taken aback. This was the 1950's, years before the advent of cholesterol-lowering drugs and aggressive measures to prevent heart disease. Heart attacks were the leading cause of death in men under the age of sixty-five. Wolf wondered what was going on. He gathered a group of his students and colleagues from the medical school to investigate.

They did a rigorous study of physician's records and death certificates. They took blood tests and EKG's of all the residents. They went house to house and interviewed everyone over 21 year of age. The results were astonishing. "Almost no one under fifty-five had died of a heart attack or showed any signs of heart disease. There was no suicide, no alcoholism, no drug addiction and very little crime and no peptic ulcers. These people were dying of old age. That's it."

How could one explain this? They tried to look at a variety of factors. One was diet. Maybe they transported a Mediterranean diet that made a difference. But no, they were very similar to surrounding towns. They looked at exercise and genes and location and other factors, but nothing explained the health of the people. Finally, the researchers came to the conclusion that what made for health of these people was the community itself. Gladwell tells us:

What Wolf began to realize was that the secret of Roseto wasn't diet or exercise or genes or location. It had to be Roseto itself. As Bruhn and Wolf walked around the town, they figured out why. They looked at how the Rosetans visited one another, stopping to chat in Italian on the street, say, or cooking for one another in their backyards. They learned about the extended family clans that underlay the town's social structure. They saw how many homes had three generation living under one roof, and how much respect grandparents commanded. They went to mass at Our Lady of Mount Carmel and saw the unifying and calming effect of the Church. They counted twenty-two separate civic organizations in a town of just under two thousand people. They picked up on the particular egalitarian ethos of the community, which discouraged the wealthy from flaunting their success and helped the unsuccessful obscure their failures.

In short, the people were healthy because they were nurtured by a supporting caring community. The same is true for our spiritual lives. You and I cannot complete our spiritual pilgrimage on our own. Remember when Jesus began his earthly ministry one of the first things he did was gather disciples around him. Jesus knew that he needed the support of others.

It is no different for you and me. We cannot be isolated Christians. We are not just to come to worship and commune with God and leave. The Church, when it truly is the Church, is a place where believers share one another's burdens and encourage each other in faith. You and I need to seek support from and give support to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Several years ago one of our young people wrote in their confirmation paper **Sometimes the church can be viewed as a large family, whose beliefs are very similar, if not the same, as yours. Together, you can help others in the community who are struggling, do community service, and provide friends with care, prayers and support in hard times. Joining the church means becoming a part of something bigger and more important than your own individual need and desires.**

The second chapter of Genesis calls us into Community. Our task is to develop the practice of living in community with each other here at Clarence Presbyterian and with our brothers and sisters in faith around the world. It is through community that we discover truth, are nurtured and prepared for life eternal.

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