

The Hunger For Relationship

Text: Luke 2:1-20; Isaiah 52:7-10

12/11/09

Introduction

“How is it that we ache for each other, and yet find relationships so difficult?”
(N.T. Wright) It seems we can live without each other and too much of the time we can’t live with each other, either.

It helps to face the truth with a little humor. The comedian George Burns once said:

Happiness is having a large, loving, caring closeknit family in another city.

And of the course there is the wisdom of the bumper sticker:

*The more people I meet the more I like my dog.
Sometimes I wake up grumpy; other times I let him sleep.
Sorry, I don't date outside my species.
How can I miss you if you won't go away?*

And of course there’s nothing like Christmas to put a lot of people together in a room – be it family gathering or an office party - who wouldn’t ordinarily choose to be there. The theory of community is a beautiful thing; the fact of community can be a bit different.

Husbands and wives, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, congregations, friends, various races, whole nations – we’re made for each other until we’re not. How does the ache for each other go astray? How is that our train, which left the station with such promise, so easily jumps the tracks?

- 1. Let me say this morning that the ache is another sound of the echo. These last couple of weeks we've spoken of a hunger for justice and a hunger for beauty. And we've said that both are the echo of the voice of a God who created us to be certain kinds of people. And that same voice has spoken the need for relationship into the core of our souls.**

If Jesus said anything clearly in his public ministry he said that we were made for relationship:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...Love your neighbor as yourself. (Matt. 22:37)

The relationship with God that Jesus speaks of I'll call "spirituality" – we'll focus on that next week. But it's the hunger for this neighbor love we have in our souls we need to focus on today.

We were made for each other! It's as if by our original creation we were intended to look away from ourselves toward connecting with God and connecting with others. Imagine a circle – that's you – with two straight arrows. One points vertically in the direction of heaven. The other points horizontally in the direction of your neighbor.

This "neighbor" focus in the bible covers a lot of challenging ground. Your husband or wife is your neighbor. Your child is a neighbor. Your irritating co-worker, the misguided member of the other political party, the person across your back fence – these are all your neighbors. We are to "love" them.

But often we don't; and they aren't crazy about us, either. Why? Because we all suffer from a spiritual condition called "curvature of the soul". Your "arrows" are bent. They both point back to you. Our ache for each other is frustrated by the truth that we are focused on ourselves.

How else can we say it? You are egotistical. You are self-centered. You are narcissistic, self-involved, prideful, and generally a royal pain. Because you and I are sinful human beings it's part of the package. We hear the echo of something better, but we struggle do much about it.

We become estranged from each other much more easily than we care to admit. Personally, romantically, racially, socially – it's no great challenge to find something wrong with each other. How could it be otherwise?

2. That's interesting we might think, but what has it got to do with Christmas? Quite a bit. It's no accident that the Christmas angels come first to the shepherds.

The angels did not announce the birth of Jesus the Messiah to Caesar or the leaders of the most powerful empire in the world. They did not announce it to the High Priest or the other leaders of the Jewish religion in Jerusalem.

They came to shepherds. Men who probably guarded the sheep who were sacrificed in the temple, but were too religiously unclean and impure to ever attend themselves.

They came to shepherds. Men who as a social class were seen as unreliable, dishonest, and likely to steal given a chance.

They came to shepherds. Men who slept in their clothes and smelled of livestock and sweat – they stank. If they visited your store you would smile tolerantly and reach for the Lysol as soon as they left.

The angels came announcing the hospitality of God in the giving of his Son first to those who knew what it meant to be “estranged” even from the people of their race, nation, and faith.

That's the way it is with God. God is far more quick to welcome us into his reality than we are to welcome him into ours. When God's estranged Old Covenant people Israel were in exile in Babylon, his watchmen came to them to announce their salvation. It was time to come home to Jerusalem:

Burst into songs of joy together you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. (Isaiah 52:8)

In announcing the birth of Jesus first to shepherds God welcomes those left off of everyone's guest list. In coming to shepherds God makes clear there is no one beyond the reach of divine hospitality – no matter how turned in upon ourselves we might have become. No matter how estranged we imagine ourselves to be.

There is a great clue here to healing our curved souls, and our neighbor challenged lives. But it's not seeing how many people I can invite over to the house for the holidays. It's whether or not I can hear the hospitality of a God who invites me to a relationship with him through Jesus Christ.

3. There is a catch to the neighborliness of God. We must respond to the Jesus invitation. Shall we receive the hospitality of God?

The shepherds did. Invited by angels to glimpse a new born Savior they go to Bethlehem to see it for themselves.

Mary did. Overshadowed by the Holy Spirit she welcomes the presence of God into her life and into her womb.

Zechariah did. Surprised by the gracious hospitality of God he gives his son John the Baptist over to announce the coming of the Christ to the world.

Are we thrilled with God's invitation to relationship? It involves one very hard thing – confessing that I am an egotistical, self-centered, sinner who needs a relationship with God if I ever hope to have the kind of relationship with others I ache to have. Jesus was not born a Savior because there were a couple of particularly unfortunate souls that needed one. I cannot offer to others a forgiveness that I am unwilling to accept.

The only way to practice God's hospitality with my spouse, my co-worker, or my opponent is to first receive it. Welcoming Christ is the only therapy for curvature of the soul that seems to make any lasting difference.

God's invitation to relationship came to the world in Jesus. The shepherd's receive it. And then they begin to extend it.

When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child and all who heard were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

It must have been quite a scene when the smelliest guys in town fanned out to announce "God welcomes you and we care enough to let you know."

It still surprises. Because there are all kinds of loved ones, friends, classmates, and co-workers who would never expect to hear – or see – such hospitality from you. On the other hand your invitation might be the only one in which they can really detect a hint of heaven.

Conclusion

It's a good time to let the healing begin. Christ came into the world to break the power of the estrangement that comes so easily to all our relationships.

A sixth-century monk once preached a sermon for the monks in his monastery. They were grumbling that they were unable to love God properly because they had to put up with one another's ordinary, irritating presence. No, he told them, they were wrong.

He asked them to visualize the world as a great circle whose center is God, and upon whose circumference lie human lives. "Imagine now," he asked them, "that there are straight lines connecting from the outside of the circle all human lives to God at the center. Can't you see that there is no way to move toward God without drawing closer to other people, and no way to approach other people without coming near to God?"