



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – March 2, 2008 One Step Closer
The Reverend Harold E. Masback, III

Genesis 2:15-18

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” ¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”

John 17:20-23

²⁰ “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,^f so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

1 Corinthians 12:14-27

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension

within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

My friends, you and I are about to go into our annual meeting, poised on the threshold of our 275th anniversary as a body of Christ. We have much, much to celebrate, and many challenges and opportunities to consider. In just 15 minutes, I’m going to close this sermon by sharing the most compelling challenge I see before us; and, like any good salesman, trial lawyer or preacher, I’m going to make an “ask.”

That’s how I’m going to close this sermon, but here’s how I want to open. I want to ask you to imagine that we were watching one of those split screen movie scenes – one of those scenes where the screen splits and shows you in three panels what’s going on simultaneously in three different locations. The left hand panel of the screen is captioned: 12:30pm, February 19, 2008 Pauma Valley, California. The center panel is captioned: 2:30pm, February 19, 2008, Iowa City, Iowa. The right hand panel is captioned: 3:30pm, February 19, 2008, New Canaan, Connecticut.

The left hand panel, the Pauma Valley panel, is a scene from the YG Mission Trip. Fourteen vans of mission fish have just streamed in from our seven different work projects, and 100 kids are gathering for mid day prayers before lunch. There are sore shoulders, blistered hands, and a few bruised thumbs, but there are also arms casually linked around shoulders, exuberant smiles, and an easy going affection that was radiant.

Notwithstanding the numbers, the cold rain, and the fatigue, I have never experienced a community that was so gentle, so easy, so loving with one another as was this YG. No one was left out, no one stood off. Everyone was a part of, no one was apart from the beauty that was unfolding amongst them. At least for these 10 days, YG truly was a community of unconditional acceptance, service and love. As I

^f Other ancient authorities read *be one in us*

watched the scene play out in front of me, thanking God for the sheer blessing of being there, my cell phone began to ring.

What is going on in this first panel? Something extraordinary. Extraordinary but, happily, not unique. Duke theologian Stanley Hauerwas put it this way: *“The work of Jesus was not a new set of ideals or principals for reforming or even revolutionizing society, but the establishment of a new community, a people that embodied forgiveness, sharing and self-sacrificing love. In that sense, the visible church is not to be the bearer of Christ’s message, but to be the message.”*¹

What is going on in this first panel is Christian community.² At least for these 10 days, God blessed YG with the experience of truly being the body of Christ. That’s the first panel, but this sermon is not about YG.

The center panel, the Iowa City, Iowa panel, is a scene from the intensive care unit of the University of Iowa Hospital. My daughter Libby is dialing my number, calling me while I stand in the middle of that Pauma Valley scene in the left panel because a fellow freshman is in a coma. During the night this neighbor had stumbled into Libby’s room mumbling that she had taken 30 of her anti-depression pills, 30 of her anti-anxiety pills and a bottle of booze.

Libby called 911, and as they waited for the ambulance the girl collapsed into Libby’s arms and lost consciousness, as the EMT’s arrived she stopped breathing, and as they raced to the hospital her heart stopped. Somehow the girl survived the night, and Libby was calling me because she wanted my advice on how to help.

What is going on in this second panel is something extraordinary. Extraordinary but, sadly, not unique. Adolescents and college students are experiencing a nationwide crisis of severe mental illness. As the chief of the Mental Health Service at Harvard University wrote in *College of the Overwhelmed*, *“If your son or daughter is in college, the chances are almost one in two that he or she will become depressed to the point of being unable to function; . . . and one in ten that he or she will seriously consider suicide. In fact, since 1988, the likelihood of a college student’s suffering depression has doubled, [and] suicide ideation has tripled.”*³

Like most mental health phenomenon, this crisis almost certainly results from many determinants, but many experts agree that competition, work load and overextension have eroded the breadth and depth of communal relationships. As Dr. Kadison writes, *“Personal connections sustain all of us in our day-to-day lives. It is the connections we have with others that provide security and a sense of safety and that reinforces our sense of who we are. Unfortunately, I have found that these personal connections have an often underappreciated role in maintaining the mental health of college students.”*⁴ That’s the second panel, but this sermon isn’t about the mental health crisis among our young.⁵

The right hand panel, the New Canaan, Connecticut panel, is a scene from your kitchen table, your briefcase, your desk, wherever your copy of the *New York Times* was lying at 3:30 pm on February 19, the time when Libby was dialing my cell phone while I was standing watching YG. One of the leading headlines in that day’s edition of the *Times* read, “Midlife Suicide Rates Puzzling Researchers.” The article reported a Center for Disease Control study revealing a dramatic increase in suicide among 45 to 54 year olds. The rate among women in that age group, for instance, had soared 31 percent in just five years.

What is going on in this right hand panel is something extraordinary. Extraordinary but, sadly, not unique. Commenting on the sudden spike in suicides, the chief of Clinical-Genetic Epidemiology at the New York State Psychiatric Institute speculated that the phenomenon was related to the long reported rise in depression among affluent baby boomers, a trend itself related to “the changing shape of families and more frequent moves away from friends and families that have frayed social support networks.”⁶ As Émile Durkheim observed over 100 years ago, “Man is the more vulnerable to self-destruction the more he is detached from any collectivity.”⁷ That’s the third panel, but this sermon isn’t about the mental health crisis among the middle-aged.

This sermon isn’t about YG, or adolescent mental health, or middle-aged mental health. This sermon is about human flourishing. It’s about the principal dynamics that support human flourishing and the principal dynamics that undermine human flourishing. And each of the three panels in our split screen points

back in its own way to the truth of this morning's scripture passages.

With each act of creation in Genesis, God pronounced his handiwork good. Each act was good, that is, until God created the human alone, as a singularity. Right away God knew that this time His creation was not good, concluding "It is not good that the human should be alone (Gen. 2:18)." And right away God set out to make it good by creating companionship and community for the human.

John's Gospel describes the scene as Jesus draws away at the Last Supper to offer his last prayer, his last request of the Father. And what is his last prayer? What is his last request? Jesus prays "that they may all be one . . . I in them and you in me, that they may all become completely one (John 17:21-23)."

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians labors to resolve the disputes that have split his young congregation in Corinth. He adjudicates theological disagreements, he exhorts patience and forbearance, and finally, like God in Genesis, like Jesus in John's Gospel, Paul shares God's deepest prescription for human flourishing: the Corinthians weren't created to be stand-alone individualities. They couldn't flourish as separated entities. Like limbs or organs of one body, they were created to participate as constituents of one shared community.⁸ They were created to flourish only when supported by and, yes, constrained by, the demands of interdependent mutuality in the one body of Christ.⁹ ¹⁴ *Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.* ¹⁵ *If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. . . .*²⁰ *As it is, there are many members, yet one body.* ²⁷ *Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*

My friends, the deep truth of these scripture lessons is that our modern aspiration for utter autonomy, our dream of unfettered individualism is an unhealthy delusion.¹⁰ When God calls us into communities of unconditional acceptance, love and service, God is only calling us fully to be what we were created to be; to live as we were created to live best; to model God's communal plan for all humanity. ¹¹

What might this look like? It might look like a fourth panel on our split screen, a panel captioned 7:00 PM,

February 26, 2008, New Canaan, Connecticut. The scene is a family dinner table as first time mission fish are telling their mom about the trip. This is what they said, "Mom, we now understand that there is another way to live. There is an easier, happier, more loving way to live where every person accepts each other without question, supports one another without condition, and puts others' needs before their own.¹² We have experienced so much love, and we now know that the love we have experienced is God's presence among us.

"It was so different, and so hard back at school today. Our teacher was shouting and criticizing and putting down the whole class. We went up to her after the class and told her that there is another way to live; it doesn't have to be this way. We told her we had just spent a week serving in the rain. For that whole week no one yelled at us, nagged us, or put us down even once. We just loved and supported one another, and we succeeded at every challenge set before us. Our teacher looked at us, and then she began to nod, and then her eyes filled up with tears, and then she began to smile, and then she said we were right. She said she would try really hard to teach differently tomorrow."¹³

What's going on in this fourth panel? Something extraordinary. Extraordinary but, happily, not unique. What's going on is the community Jesus came to establish, a community of unconditional acceptance and love embodying Christ's message to the world. Henry Nouwen put it this way. *"It is a great mystery that compassion often becomes real for people not simply because of the deeds of one hospitable individual, but because of an atmosphere resulting from a common life. Certain parishes, prayer groups, households, homes, convents, or monasteries have a true healing influence that can make both members and their guests feel understood, accepted, cared for, and loved."*

And now, my friends, you can anticipate the compelling challenge I see before us as we celebrate our 275th anniversary as a body of Christ. We live in a time of powerful forces pulling at the fabric of community, forces that erode our time and energy for deep relationships, forces that encourage rather than restrain our native instincts to set ourselves apart as self-sufficient individuals.¹⁴ Let us instead be ever more truly the body of Christ we were created to be. Let us be ever more deeply a healing community of acceptance, understanding, sharing and love.

And now, my friends, you can anticipate my “ask.” I ask you each to take one step closer. In this our anniversary year, find just one way in which you can be more “a part of” rather than “apart from.” Find just one way to participate more deeply in any one of the relational ministries of this church. Find whatever ministry is right for you: small group Bible study, prayer shawl ministry, choir, pastoral ministry team, service ministries, OG, Women’s Fellowship, Men’s Fellowship – and take one step closer.¹⁵

Call it a “*human capital campaign*.”¹⁶ Deacon Judy Dunn has a lovely phrase that describes the healing power she has experienced living in this congregation. Judy says, “this church is living love.” Let us all take one step closer to living into that vision. **Amen.**

* Notes below offer both references for quotations in the text and relevant thoughts for further study.

1 Compare Hauerwas, selection from *The Peaceable Kingdom*, in *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham: Duke, 2001), p. 133: “Discipleship is quite simply extended training in being dispossessed. To become followers of Jesus means that we must, like him, be dispossessed of all that we think gives us power over our own lives and over the lives of others. Unless we learn to relinquish the presumption that we can ensure the significance of our own lives, we are not capable of the peace of God’s kingdom.”

2 YG’s achievement (or rather, God’s in them) is all the more remarkable, bearing Henri Nouwen’s thought in mind: “Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives.” Nouwen is quoted in Peter Marty, “Community as a Way of Life,” *The Christian Century* (23 August 2005), pp. 8-9. Hauerwas’s point above about the church finds traction in God’s nature, and ours. Colin Gunton sees in Christian community the very image of a Triune God: “To be in the image of God is therefore to be in necessary relation to others so made.” One strand of the Christian tradition identifies the Fall itself with possessiveness or privatization. The anonymous writer of the fourteenth-century devotional work, the *Theologia Germanica*, which had a considerable influence on Martin Luther, puts it this way: “It is said, it was because Adam ate the apple that he was lost, or fell. I say, it was because of his claiming something for his own, and because of his I, Mine, Me, and the like. Had he eaten seven apples, and yet never claimed anything for his own, he would not have fallen: but as soon as he called something his own, he fell, and would have fallen if he had never touched an apple.” The text, translated by Susanna Winkworth, is available at <http://www.ccel.org/a/anonymous/theologia/formats/theologia.a.htm>; see chapters 1 and 3.

3Kadison and DiGeronimo, *College of the Overwhelmed: The Campus Mental Health Crisis and What to Do About It* (San Francisco: Josey

Bass, 2004), p. 1. The complete quote is as follows: “If your son or daughter is in college, the chances are almost one in two that he or she will become depressed to the point of being unable to function; one in two that he or she will have regular episodes of binge drinking (with the resulting significant risk of dangerous consequences such as sexual assault and car accidents); and one in ten that he or she will seriously consider suicide. In fact, since 1988, the likelihood of a college student’s suffering depression has doubled, suicidal ideation has tripled, and sexual assaults have quadrupled.”

4 Kadison and DiGeronimo, p. 11

5 From the Commission on Children at Risk, “Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities,” Press Release, 9 Sept. 2003:

“Despite a decade of unprecedented economic growth that resulted in fewer children living in poverty, large and growing numbers of American children and adolescents are suffering from mental health problems. Scholars at the National Research Council in 2002 estimated that at least one in every four adolescents in the U.S. is currently at serious risk of not achieving productive adulthood. Twenty-one percent of US children ages 9 to 17 have a diagnosable mental disorder or addiction, 8 percent of high school students suffer from clinical depression, and 20 percent of students report seriously having considered suicide in the past year. By the 1980s, U.S. children as a group were reporting more anxiety than did children who were psychiatric patients in the 1950s, according to one study.”

6 Patricia Cohen, “Midlife Suicide Rates Puzzling Researchers,” *New York Times*, 19 February 2008.

7 Quoted by Jack D. Spiro, “Letters to the Editor: Trying to Understand Midlife Suicide,” *New York Times*, 24 February 2008; see Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (New York: Macmillan, 1951).

8 From a neurological point of view, it’s been noted that this need for collectivity is “hard-wired” into the brain. A collaborative study from the Dartmouth Medical School and the National Commission on Children at Risk concluded the following: the brain is genetically predisposed to develop organically in an environment conducive to meaningful relationships with others. Reduce the relational opportunities in the environment you will get structurally different brains with increased dispositions to mental illness. As commission member Allan N. Schore of the UCLA School of Medicine put it, “The idea is that we are born to form attachments, that our brains are physically wired to develop in tandem with another’s through emotional communication beginning before words are spoken. . . . If these things go awry, you’re going to have seeds of psychological problems, of difficulty coping, stress in human relations, substance abuse, those sorts of problems later on.” *Hardwired to Connect: The New Case for Authoritative Communities* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2003), p. 16. Compare Erich Fromm: “The deepest need of man, then, is to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his

aloneness, . . . to achieve union.” *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper, 1956), p. 8.

9 Compare Deitrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper, 1954), p. 24: “Without Christ we should not know God, we could not call upon Him, nor come to Him. But without Christ we also would not know our brother, nor could we come to him. The way is blocked by our own ego. Christ opened up the way to God and to our brother. Now Christians can live with one another in peace; they can love and serve one another; they can become one. But they can continue to do so only by way of Jesus Christ. Only in Jesus Christ are we one, only through him are we bound together.” The call to love others is fed by the recognition of our own condition; psychologist Carl Jung asks: “But what if I should discover that the least amongst them all, the poorest of all beggars, the most impudent of all offenders, yea the very fiend himself – that these are within me, and that I myself stand in need of the alms of my own kindness, that I myself am the enemy who must be loved – what then?” “Psychotherapists or the Clergy,” *Psychology and Western Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 207.

10 Swiss theologian Karl Barth diagnoses the problem (following the Jewish thinker Martin Buber): “A pure, absolute and self-sufficient ‘I’ is an illusion, for as an ‘I,’ even as I think and express this ‘I,’ I am not alone or self-sufficient, but am distinguished from and connected with a Thou in which I find a being like my own, so that there is no place for an interpretation of the ‘I am’ which means isolation and necessarily consists in a description of the sovereign self-positing of an empty subject by eruptions of its pure, absolute and self-sufficient abyss. The ‘I’ is not pure, absolute or self-sufficient. But this means that it is not empty.” *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, ed. Torrance and Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1968). And in a contemporary American context, compare Mary Pipher, *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), p. 25: “American values concerning independence may have worked better when we lived in small communities surrounded by endless space. . . . We have pushed the concept of individual rights to the limits. Our laws let adults sell children harmful products. But laws are not our main problem. People have always been governed more by community values than by laws. . . . Unwritten rules of civility – for taking turns, not cutting in lines, holding doors open for others and lowering our voices in theaters – organize civic life. Unfortunately, those rules of civility seem to be crumbling in America. We are becoming a nation of people who get angry when anyone gets in our way.”

11 Karl Barth, *The Church and the Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 10: “The one and only word of God has once for all been uttered, for all men to heed, in the fact of the Incarnation: in the man Christ Jesus, in whom the sin of all men, their contradiction against God and their own inner self-contradiction is done to death, taken away, forgiven, and exists no more. The task from which the Church derives its being is to proclaim that this has really happened and to summon men to believe in its reality.”

12 From Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, quoted in George Brandl, ed., *The Religious Experience* (New York: Braziller, 1964), p. 919: “It is more ‘natural’ for us to be ‘out of ourselves’ and carried freely and entirely towards the ‘Other’—toward God in Himself or in other men—than it is for us to be centered and enclosed in ourselves.”

13 Thus Stanley Grenz: “The best apologetic we have in the postmodern context is the vibrant, local community of disciples who are loyal to Christ, that is, a community in which the power of the spirit is transforming relationships. . . . postmodern persons are converted to the community before they are converted to Christ.” “Next-Wave Interview with Stanley Grenz,” 20 April 1999, available at <http://www.next-wave.org/may99/SG.htm>. Paul Tillich observed similarly: “The Church’s task is to introduce each new generation into the reality of the Spiritual Community, into its faith, and into its love.” *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

14 From Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), p. 257: “It is everlastingly repeated [in society] that it is man’s nature to be eternally dissatisfied, constantly to advance, without relief or rest, toward an indefinite goal. The longing for infinity is daily represented as a mark of moral distinction, whereas it can only appear within unregulated consciences which elevate to a rule the lack of rule from which they suffer. The doctrine of the most ruthless and swift progress has become an article of faith.”

15 Consider the fruits of getting “active” in our church context: compare Mary Pipher, *The Shelter of Each Other*, p. 127: “Therapists are asking how we can respect our long-held ideals of personal freedom and also acknowledge our culture’s desperate need for family loyalty and community values. In his book *We’ve Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy – and the World’s Getting Worse*, James Hillman noted that one of the reasons our culture is falling apart is that intelligent people are going into therapy instead of becoming social activists. They’re paying therapists for time to complain about work instead of organizing workers. Hillman wrote that therapy further erodes the planet by emphasizing inner, not outer, problems. He said that there is no evidence that people do more community work after they’ve had therapy, and in fact he suspects they do less.”

16 Mary Pipher, *The Shelter of Each Other*, p. 250: “In the 1980s many people retreated into private life. They tried to go first class on the Titanic, but that didn’t work. By now it is clear that our public world must be saved. As Hillman wrote, the self is the internalization of the community. We cannot be healthy in a community full of pathology. We are all joined at the hip.” Miroslav Volf sharpens the point for us, describing the sort of spiritual “economy” in which we develop community: “Luther used the image of the conduit: We are channels of God’s gifts to our neighbors. The image is good except that a conduit merely conveys goods and does not benefit from them. We, on the other hand, benefit from the goods as well as bestow them on others. Which is to say that we don’t just receive the gifts, but that we are

constituted and changed by them.” *Free of Charge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p. 14.