

A Chord of Three Strands

Sermon on Ecclesiastes 4:1-12 July 19, 2020

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I want to share about another recent virtual coffee that I very much underestimated. It was three weeks ago, and that time the theme was music. "Share about a favorite musician or band or group you would want to hear live in a coffee house kind of setting. If you could pick anyone or any group...who would you just love to hear live in that intimate kind of setting?"

Do you know what the first response was? Hand rushes up on the Zoom camera and goes, "Abba." "Like Dancing Queen rocking out in the coffee house?" "Yes. Dancing Queen in the coffee house," this congregant replied.

And then everybody starts chiming in...

Garth Brooks and Tricia Yearwood...Johnny Cash...Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass...The Highwaymen...Dave Brubeck...The Eurythmics...Jose Feliciano...Willie Nelson...John Denver...Johnny Mathis...

And with each name shared, the participants shared a personal story. A memory about why that artist or that song held meaning for them - would be so meaningful to hear live in an intimate setting. Some of them shared stories from parts of their memory they had rarely considered in years. It really was remarkable.

What everyone on the Zoom did not know was that each time they said the name of the artist or band they would love to see in a Coffee House setting, Jaime Cowan was furiously Googling to find a Youtube video of that artist or band playing at a concert. And so once everyone was finished sharing their musician, Jaime shared her screen on Zoom and showed clips of each artist or band playing "live." We basically went to the Coffee House together and watched every single favorite musician play one of their great hits.

And if you have been Zooming regularly these recent months, then you know that when someone shares their screen like Jaime did - you can see the video of what Jaime is sharing, but on the side of your computer screen you can also see some of the faces who are also in that Zoom meeting. Which means, you can watch both

the musician and you can see people reacting to the music. And this is where I deeply underestimated this particular activity.

I thought we'd have an hour of fun sharing about music and listening to a few songs and that would be that. I had no idea when each person's musician and song came on the way they and others would react. You could see deep smiles for other people's song knowing what it meant. There were knowing nods with faces that filled with memories and love flooding back. Occasionally there was a tear or two as the music drew forth something from the soul perhaps even the participants could not quite describe.

"Two are a better than one," declares the wisdom of Ecclesiastes - how beautifully that truth was affirmed in a music-filled hour even over Zoom.

Because, right, each of these people could have not attend Virtual Coffee that morning and turned on that musician's music in their own home by themselves that day. And yet, being together offered a qualitatively different experience. It was like the stories opened the hearts and then into that opening eventually flowed the music that even across all our distance found a way to knit hearts into a sense that we are together. Unconsciously but quite truly we experienced this most elemental truth that "Two are a better than one..." that, as the author of Ecclesiastes goes on to say, "we do pick one another up, we are a strength to one another."

This is a Scripture often used for weddings, but in context this speaks to any human relationship - marriage, business, friendship. And it is a passage that alludes to Genesis when God notes that it is not good for Adam to be alone. Adam needs a helpmate. Foundational to our human DNA is the truth that we are made for relationship, for connection, for friendship, for family, for one another. It's not that time alone is wrong - goodness, Jesus himself frequently prays by himself. But...most fundamentally...When Jesus himself calls the disciples, he calls a community (a pretty diverse one at that) When he sends his disciples to do the work of ministry, he sends them two by two.

"Two are better than one..." But if you were listening to Susan's reading of Ecclesiastes earlier in the service, you know that this insight seems to come almost out of nowhere. The author of Ecclesiastes begins chapter 4 with this (which are

really a continuation of very similar thoughts he was sharing in chapter 3): *I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors—and they have no comforter.*

The oppression and evil in this world strikes him as so pervasive and awful that he goes on to say that actually it would be better to be dead than alive so as not to see any of this. Better, even goes on, is the one who has not been born and knows nothing of this. It's really quite dark. And to be fair, the author is not alone in Scripture. Faced with great personal trial Job cries out: *“May the day of my birth perish, and the night that said, ‘A boy is conceived!’ That day—may it turn to darkness; may God above not care about it; may no light shine on it.”*

The prophet Jeremiah upon seeing the sins of God's people and experiencing the way they were treating him said, *“Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?”*

Phew...These are not the scriptures we put on bumper stickers. But this is where the author of Ecclesiastes is at this moment. No answers - only pain and disillusionment.

The author of Ecclesiastes then moves in our passage from this painful observation to a brief observation about work and rest. We're not going to explore all that he says there, but suffice to say he observes some of the futility found both in workaholicism and getting more and more as well as in wallowing in laziness...and he again finds himself disillusioned by all he sees. The bottom line is this: this person is disillusioned. He's exasperated. And as he looks out upon the world (and perhaps even within himself) he generally just doesn't see how anything can change. So how in the world is his very next sentence, *“Two are better than one”?* (followed by practical examples of how 2 people can really make a difference)

How do you move from profound resignation to a word of hope about what 2 can do?

The truth is when we finished the Zoom meeting everything around us remained in deep uncertainty as to what will unfold - COVID-19, protests, employment,

family situations - every one of those things remained as pressing and real and perhaps in some cases as overwhelming as ever.

And yet, my soul was a in a different place for having spent time hearing the stories, the music - and watching you all hear one another. I began to sense the real gift of that time together was not actually the funny stories or even the moving stories as good as they were, nor was it the music as wonderful as it was...the real gift of that time was the way it engendered a sense of belonging among us. Again, the problems of our lives and this nation and our world were not solved, but is not the gift of belonging the first priority for bringing for real change?

In one of his recent Opinion Editorials, David Brooks wrote, "If you don't have a fierce sense of belonging to each other, you're not going to sacrifice for the common good." Belonging begets a willingness to sacrifice for the greater good - which surely drives change. Is this not why the God of the Universe came among us as a human? He belonged fully with and among us; he tied himself to our stories, our ways, our trials. He chose to belong to us and for us despite even our gravest sins.

As Scripture declares time and again: God cannot but keep covenant with us. God belongs in this marriage to God's people for better or for worse.

And it is this radical sense of belonging to us and for us...that is shown forth ultimately in God's willingness to sacrifice for us upon the cross.

A fierce sense of belonging begets sacrificial love that changes the world.

I can't say for certain why the author of Ecclesiastes looks upon the devastating oppression and injustice of this world and the workaholism that buries so many...and in his disillusionment suddenly declares, "two are better than one." But I wonder if at some level he knows that if a people can recognize afresh just how deeply and profoundly they belong to one another; if a people can recognize afresh that they are a people before they are a person...therein they shall find the resolve to offer themselves in sacrificial ways that can actually move the needle in this world filled with so much that seems impossible.

A fierce sense of belonging begets sacrificial love.

In this strange time, in this trying time, in this distanced time of ours - how might we discover afresh this gift of deeply belonging to one another - and so nourish the gift of sacrificial love that this world so dearly needs?

Much could be said about that, but for this morning I am mindful of Romans chapter 16 which you heard me read earlier. It's a long chapter because Paul finds the specificity of his greeting quite important. He understands that he belongs to these people - by name - and they to one another, by name. And all of them belong by grace to Jesus.

Paul also knows that in the chapters leading up to chapter 16 in the book of Romans he has called the church to a great deal of sacrificial love - and such love is most fully engendered by a sense of belonging. What if we took our cue from Paul this morning as we seek to remember that we belong to one another, we need one another, we are a vital gift to one another? What if we wrote out our own greetings to FPC at Georgetown? Or if you are tuning in and belong to another church - think of folks at that church? But what if - either in our minds or quite literally on paper we wrote out a greeting to our church?

What names does God put on our hearts?

Greet ___ who works with me in Christ.

Greet ___ to whom I give thanks.

Greet ___ who has worked very hard among you.

Greet my relative ___.

Greet the family of _____.

Greet the beloved _____.

Who are some of the names and faces that come to mind?

- Some perhaps you talk with or think about or pray for daily?
- Any names or faces you had forgotten about?
- Folks who usually attend the 830am service - or the 11am?
- Folks who are homebound?
- New members? Longest time members?
- Folks who are among our youngest disciples?

- Folks who live part of the year elsewhere and so aren't as frequent on every Sunday?

And what would it look like this coming week to send a couple notes or texts or words of encouragement to the ones landing most fully or surpassingly on your heart today? Maybe a phone call or two?

Many of you have been doing this very thing - these are hardly radical acts of love. And yet especially in a time when we are not together in-person, especially when the challenges before us can seem so weighty and uncertain or impossible...these acts are absolutely foundational, essential and on-going. For these small acts proclaim afresh that we belong to one another, they fuel the fire of love that burns always to sacrifice for the greater good. And such acts open heart...

Which makes me mindful that the author of Ecclesiastes ultimately declares not just that two are better than one...but that a chord of three strands cannot be broken."

And I believe it is always true as a people genuinely open their hearts unto one another even across all our distance, the Holy Spirit faithfully flows like a musical chord knitting two strands unto an unyielding sense of belonging. And what love plays forth when you belong. Amen.