

“Thrive”: Forging a Vital Faith
From Isolation to Belonging
2.17.19
Romans 12:9-18



Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context... (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

“At what point in your life did your feelings of vulnerability overtake your desire for companionship? When did you decide ‘it’s just not worth it’?”

“When would you say that you stopped needing people?”

“What if your present frustrations and feelings of loneliness were actually the initial stages of your healing?”

To be alone is to be unaware of our need of the other. Here are some declarations of our own relational self-sufficiency. Have you heard yourself use any of these?

“I can handle this by myself.”

“I don’t want to burden others with my problems”.

“I’m fine, really.”

“Why do you think it’s so difficult, at times, for us to admit our need of another? How do you find yourself showing up in healing friendship?”

“How do you understand the difference between acceptance and tolerance? How would you describe the difference between solitude and isolation?”

“Where is your favorite hiding spot? Work? Internet? Failure? Success?”

“Are you convinced that you can’t be loved in your present condition? Do you assume that your present circumstances disqualify you from belonging to God... belonging with God?”

Teaching Notes...

Takeaway from last week...

Our journey has always been offered to us within the imagery of this movement “from” something, “to” something, primarily centered in the Exodus story--- from captivity to freedom.

We considered how Paul offers Abraham as a means of placing us in this environment of ‘faith’. As we seek to understand this notion of ‘faith’, what we get is not a dictionary definition, but a story. Stories of God acting, God inter-acting. Stories of humanity inexplicably responding. *“Go. So, Abram went”* (Genesis 12).

The initial movement we considered last week was from **Self-reliance to God-reliance**. In this movement we are losing confidence in ‘self’ and gaining confidence in God. We are learning how to defer to God in all-things-life.

Today, we consider the movement from **Isolation to Belonging**. In this movement, we are centered in our status as the “beloved” and are confident enough to allow others “in” and to let ourselves “out”.

At its best, Christianity compels us toward authentic and humble encounters with God and each other. At its worst, it simply compounds our sense of condemnation, forcing us deeper into isolation and more creative expressions of hiding.

Listen, we always belong to **church**, not as we desire it to be, but as it is. None of us flawlessly embodies the nature and character of Jesus. We gather and, given enough time for discovery, we realize that we are all at varying levels functionality.

Even Jesus admitted that the Kingdom is fully of *“wheat and weeds”* (Matthew 13), and sometimes it’s hard to distinguish one from the other. **But**, if you stick around long enough, you’ll likely find those that make it feel **“safe”** for you to be broken, but who refuse to use grace as a means of enabling your continued dysfunctionality.

Our desire to be loved and develop a relationship with our Creator-God is far more central to who we are than our brokenness, but it’s easier to be identified by all that’s wrong with us rather than embracing God’s gracious offer to make us right.

I suppose, over time, we have all experienced situations and relationships which, instead of vulnerably moving us toward others, have driven us, instead, into isolation.

One social scientist assesses our dilemma well:

“Our modern society is more likely to isolate than connect us.”

Significant loss in relationships (e.g. divorce, separation, inadequate relationships with those meant to establish us early in our development).

Conditional love. We have impossible standards for ourselves, therefore, we have unreasonable expectations for everyone else.

Don't admit that it hurts. Don't demonstrate weakness. Don't admit need. If you don't have needs, you can avoid people and if you avoid people, you avoid vulnerability (but you end by yourself... left to yourself).

Shame: that general sense of inadequacy that turns all of life into a “*worthiness contest*”.

“It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18).

In **Genesis 2**, we find man “**alone**”; in **Genesis 3**, he is “**fallen**”.

What we discover from the narrative is that there are certain needs that can only be rightly met in relationship with God: identity, worth, significance. Only your creator gets to decide that.

There are other needs which are meant to be met in the context of healing-relationships with another human being: companionship, partnership, aloneness.

There are advantages to living in isolation: you don't have to confront your own brokenness. You don't have to deal with someone else's 'mess'. You don't have to confess your needs to another human being... but you'll miss out on all the grace that God longs to share with you through another (1 Peter 4:10).

In **relationships**, I make myself vulnerable. I am able to be wounded.

In **isolation**, I make myself susceptible. I can be over-taken. I am easily spotted as wounded [1 Peter 5:8].

People are “fallen” and “alone”: the worst possible scenario. We have a deep, heart-longing for relationships because of our alone-ness, but we pursue them in all the wrong ways because of our brokenness.

Reminded of this quote from a consortium of British theologians...

“All the lonely people, where do they all come from? All the lonely people, where do they all belong?” The Beatles

Here is the genius of Christianity:

~ It seems that our relationship is not initiated with our acceptance of Christ, but his acceptance of us.

“Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes.” Ephesians 1:4

~ Instead of insisting that we perform, it begins by conferring value and worth upon us and then simply invites us to live as if it's true (Ephesians 5:2).

~ It puts us into a big "adoptive God-family" (Ephesians 1:5; 1 John 3:1-2), declares that we belong, and invites us to allow this new arrangement to supplant any challenges linger from our family of origin.

Belonging seems to be the antidote to our isolation and belonging always begins with acceptance.

"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you". Romans 15:7
accept: *'taking to oneself'; to grant another access to your heart'; to receive"*

John 1:14-17 (read)

Jesus demonstrated (3) qualities of relationship which will help move us from "Isolation to Belonging":

He resides with us. With intentionality and proximity, God makes himself present to and available for us.

We need relationships with others which involve a commitment to participate with intentionality and frequency. Something more than a 'snap-chat' or a 'snap-shot' of who I am. An atmosphere which allows for mutual revealing. Shared-experience, shared-stories.

He is indiscriminate in his distribution of grace. Grace is the active expression of God's love. By definition, it a gift. It comes from outside of ourselves. It's not something we offer ourselves. *"Give yourself some grace". I can't!* But, I can assimilate the grace he offers in Jesus and receive the grace he longs to offer through another.

He is honest with us, "to our fault". There's always a caveat to speaking the truth: it must be delivered/spoken "in love" (Ephesians 4:15). It's not simply about getting together and stating the facts, *'as we see them'* (that's the problem).

Telling the truth, without the possibility of grace, is cruelty. To speak truth without actually caring about how that truth will come to bear on another's life is actually the least-loving thing we can do because our presentation is simply self-indulgent.

Never underestimate the power of another Spirit-enlivened human being to help effect healing in your life.

What we seem to desire is for God to unilaterally intervene in ways that help us *'ween ourselves'* from our need of others. What God seems to be doing is re-directing us back toward others and reinforcing the power of "incarnation" (God, in flesh).

"But God, who comforts the downcast (depressed), comforted us by the arrival of Titus,..." 2 Corinthians 7:6

“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If you speak, speak as if one speaking for God...” 1 Peter 4:10-11

“Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?” 1 Corinthians 3:16

Those in whom the Spirit comes to live are God’s new temple; God’s intended place of dwelling--- the place where heaven and earth intersect. It means that whatever the people went to discover about God at the Temple (presence, forgiveness, comfort, community), they should now find in us.