

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent: Ephesians 2:1-10 & John 3:14-21

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I'm not sure I know exactly when it happened, but there's been a split in the church. I suspect it's a very old one. In fact, I suppose I could go back and look at the desert mothers and the Aesthetes and even Simeon the Stylite for some evidence. But I'm not sure the whens and hows really matter all that much. Because the split is still very much alive, and most folks that have picked a side don't know Simeon the Stylite from Adam. The split I'm talking about is rooted in a simple but massively consequential question: can you be a Christian alone? Where I grew up in the Ozark hills, where hollers cut sharp rivets through dense forest, where cattle and horses and wild thistle outnumbered people, where living in a town of 10,000 made you cityfolk, where I grew up, that good, old time religion reigned. And for that good, old time religion, this question doesn't even make sense. Can you be a Christian alone? Of course you can. Because being a Christian means accepting Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. What else could it mean?

Now, before I go off on my hometown brethren and sistren (and, admittedly, the strawman I've set up in their place), I feel a responsibility to defend them a bit. See, where I grew up, that good, old time religion took hold long before I came along, and long before a lot of other people came along, too. When the Ozarks were the wilderness and those mountain people were fewer and farther between, when you might go into the nearest town twice a year for supplies, when the majority of your time was spent worrying about bears and wampus cats and forest harpies, knowing God was with you always, knowing your personal relationship with Christ was still there, well, that would've brought great comfort. It's no wonder rugged individualism and faith got intertwined. And, though the woods look a little different and the infrastructure's a little better these days, that personal relationship with Christ is still at the very center of belief. The oft-quoted John 3:16 would've been the touchstone then and it remains for this individualistic approach to God. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." And truth be told, I'm not mad about that, not at its core. The relationship between each of us and God, our belief in what our stories say, our attempts to better our own selves through Lenten disciplines or ongoing practices, those are all, by nature, personal. And holding onto God at a personal level, well, that's just dandy. It's sort of the core of our baptisms. Do you, yes, YOU, accept Jesus, do YOU promise to change, do YOU vow to do better? That's all immensely personal stuff. Good on you.

But here's where I think my hillbilly brethren miss out. They miss the corollary to being a Christian on your own. Yes, you, individually can believe in Christ. But to *be* Christian requires action, action that affects other people and the world you occupy. Going back to our baptisms, we don't stop at YOU doing all these things to better yourself. We keep going. Will YOU seek to change the world around you and serve those in need? Even our approach to marriage takes it further than the personal. I can think of few things more personal than a marriage. Marriage itself is an opportunity to love, serve, honor, and respect another person, fully. It's an analogy for your love of God, maybe even a sacred practice arena where your love for this person helps you to love God and your love of God helps you to love this person even more. But it doesn't stop there, with individualism expanded to include just one other person under your own roof but no further. No, it keeps expanding. Your love for this person becomes a model for the rest of the world, how you love and serve this one person should show the rest of the world how to act more faithfully. And maybe in the same way that your love of God and your love of your spouse work in a self-perpetuating cycle, maybe that same cycle can expand outward to include your love of a few more friends, or your neighbors, or the stranger jaywalking on Broad Street, or the car that won't turn off their brights on a dark road, and on and on, ever outward, ever increasingly more encompassing until the entire world is held in God's love as much as you yourself.

Every one of our sacramental acts comes back to this same idea. You have individual responsibility, but that responsibility is not solely to yourself and to God. Your Christian responsibility includes how you interact

with all other people. Even our rite of Confession, which seems like a mighty personal thing, still has communal implications. For one thing, while you can do confession alone with a priest, we confess *as a community* every week. But also, when we do confess to a priest, we don't call it confession. We call it reconciliation. Because the entire point is first, owning the damage you have caused and then, where possible without causing more harm, repairing the breach you made in the community. It's inherently about how your relationship with God can heal the world.

All that to say, it's Paul that draws my attention this week. He talks of sin and grace and our rightful place alongside Christ in the Kingdom of God. It's all sorts of churchy jargon that need unpacking, especially because it's Paul. What is sin? Our Catechism says "Sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation." Even the definition of sin starts with personal relationship and spreads, rather quickly, outward. Alright, so what is grace? "Grace is God's favor toward us, unearned and undeserved. It's by grace that God forgives our sins." I went to a church once that talked about God's grace every single week, and it was the second most loving community I've ever been a part of, second only to St. Thomas', naturally. And what is the Kingdom of God? Well now, that's a trickier question. The Catechism doesn't give a straight answer, and scripture doesn't either. But both point to the same idea, that the Kingdom of God is the realized perfection of all parts of Creation redeemed by God's grace and free of all sin. Our tradition says the Kingdom of God is coming sometime in the future in its perfection but is also being made now. When Martin Luther King said that the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice, he was talking about the Kingdom of God, both the justice at the end and the bending arc now. So, sin is a break in community, often done by an individual but sometimes by the whole body. Grace is God's forgiveness of that sin. And the Kingdom of God both works to repair that breach and, in the end, will become that completely repaired and sacred community.

Every step of the way, the individual matters, but the community's involved. It's bigger than the individual, always. Paul goes on to say that we are created for good works. We don't earn that grace through our good works. Good works are what naturally come out of us when we strive to live life as sin-free as we can. And good works, good works require a community to work in. Sure, you can dedicate your life to prayer in solitude. But what do you pray for? Most everyone I've met that can't be around other people (or that don't particularly like other people) still pray for the world. They pray for their loved ones, but they also pray for this world to get back on some less-sinful track. Sure, you can live alone and be faithful. But how are you faithful? Is it only in your daily disciplines? Do you strive to be nicer or kinder or easier to be around? Well nicer and kinder to whom? You're still coming back to how your own life affects others. I'd even say that my hillbilly roots involve the community, even if they wouldn't claim it. I think about my mother's family and how invested they are in helping other people to see the light of Christ. It's not because they'll get some merit badges in Heaven. They do it because of their love and concern for others. Now, I may take a different approach, but at least we share this growing connection.

So, back to that first question. Can you be a Christian alone? Our tradition says no, you can't. But I think it bears a tweak. Can you be a Christian without seeing other people? God knows this year has shown us we can. But can you be a Christian without concern for other people? Absolutely not. Your relationship with Christ fundamentally begins with you and God, but it can't help but expand outward. That's the gist of John 3:17, the less famous continuation of John 3:16: "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Taken together, John 3:16 and John 3:17, that's where we live. In a world where sin is a real and painfully present part of life. But also in a world bending toward justice. A world filled with grace and more on the way. A world where your love, your prayer, your faith grows ever outward. A world where you and your neighbor heal each other. A world with good works sewn into Creation itself. A world that is and that is moving ever closer to that glorious Kingdom of God.