

I

Next month, my wife Amy and our three sons and I will take an annual beach trip, one that Amy and I have been making since before we had children. Amy and I were reminiscing about the first beach trip that we made when our twins were four-month-old infants and the incredible volume of baby gear we felt compelled to pack in the car. Of course there were the car seats and the double-wide stroller and two pack-and-plays and all the bottles and diapers and wipes. We even broke down their baby swing and packed it away in the car. We looked like a mobile Babies-R-Us store rolling down the interstate.

But we've now reached that stage in our parenting life when everybody in our traveling party can pack their own bags (with a spot check from a parent, of course). They can get themselves in and out of the van and buckle their own seat belts. Our children are growing up, and as they grow, they're becoming more and more independent and autonomous.

And while there are parts of those infant and toddler years that we'll miss, we largely celebrate their independence and autonomy. Amy and I believe that part of our God-given task as parents is to work ourselves out of a job, to launch three independent, self-confident, capable young men into the world. That's what we're about.

II

You and I live in a culture that places a hefty premium on self-sufficiency and autonomy. Our bookstores and public libraries have dozens of feet of shelf-space dedicated to a section labeled, "Self-Help." Entire television networks are devoted to programming that features do-it-yourself home improvement, and thanks to modern technology, you don't have to watch those shows on the network's schedule – you can catch them anytime, anywhere, on any device with an Internet connection. And if you want to grab a cup of coffee while you watch your show, no longer are your choices simply regular or decaf. Someone ran the numbers on this, and accounting for all of the sizes and flavor shots and such, there are over 14,000 unique ways to customize your very own cup of coffee at your local coffee house.

And all of that is fine and good. I am not suggesting that bookstores and television networks and coffee shops are bad things. I'm simply pointing out that the culture in which we live has placed a heavy premium on individualism and customization and independence.

And all of that cultural emphasis on autonomy and self-reliance makes bible stories like the one before us this morning seem that much more strange and foreign to our modern ears.

III

We pick up our story this morning in Acts just a few verses past

where we left off last week. Last week, we read the story of Pentecost, the day when the Holy Spirit fell on the 120 disciples of Jesus who were waiting in Jerusalem, and suddenly, all these Galileans who had no formal education or training in linguistics were nevertheless able to speak fluently in all the languages of the then-known world. In between where we left off last week and where we pick up this morning, Peter has addressed the crowd that and interpreted the events that have unfolded, and we're told that that Pentecost day, 3,000 people were added to their number.

And then we come to today's text, so I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Acts 2:42-47.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute them to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread from house to house and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This is one of those stories that biblical scholars like to write papers and argue about at conferences. Did the members of the early church *really* sell *all* their goods and live together as some sort of utopian commune?

Did they really have the goodwill of *all* the people? In last week's story, when the Holy Spirit came, some of the people standing there scoffed and called them a bunch of drunks. Did all of that change because of Peter's sermon? And what about Herod and the Pharisees and Pontius Pilate? Weren't they still hanging around Jerusalem, too? Did *they* suddenly find goodwill for the disciples, too?

And all of those are interesting questions. But for me, I try to remember a simple rule for reading and interpreting the bible. Ultimately, the bible isn't about the disciples, or the church, or people who lived long, long, ago, in a land far, far away. They're important to the story, sure, and the story wouldn't be the same without them, but ultimately, the bible isn't about them. Ultimately, the bible is about God.

I know that's not exactly an earth-shattering revelation, but I think it helps tremendously when we come to stories like this one. Because what this story tells us about who God is and who we are is that God has created each one of us uniquely and individually, *and* God intends for us to live together.

IV

And here's what that means for you, my friend. There never has been and never will be anyone who is exactly like you. As the psalmist says, you were fearfully and wonderfully made by God, and you are irreplaceable. The cross and empty tomb of Jesus is a reminder that there is nowhere above, on, or under the earth that God would not go for you, and there is nothing that God would not do for you.

You are made in the image of God, and you are loved and cherished more than you or I will ever understand, not because of anything you've said or done, or not said or not done, but because of who God is, and not because of who you are, but because of what God has said and done for you in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There never has been and there never will be another you, and that's how God intended it.

But the paradox of the biblical story is that you were made to live in community. When God made the first human, God looked at everything God had made so far, and for the first time in the biblical story, God noticed that there was something not good. God said, "It is not good that the human should live alone." And so God created another human, and placed them in the garden to live together.

And then we come to stories like we read this morning. And the word that keeps showing up is *together*. They

devoted themselves *together*. All who believed were *together*. Day by day, they spent much time *together*.

And so my friend, here's what I want you to know right from my heart. Following Jesus is too hard to do by yourself. Believe me, I've tried, and I've failed, and I've got the scars to prove it.

You are uniquely and wonderfully made, *AND* you were made to follow Jesus in community. Discipleship is a team sport, and *you've* got a pivotal role to play.

V

So let me lay some cards on the table. There's not a pastor or church leader I know who is not anxious about what congregational life will look like as we emerge from the pandemic.

Church leaders are and always have been worried about finances. As we keep reading through Acts, we'll see how the church continues to wrestle with how to fund its ministry and be good stewards of the resources entrusted to its care.

But as we emerge from the pandemic, I think most church leaders are concerned that the pandemic has only exacerbated our cultural tendency to treat engagement in the life of a worshiping community as an individual, optional activity, one of any number of equally valid choices, rather than as a vital component of discipleship.

It's not about filling the pews again. Everyone has their own risk

tolerances and comfort levels about being in public spaces, and those tolerances and comfort levels will continually be recalibrated as we move along. Not everyone can be physically present in this space. Discipleship is not about where our bodies are for a few hours on a Sunday morning. It's about the orientation of our hearts, day by day.

As an old camp song says, the church is not a building. The church is not a steeple. The church is not a resting place. The church is a people. I am the church. You are the church. We are the church together. All who follow Jesus, all around the world, yes, we're the church – together.

There's an old story about a preacher who noticed that a member of his church hadn't been around in several weeks. So the preacher made an appointment and went out and visited the man in his home.

It was a cold day, and the man invited the preacher to have a seat by the fire. Although the man thought he knew what the preacher was going to say, he didn't say anything – the two men sat in silence next to the fire for quite some time.

After a while, the preacher got up, took the fire tongs, and took a coal from atop the fire and set it aside. They watched as it flickered and then went cold, dead as a doornail. After a few more minutes, the preacher got up again, took the cold coal, and placed it back on top of the fire, and it

immediately lit up and roared to life again.

The man said to the preacher, "Thank you for the fiery sermon, pastor. I'll see you again very soon."

Amen.