

Humanity: Communal

In the Beginning: A Study on Genesis 1-11 Sermon 3

Genesis 2:18-25

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Today is the third Sunday in our Genesis 1-11 sermon series, *In the Beginning*. This winter into spring, we are asking what our beginnings tell us about ourselves, our world, and our Maker. In the first sermon of this series, we saw that Genesis says that creation has a Creator—the universe is not an accident. Designed by God, this world is personal and purposeful. Last week, we saw that human beings are the pinnacle of God’s creation and are created with a *calling*. Made in God’s image, we are called to represent Him in how we cultivate and protect whatever patch of Eden is entrusted to us.

Today we consider another truth about human beings Genesis reveals. Along with being called, we are also *communal*. Part of what it means to bear God’s image is to be hardwired for fellowship. This part of our design—this communal engineering—comes to the fore in a shocking statement made by God in Genesis 2:18. Seven times across Genesis 1, God looked at what He’d made and declared, “It is good.” In Genesis 2, with the zoom-lens taking us close in on Adam, God looks upon the solitary human, and we read:

“Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone.’” (Genesis 2:18).

You don’t need a master’s degree in literary or rhetorical technique to know this statement is really significant. Verse 18 sounds like the scratching of a record. *What!?! Something not good in God’s perfect creation?* There is much meaning in this verse—and our goal today is to draw some of it out.

Genesis 2:18 tells of a problem that exists prior to the arrival of sin—and therefore it’s deep. Genesis is telling us this truth about being human: aloneness is our first and foremost problem. A human alone is not a human at all. *Why? Why is aloneness such a fundamental problem? Isn’t it the case that the stronger a human becomes, the more they can stand on their own two feet?*

The problem of aloneness—or loneliness—is certainly relevant. In 2018, Theresa May appointed the UK’s first Minister of Loneliness.¹ Around the same time former U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, called loneliness a “growing health epidemic...associated with a reduction of lifespan similar to that

caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day.”² A Viceland survey found that “Loneliness is the single greatest fear of Millennials.”³ And in Japan there is a booming industry centered around renting friends. As an *Atlantic* article explains, “In Japan, you can pay an actor to impersonate your relative, spouse, coworker, or any kind of acquaintance.”⁴

Here is a puzzle: There are more people on the planet than ever. There are more ways to connect with other people than ever. And yet, humanity is growing lonelier. *Why?* People suggest different reasons.

One writer blames a “cultural climate change” towards individualism. He writes:

Divisive politics, inequitable economics, the loss of openness in universities, and the growth of depression and drug abuse are the result of what I call cultural climate change. They are the long-term consequences of the unprecedented experiment embarked on throughout the West a half-century ago: *the move from “We” to “I.”*⁵

Others blame technology:

[T]he human webs of connection—the relations, values, and norms that bind us to one another—are being torn apart by technological innovation.⁶

Apparently, individualism combined with increasingly digital forms of relating leads not to deeper but more superficial connections. It’s with this puzzle in mind—that our current way of relating is proving less and less satisfying—that we turn to Genesis. God is aware that it’s not good for us to be alone— isolated and lonely. What does His word teach us about this *relational drive* within us?

I. The Depth of Our Relational Need

The first thing Genesis tells us about human relational need is that it issues from a deep source. It’s not a sign of poor development—that we should just be less needy and more self-sufficient. It’s a sign of how we are designed.

Image of God the Trinity

Let’s return to the foundational truth that humans are created in the image of God. Left unexplored last week is the strange use of the plural when God turns from creating everything else, to creating *us*. After speaking in the singular throughout Genesis 1, we suddenly hear the plural in verse 26.

“Then God said, “Let **us** make man in **our** image, after **our** likeness” (Genesis 1:26).

If there is only one God, who’s this “us” making human beings? People have different opinions about this. Some say it’s God speaking as the “royal we,” such as when Queen Victoria, having been told a risqué joke, famously replied, “We are not amused.” Others think this may refer to a heavenly counsel God is speaking of amid a group of angels who dwell in His presence. But if we read Genesis 1 in light of the rest of the Bible, it becomes clear that this is *the Trinity* at work. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all involved in creation.

The Father speaks the World into existence— “And God said” (Genesis 1). The Spirit is also present— “And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). And we read the following in Colossians about the Son— “All things were created through Him [Jesus] and for Him” (Colossians 1:16). Human beings, along with the whole cosmos, are the loving result of the creative work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

If God is Three Persons in One, who dwell eternally in a perfect relationship of love, and if we are created in His image, then God’s relational nature has huge implications for understanding human nature—especially the depth of our relational needs.

Imagine you were to draw a sketch, a silhouette, of Jesus. You would draw the shape of a body—two arms, two legs, a torso, and a head. And you might think you were pretty accurate in drawing Jesus’ silhouette. But wait a minute. *Does your sketch capture the Triune nature Jesus exists within? What if you were drawing a silhouette of Jesus as a member of the Trinity?* If so, a simple chalk outline of a human body would not at all convey the real shape of God. We bear the image not just of the Son of God, but of the Triune God—the God who says, “Let *us* make man in *our* image.”

I’ve often thought that if you drew a silhouette of yourself—that complex *you* made up of dreams and hopes, family ties and friendships— if it were accurate, it wouldn’t look much like a chalk-outline of a body. It would look more like the silhouette of an over-jammed eclectic box: cords coming in and out from all directions, some tangled around others, maybe even some sparks flying. We are not isolated selves. We are a complex web of relationships, and we burn for connection with others.

Abraham Heschel used to speak of the “divine pathos”—the passion of God coming through Scripture. There is a divine fire inside the Trinity that is a passionate love for the other: The Father loves the Son; The Son loves the Father; The Spirit is that love moving back and forth. When God made us, He put sparks of this divine fire within us: in our yearning for connection, in our ability to deeply communicate, in our sharing of emotions and dreams, in our bending towards another, we are like a mirror, reflecting the relational heart of the Triune God.

So, whether we struggle with the pain of loneliness or the cul-de-sac of individualism, we encounter our divine blueprint in this plural pronoun: When God made you, He said, “Let *us*, create her or him, in *our* image.” You are made, not in the image of a stoic “I”, but a passionate “We.” Human beings are *communal beings*.

This truth may frustrate. *Why wouldn't God make us happy on our own? Wouldn't it make life easier? Why can't Adam be satisfied simply with fellowship with God—why does he need others?* I want to explore the next two underappreciated purposes of our relational design—both of which we see in Genesis 2.

II. Two Underappreciated Purposes of Our Relational Design

There are two immediately obvious purposes within Adam's relational drive. Firstly, relationships will assuage loneliness. And secondly, by himself Adam cannot fulfill the mandate to be fruitful and fill the earth—His relationships with Eve will provide fruitfulness. The creation of the woman in Genesis 2 means Adam and Eve can enjoy the fellowship and fruitfulness of *relationship*.

Genesis 2:18-25 focuses on a specific and foundational relationship: marriage. The union of man and woman as one flesh creates the foundational community—family. All other relationships depend on this one. I want to focus today, however, not on the specifics for the marriage relationship. I want to focus on something broader—the more general claims this passage makes about our universal communal design. If you'd like to explore the biblical teaching on marriage and gender, I'd encourage you to visit our sermon page and listen to the *Mere Sexuality* series from June 2021; or visit the Rector's Corner on our webpage and listen to the *Being Human* series.

Considering the more general things this passage reveals about our relational nature, I want to point out two underappreciated purposes behind the communal design. They both have to do with knowledge. We need others in order to know ourselves and God.

1. We know ourselves better through others

Genesis 2:18-25 stresses the need for a “suitable helper” for Adam (2:18, 20). The term **helper** is not diminutive. Of its eighteen uses in the Old Testament, sixteen are referring to God as humanity’s helper. The passage further says the helper must be **suitable** for the human. And the animals won’t do (2:19-20).

When God fashions the woman from Adam’s rib and brings her to him, Adam breaks into poetry:

Then the man said,
This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man. (Genesis 2:23)

Often missed in the English translation is a change in terminology Adam uses to describe himself. Up to this point, the human has always been referred to by the Hebrew term, ‘*adam*, which connects Adam to the earth, which in Hebrew is ‘*adamah* (earth). Now, however, when standing before another human being, Adam uses a different term to describe himself. When Adam says, “she shall be called **woman**, for she was taken out of **man**,” he switches to the Hebrew word for man, **ish**. And the word for woman he uses is similar, **isha**: Adam says, “*Isha* has been taken from *Ish*.”

Here is the point: only when relating to another human being, does Adam come to a deeper understanding of himself. He is a generic ‘*adam* until standing before another, when he becomes, *ish*. Commentators also point out the order:

“Adam has to pronounce her name before he can pronounce his own name. He has to recognize *isha* before he knows that he is an *ish*. He has to say the ‘thou’ before he can say the ‘I’. Before he exists as an individual.”⁷

Just so with the Trinity: God the Father is Father *in* His relating to The Son, and vice versa.

How well do you know yourself? Do you think you can really know yourself by yourself?

I remember once in middle school seeing myself on video. I was skateboarding with a bunch of friends (yes, skateboarding!), and in the video, I was talking up a storm. I looked and sounded so cocky. I couldn't believe I came across that way. I said to my friends, something along the lines of, "Is that what I sound like? Is that what I look like?" They were like, "yes!" I didn't fully see myself by myself. **We need others to help us know and see ourselves.**

2. We know more of God through others

We not only come to know ourselves through others. We also come to know more about God. Being so small and limited, we often need others to help us come to know things that are greater and bigger than us. In his novel, *Swann's Way*, Marcel Proust recounts a time when—as a young and aspiring writer—he came to see the world through the eyes of a famous author he idolized.

"Each time he talked about something whose beauty had until then been hidden from me, about pine forests, about hail, about Notre-Dame Cathedral ... with one image he would make that beauty explode into me.... [R]ealizing how many parts of the universe there were that my feeble perception would not be able to distinguish if he did not convey them to me, I wanted to possess an opinion of his, a metaphor of his, for everything in the world."⁸

There are truths about God, vistas of His beauty, depths of His faithfulness, that we can only know through other people. When it comes to knowing God by ourselves, we are like tiny cups trying to hold the ocean. But in connection with other believers, in drawing sips from the cup of another, we double, triple, quadruple our taste of God. I have learned so much about God from the spill-over of other people's relationship with Him.

God has designed us relationally for many reasons. Two of them have to do with growing in knowledge. In connection with others, we come to a truer knowledge of ourselves, and a deeper knowledge of God.

With the remainder of our time, I want to read our passage in the light of God's work of relational restoration happening today—and highlight some specific qualities of the relationships God wants to foster around us.

III. God-designed Relationships in the Church

There is an amazing use of Genesis 2:24 in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 5:31-32, Paul shows us that the relationship between Adam and Eve points to God's relationship with His people:

"Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh [=Gen 2:24]." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:31-32).

This is profound, and it tells us something very important: today, right now, the Triune God is refashioning relationships in the Church. And these relationships—because they are made by Christ—share in the divine passion of the Trinity. If you want to move away from the pitfalls of today's epidemic of aloneness, move towards the relational world of a local church. And here are three qualities of the relationships God intends for the church.

1. God-designed relationships are *embodied*

Adam's response to Eve stresses the embodied nature of God-designed relationships: "bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh" (2:23). God didn't design an online community for Adam.

Anna Meade Harris is a single mom of three almost-grown sons.⁹ She's a gifted writer. In a recent article, "Breaking Social Media's Grip on Teens," she warns of the limits of digital community:

"Instagram platforms and Snapchat groups are not communities. They're helpful communication tools, but they cannot begin to replicate the joys or challenges of physical togetherness. The disembodied interactions of social media likes and comments fail to truly satisfy because we were created for communication not just with words and clicks, but with tone of voice, body language, and touch. It's impossible to work, serve, worship, laugh, or cry together if we're not physically together, frequently and intentionally."¹⁰

Circumstances at times make face-to-face relating hard. But we need to do all we can to be physically around other Christians. Families, go to church together weekly. Friends, join small groups, and attend regularly. If you're healthy, ask your church if you can visit someone who can't get out to church (health allowing). Make dinner for a family with a newborn and deliver it. Ask a friend if they'd meet

twice a month to pray with you. Parents, model hospitality for your kids by having church members in the home for dinner. God-designed relationships are *embodied*.

2. God-designed relationships are *word-centered*

It is often overlooked that the first recorded speech in the Bible is not a soliloquy: Adam speaks only when there is another person to speak to (Genesis 2:23). And Adam uses words that honor God because Adam's speech honors what God has made. Too many communities today form around negative words—words that tear down. Groups form around their shared hatred of another group, and fellowship around gossip and negative speech. There's space for lively discussion, but the community God desires is shaped by God-honoring words. A point of Genesis 1 and 2 is that *words* have power—God creates by them, and Adam shapes by them. It is through words that Adam names the animals, and by words that Adam begins to relate to Eve.

God-designed relationships find friends being built up by the world-shaping power of God-honoring words.

3. God-designed relationships are *others-centered*

Finally, and this may be obvious, but it's crucial: Adam breaks out in song, not when he's looking at himself, but at another. The deepest happiness humans know is when they are delighting in and serving the happiness of another. The Father glories in the Son; the Son glories in the Father (John 17:5).

Remember the old Greek myth about Narcissus. The young man was so handsome that he fell in love with his own image when looking at its reflection in a pool. Narcissus stares at himself and becomes sick with self-love. Adam looks away from himself and grows healthier through the love of another.

In the Body of Christ, Jesus will provide you with ample opportunities to stop staring at your own reflection. Through the practice of serving others, Jesus slowly weans us off the poison of self-obsession. This type of others-love is precisely what Jesus Himself has modeled (Philippians 2:5-8).

It is not good that the man was alone. And it is not good that people today are alone. The world teems with people made in the image of a relational God, but who grow selfish and isolated when left to their own devices. So, they rent friends, settle for online communities, and suffer under the weight of loneliness. But God has given the world both Christ and the Body of Christ, the community of Jesus. God is addressing Adam's aloneness today, through local churches across the world.

Take a deeper step into the relational life of your local church. And if you are in church, take a step this week to assuage the loneliness and aloneness of another. In doing so, you will become more of the person God has designed you to be.

Endnotes

1. Tara John, "How the World's First Loneliness Minister Will Tackle 'the Sad Reality of Modern Life.'" *Time Magazine*, April 25, 2018. Accessed online: <https://time.com/5248016/tracey-crouch-uk-loneliness-minister/>
2. Vivek Murthy, "Work and the Loneliness Epidemic: Reducing isolation at work is good for business." *Harvard Business Review* (Sept 26, 2017).
3. See Neil Howe, "Millennials and The Loneliness Epidemic," *Forbes* May 3, 2019; "What Young People Fear the Most," Viceland UK Census, September 21, 2016.
4. Roc Morin, "How to Hire Fake Friends and Family," *The Atlantic*, Nov 7, 2017.
5. Jonathan Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (Basic Books, 2022), 11.
6. See Raghuram Rajan, *The Third Pillar: How Markets and the State Leave the Community Behind* (London: William Collins, 2020).
7. See Jonathan Sacks, "Faith Lectures—Creation: Where Did We Come From?"
8. Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, Trans. By Lydia Davis (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 97.
9. See her bio here: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/profile/anna-meade-harris/>
10. Anna Meade Harris, "Breaking Social Media's Grip on Teens." *The Gospel Coalition Blog*, Feb 11, 2022. Access online: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/teens-social-media/>