

A New Creed: Part V

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The above picture that might aptly describe the experience of many people as they make their way through life's journey. There are many who experience a life (or at least moments in life) when they find themselves not a part of the world, but separate from the world. Not a part of the creation, or the community of the earth, but separate from it. There may be different perspectives that we can take. Perhaps feel as if we are on the outside looking in. Maybe from below, thinking one's self is on the bottom looking up. Or maybe even one feels as if they are above the world and that it and its inhabitants belongs at his or her feet. Regardless of the perspective, the reality of this image and the reality that many people experience as a result, is the weight of loneliness. A loneliness that can make the weight and importance of one's life and one's living greater than the weight and importance of the world itself.

Just how lonely do people find themselves these days? To put it into perspective, let me cite a couple of numbers for you. I recently looked at some survey data that compared levels of loneliness experienced by people in the United States over the past 30 years or so. Back in 1995, when people in the U.S. were surveyed and asked if they had any close friends, one in ten people, or about ten percent of respondents said they had no close friends. Now compare that to a survey done in 2015 that reports over four out of ten respondents indicating they have no close friends. To me there is something rather alarming as I meditate on those survey results.

When you think of the way we have managed to create new webs for communication and different ways to enhance human connectivity through mobile phones, the internet and

social media, one would expect that somehow this would lead to the blossoming of friendship and perhaps a deepening of human relationships. But it's the opposite that appears to be true. It reminds me of something that Mother Theresa was once quoted as having said when she was asked about the worst disease she ever encountered. When you think about Mother Theresa who devoted her life to working with ones stricken by terrible diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera, and leprosy, she noted that the most terrible disease she ever encountered was loneliness. And if the numbers of those surveys are any indication, this disease has become an epidemic.

This disease of loneliness and overcoming this disease is at the heart, I believe of why we are called to be the church, to celebrate God's presence and live with respect in Creation. To consider these phrases from a new creed and to explore them for their deeper meaning is to conclude that we worship a God who calls us into community. A God who calls us into relationship with him, with one another and with the whole of creation. To me there is intention, and I know I have said this before but it deserves repeating, there is intention in the Scriptures when first thing God says isn't good "is to be alone." After all, where do we as human beings find our identity, our meaning, our purpose in life if we do not see ourselves as relational beings? Think about how you would identify yourself in your life, what is it that makes you "who" you are? What would you be able to say about yourself if you were all by your lonesome, how would you know who you are? Where would you begin? We need others, we need one another, we need a community and see ourselves as a part of that community if we are to truly grow and flourish in knowledge of ourselves and just as important, in order that others might grow in knowledge of their selves.

So much of Jesus' ministry was devoted to reaching out and including ones who were left along life's margins. Ones who were sentenced to be alone because they were told they did not belong. Jesus did this because as the son of God, he knew that it was not good to be alone. As a result, it was not good to abandon others. Even in the place of ultimate abandonment, when the world abandoned Christ to the cross, Jesus said to one of the criminals on the cross next to him that "today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 24) It was a reaching out to another, in the midst of public shame and embarrassment, at a time when

someone can feel truly alone, with an invitation and a promise of community. The theologian Karl Barth once said in a sermon of his that Jesus hanging on the cross, with the criminals hanging on the crosses on either side of him, was the first authentic Christian community. The first church as it were.

Sustaining community and connection to God and to one another was always important to Jesus. Not only his actions but his teachings sought to reinforce this time and again. When we think of the Lord's Prayer that we recite, it was given to ones who did not know how to pray in order that they might know not only how to pray but pray intimately to the one they were to call "Our Father" in heaven. It expressed not only their commonality in the words that were spoken, but in the common source of life that calls us all to be one family of creation. So important was this message to the mission of Jesus that in John 14 he even says, "I will not leave you as orphans." Jesus, knowing just how easy it is to experience abandonment and loneliness in this world, promised his disciples and us a way to overcome it by his Spirit.

This new community he sought to institute was reiterated when he shared his last supper with his disciples when they ate from one loaf, recognizing they were one body, and drinking of one cup for the forgiveness of sins. Seeking for his disciples to have a way to move beyond conflict and alienation with the ask and distribution of forgiveness -knowing forgiveness was necessary to the sustenance and life of all human relationships. The church was left to his followers as a gift, where those connections and those relationships that are vital to human survival could be restored and renewed. You know when we think of Christ's atoning sacrifice, we should think of atonement as "at-one-ment." It was a life lived and given in order that we might celebrate a deeper unity. Yes, there is a matter of personal salvation, if only because atonement is meant to heal us as individuals in our loneliness and alienation that we might become community at one with God and one another. That we might be saved from ourselves and brought into relationship -truly be the church.

Now I appreciate that this message can be a challenge in our 21st century world that is filled with a rampant individualism. Ours is a world in which everything can be "about me." We can even make the church about "me and my needs." It's like the story of this fellow who once washed ashore on a desert island only to discover another castaway on the island who had

been living there for a number of years. Having been alone for so long, the castaway was so happy to have someone on the island to share his life with and decided he should show the new guy around. So he took the guy who just washed up on the shore and brought him to a bunch of different huts that he had constructed around the island. The first hut he went to had a basin carved out of wood and a fire pit. He said, "this is where I do my cooking." Then he took him to a hut with a chair and a few books, he said, "This is my library, its where I study." He then took him to a hut with a table and chairs and said, "This is where I eat." Then he showed him a hut with a bed in it and said, "this is where I sleep." Then he walked over to another hut with a bench and a cross on the wall and said, "this is where I go to church!" Well, as the new fellow looked around, he saw another hut that they had not visited, he pointed to it and asked, "what's that hut over there?" The first fellow responded, "that's where I used to go to church!"

Yet the church is not just about any one person's needs, nor was it ever meant to be. Like Jesus who hung on that cross, the church was a place where we reach out to minister to others in their need, even while we stand in need. I believe that as we do this we experience one of the great mysteries of faith because it is then that somehow we do find our own needs being met. We are filled with the Holy Spirit, with God's presence and community in our lives when we empty our selves of our selves. A.J. Tozer the former pastor and writer once said that sometimes a church is so full of individual spirits that the Holy Spirit can withdraw from that church and people would not notice. They wouldn't notice because it is too full of individual egos and personalities that can crowd out God's spirit.

But the picture of the church painted for us in the book of Acts 2, in this text that Jane read for us this morning, is of a Spirit-filled Spirit led church. The Spirit of Christ had not left, it had only just entered the lives of those first believers. The Spirit that had called them to be the church and be that different kind of community. An image of that new creation promised in Christ. If the Spirit were to have left them, they would have stopped being that relational community that was called to celebrate God and live in that deeper relationship with one another.

Listen again to the description of what life was like amongst the early believers in the first days of the church. It bears repeating. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people." I'm not sure if we can completely relate to that description in our own life as a church, as a community of Christ, but I hope that when we are at our best we do catch glimpses of it. Especially that last phrase that speaks of praising God and having the goodwill of all the people, for this is akin to celebrating God's presence and living with respect in creation.

You see living with respect in creation is more than just environmentalism. When we speak of the environment or when we speak of creation even, we should not see ourselves as separate from it but instead as a part of it. We are meant to be a part of the whole. When we appreciate this, then we come to see our needs, not as the only needs that matter, but we see and consider the needs of those around us, even the needs of the Creation itself. For when we find ourselves so consumed by our own needs, that is when we begin to set ourselves apart. When we are set apart is when we can find ourselves at our loneliest because nothing else and no one else matters. Like that image that I showed you at the beginning, the individual can begin to carry more weight and importance than the whole.

We can forget, rather than celebrate God's presence. We can forget how our needs have been supplied for rather than appreciate how God has supplied for them. We can start to think that it is all up to me, my life, my future, my welfare. We move to that lonely place in life. I was reminded of this perspective a couple of weeks ago while I was attending the Distinguished Alumni Award Dinner at Emmanuel College. This year's recipient was Rev. John Thompson, a man who has spent over forty years in ministry working with some of Canada's indigenous peoples. Rev. Thompson told a story about a time when he was very young and found himself working as a pastor on a reserve in Alberta. There was a woman on the reserve who had fallen very ill and she had been to a number of doctors and specialists, had tried a

variety of treatments and medicines and nothing seemed to work. Rev. Thompson was approached by a local medicine man who believed that he could help the woman, but needed Rev. Thompson's assistance in order to go find a medicinal plant that he believed would help this woman. They hopped in Rev. Thompson's truck and drove north along a provincial highway for a couple of hours when finally the medicine man said "pull over here." They got out of the truck, walked into the bush and found a spot where the particular plant the medicine man needed was growing. Rev. Thompson was surprised to see that the plant was all over the place and decided that he would pick a bunch of it to take back with him for future use. Then, he describes feeling the hand of the medicine man on his shoulder, and he looked up to see the medicine man shaking his head at him saying, "what is it with you guys, always taking more than you need? You are not the only one on this earth you know." Then the elder, showed him how to instead of taking more, to give something back to the earth for what he took. They left some tobacco behind on the ground and said a prayer of thanksgiving to the Creator for providing what was needed in that moment. They also said a prayer that acknowledged their brothers and sisters with whom they shared the land.

Thompson reflected on what a powerful moment that was in his ministry. For there he was, a newly ordained minister out in the middle of the wilderness, just he and this medicine man, alone in their need -their quest. He discovered that even in that place they were far from alone and their need in that moment was not the only need that mattered. He found himself connected to the needs of others he hadn't really given much thought to, others who may come searching for this same plant. There was something about the graciousness of God to provide in Creation in a way he hadn't really considered. Here he was a Christian minister, and he realized that the medicine man was more conscious of God's presence than him...that the medicine man had a better handle on who was a part of God's church than he did. Thompson said that suddenly his perspective shifted even more from that lonely place, to that larger place. From that outside perspective to being part of a greater whole, community and relationship. He said , it helped him to have a greater understanding of what is meant by the old saying that exists in many First Nations peoples that acknowledges "all my relations." A

saying that also finds a place in the Cree language on the crest of the United Church of Canada. A saying that is a part of what it means to be the Church.

You see my friends, wherever we are, whatever our perspective, the Spirit of Christ still calls us to be the Church, to be the ones who celebrate the presence of a God who is for us and live with respect in God's creation that includes us, all of us, all our relations in creation, now and forever.