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Sermon: No One Is an Island

Scripture: I Corinthians 12:12-31

July 7, 2024

I Corinthians 12:12-31

<sup>12</sup> For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup> For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup> But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup> If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many members yet one body. <sup>21</sup> The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup> and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect, <sup>24</sup> whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, <sup>25</sup> that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. <sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. <sup>28</sup> And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. <sup>29</sup> Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work powerful deeds? <sup>30</sup> Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? <sup>31</sup> But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

A little over two decades ago, the sociologist Robert Putnam wrote a book entitled *Bowling Alone* which explored the hollowing out of communal groups in favor of a more hyper-individualism. When he researched the book he found that 80 percent of the populace thought we were becoming less civil while only 12 percent thought otherwise. At the turn of the century, several surveys of Americans indicate that ‘America’s civic life had weakened, and that our society was focused more on the individual than the community.’<sup>1</sup> The title of Putnam’s study was ‘Bowling Alone,’ and interestingly he found that bowling was not a dying activity, on the contrary, more people were doing it than ever, we just weren’t doing it in groups. We were ‘bowling alone.’ In her study *Generations*, a book the session of the church is reading this summer, psychologist Jean Twenge uses a variety of graphs and data to interpret the changing generations and in particular believes from the 1990s until now, there was a sharp rise in the values surrounding individualism. Not all of these changes have been bad; they have led to a greater openness and respect for people of different races, gender, and

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 25.

sexual orientations, but in Twenge's words, 'modern citizens have [more] time to focus on themselves and their own needs and desires because technology has relieved us of the drudgery of life.'<sup>2</sup>

Several years ago preaching professor Richard Lischer at Duke Divinity School, wrote a book about the first congregation he served as a Lutheran pastor. In reflecting on the community, he wrote that as a young theological student, 'I would have sworn that each person makes the race [of faith] alone, like a long-distance runner who has separated from the pack and runs at his own pace. Religion was the most refined form of privacy to me.' But, Lischer, confessed, after his experience in a congregation where everyone in the church community 'pitched in and learned how to 'pattern' a little girl with cerebral palsy, helped another member put up hay before the rains came, grieved when a neighbor lost his farm, and refused to buy his tools at the [bankruptcy] auction,' but as he gazed out at the congregation gathered together for worship, Lischer realized that maybe he was looking at the community as God sees it, 'not as a series of individual quirks and opinions, but as a single heart of love and sorrow. The only thing that made us different from any other kinship group or society or nonprofit was the mysterious presence of Jesus in the community.' As he looked the congregation as a whole, 'he could see the ways in their common life together that the 'ordinary world really is capable of hosting the infinite Being.'<sup>3</sup>

In 1623, just over 400 years ago, the Anglican priest and poet who would later become dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, where his effigy can be seen to this day, John Donne, was bedridden and ill and had already lost a wife and two children, and was perhaps preparing or at least contemplating his own mortality and during this time wrote a series of meditations and prayers on the human condition entitled *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. One of those prayers and meditations is one you have probably heard in one form or snippet, entitled *Meditation XVII* or 'No Man Is an Island.' Donne's reflection reminds us we are all inner-dependent people and intricately tied together by bonds that make it impossible and even harmful to try and bowl alone or do life alone.

Hear John Donne's words from 'No Man Is an Island:'

No man is an island,

Entire of itself.

Each is a piece of the continent,

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Twenge, *Generations*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Lischer, *Open Secrets*, 75, 232.

A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thine own.  
Or of thine friend's were.  
Each man's death diminishes me,  
For I am involved in mankind.  
Therefore, send not to know  
For whom the bell tolls,  
It tolls for thee.

No one is an island, we all need each other, self-sufficiency is a false god that risks fragmenting us and our larger world, and the bell does not toll for any anonymous person, but the bell always tolls for someone who had a mother and father and spouse and children and friends and family, someone who worked hard and knew love and loss and joy and sorrow. There are no anonymous people out there, so when the bell tolls for whomever, a part of us is lost.

So in the opening lines of the movie *About a Boy*, the central character Will Freeman, played by Hugh Grant, begins with this monologue, referring to and channeling John Donne from another age. However, Will declares in opposition to John Donne: 'All men are islands. And what's more, this is the time to be one. This is an island age. A hundred years ago, for example, you had to depend on other people. No one had TV or CDs or DVDs or home espresso makers. As a matter of fact they didn't have anything cool. Whereas now you can make yourself a little island paradise. With the right supplies, and more importantly the right attitude, you can become sun-drenched, tropical, a magnet for young Swedish tourists.' In the words of Will Freeman in *About a Boy*, the goal of life should be to become an island, completely self-sufficient and with no need for other people unless they serve our needs in some way. In the movie *About a Boy*, Will Freeman's philosophy that we are all islands or all should be at least, is put to the test and throughout the movie Will's island world is completely upended by a community of people he would never have picked out of a line-up but strangely find their way into his life and have a claim on his heart. It all begins with a boy named Marcus who is the child of a single mother who is experiencing depression and Marcus is looking for some kind of connection and friendship and pretty much barges into Will's life. And against his better judgment and directly in violation of his own

philosophy, Will Freeman learns that none of us are islands and that is good news. That his life is expanded not narrowed by the people who walk into his life as he is placed into a larger community even if it happens kicking and screaming at times.

There may not have been a more diverse congregation in all of Christendom than the Corinthians. Corinth, like New Orleans, was a port city, and as a result, the Christian community in that town reflected people and ethnicities from all over the ancient world. And as a result, the Corinthians were constantly failing at being the Christian community, whether it was suing each other and taking each other to court, engaging in sexual behaviors that would cause members of a Las Vegas bachelor party to blush, they were taunting each other over who had the best spiritual gifts, they better resourced members were bringing a full meal to eat in front of the poorer members who relied solely on the drink from the cup and the morsel of bread at communion, and on top of that, they were getting drunk during communion and making a mockery of the Lord's Supper. Any yet, in spite of all the dysfunction, all the major fails at being church, in spite of all the hostility various members of the body had with one another, Paul calls them all church, and reminds them that 'the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,' and reminding them that 'if one member suffers, all suffer together,' and if 'one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.' That love of God, Paul recklessly told the Corinthians, not unlike the love of God Richard Lischer saw reflecting across the whole of the congregation he served, was not fragmented into 'a series of individual quirks and opinions,' but knit them together into a 'single heart of love and sorrow.'

What seem like much stronger forces in our society right now are happy to fragment us and tear us apart and divide and conquer the many members of the body of Christ. In a world of red America and blue America, why assume that a church, a Christian community would want or endeavor to reflect anything different? Why not just find our niche market and become solely a woke church or a MAGA church, why insist that there is a greater good, that we need each other and make each other better in spite of our ideological differences or generational differences or social and ethical differences? Unless we whittle every Christian community down to the size of a phone booth (and for you millennials and Gen Zers out there, a phone booth used to exist throughout cities and public spaces offering the use of a public phone for calling), unless the Christian community is reduced to a phone booth, a table for one, we are called to commit to a Christian community that includes a broader assortment of people than any of us would ever choose if we had our own way, but all people God has not chosen us without.

Our Presbyterian Book of Order declares in its foundational principles, that while people of goodwill and 'good character and principles may differ,' it is the responsibility and calling of the Christian community 'to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other' (F-3.01). Those beliefs go back to 1729 and the first council of the Presbyterian churches in the United States formed in Philadelphia, two generations prior to the Declaration of Independence. The centrifugal forces in our world may always be set to pull us apart, to whisper seductively in our ear that life would be easier on our own and by ourselves and without the need of others, but the central call to be in Christian community thrusts us into the exact opposite direction, where we learn that we are better and richer human beings and closer to our calling as Christian disciples and the image of God, when we are held together and when we hold together, as Christ's body, rather than settling for smaller like-minded fragments of tribes and identities. So may we learn, happily, uncomfortably, and frequently, that none of us, not one, is or will ever be an island, thanks to Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.