

**“It’s Not Good for The Human to Be Alone”**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

17 October 2021

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Genesis 2:4-8, 18

Romans 15:1-6

*“so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and  
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”*

- Romans 15:6

**Prayer**

God of grace,

We are grateful for this sacred moment

We set aside every week to reflect on your Word.

Bless all who now pause to meditate on the stories

That nurture our faith,

And speak to us once again –

That hearing we might believe

And believing trust and serve you with all our strength, mind and heart.

Hear our prayer, O God. Amen.

***“Lo tov heyot ha’adam levado.”***

***“It is not good for the human to be alone.”*** This is one of the first sentences I learned, studied and translated into English in my first year of Hebrew in seminary. I remember spending an outrageous number of hours in the library with my face buried in biblical Hebrew grammar books and surrounded by Hebrew lexicons, commentaries on Genesis, printouts of this text in the Septuagint, and a pile of different versions of the Bible. I knew I would have to justify my translation, so I agonized over the meaning of every word, especially of the Hebrew word “*adam*,” which is rendered as “*man*” in the passage that Heather Makris read a few minutes ago.

***“It is not good that the man should be alone.”*** I was convinced then as I still am this morning that this ancient Hebrew sentence has a much deeper meaning than the mere theological foundation for the institution of marriage. I believed then as I do today that imbedded in these divine words is an ineluctable truth about human nature that is bigger than preferred pronouns, gender roles, marital status, sexual identity or human sexuality. Every time I immerse myself in this passage, I imagine God looking at Adam, the only human being on Earth, at least in this second version of the creation story, and saying out loud that humankind is designed, built, and hardwired to not live alone.

There is a great deal of theological and anthropological substance in the words of the song Barbra Streisand made famous in the motion picture “*Funny Girl*.” “**People, people who need people, are the luckiest people in the world.**”<sup>1</sup> In one of the very first attempts to define what it means to be human the Bible simply states that the Maker of humanity created people for people. Adam’s need is also the need of every human being on the planet. We are all social creatures who need each other to become more whole, to thrive, and to live fuller lives. In fact, this inherited need to not live apart from other people is what makes us human. This passage in Genesis makes the unequivocal claim that you and I can begin to count ourselves amongst the luckiest people the sooner we accept and embrace our God-given need for a partner, a spouse, for friends, for soul-repairing companionship, for heart-enlarging relationships, for other human beings whose needs challenge us to think beyond ourselves and for community. Reading Genesis 2, verse 18 as nothing more than a divine commentary on the existential aloneness of the first male of the human species would be too reductive. The interpretation of this Bible verse would be too narrow if it did not take God’s instructive words about Adam’s condition as a universal statement on the fundamental need of every human being to bond with other human beings. I believe the ancient Israelites preserved this second creation story alongside the first creation story<sup>2</sup> in Genesis – Two creation stories that are drastically different from each other – because in these age-old religious words “**It is not good for the human to be alone,**” the faith community hears a clear warning against the notion that any one of us can do it alone, that we are independent, autonomous, self-sufficient individuals completely in control of our lives without the need for other people.

Jewish sages of the past said that God created Adam alone so the first human being would experience the emptiness caused by isolation and would know that human loneliness is never good. It is fascinating that in the first story of creation, God pronounces the Hebrew words “**ki tov**” – “**it was good**”- at the end of almost every single day. But in this morning’s passage, we hear for the first time that something in God’s creation is “**lo tov**” – “**not good**.” Being alone, isolated, cut off, and separated from other people is the only thing God declares as not being pleasant, agreeable, acceptable or good in all creation.

You and I know now more than ever before the pain of physical isolation. One of the many cruelties of the COVID pandemic has been the loss of physical proximity and human contact. We all understand on a much deeper level now how unnatural it is to stay away from family, neighbors and friends we love. This artificial pause in our social interactions, although much needed to avoid hospitalizations and deaths, has shown us the importance of those shared spaces in our lives where we connect with other people eye-to-eye, face-to-face, heart-to-heart, human-to-human.

A friend of mine told me a little while ago that a screen is no substitute for real human skin. I am deeply thankful that for the last 19 months screens have kept us from social, emotional and even spiritual starvation, but we all understand better now our deep physical, psychological and religious need to experience human closeness

unmediated by social media, microphones, or computer screens. We know now that life is definitely more complicated when we live in a real community of human beings, but it is also more fun, beautiful and meaningful. COVID has reminded us of the unquestionable goodness of things we had been taking for granted. It is good to have friends over for a meal. It is good to hug our parents and grandchildren. It is good to fall in love for the first time and kiss the other special person in your life. It is good to sit in an audience with countless other human beings to be inspired, moved, shocked, excited and transformed by human creativity on the stage or on the large screen. Someone told me recently that she misses the delightful human experience of eavesdropping on the conversation of strangers at a café. It is good to have a human connection with complete strangers we come across on a flight or at the check-out line at the grocery store. If the pandemic has taught us anything is that we took for granted the goodness of a simple handshake, a spontaneous smile without a face mask to cover it, of a gentle and reassuring human touch. There is incalculable goodness in holding another person's hand to say a prayer together. It is good to share the pew with other human beings who are seeking to live God's love in the world. It is good to have opportunities to catch up with a friend in the parking lot after the worship service to gossip or to have a Stephen Minister or a deacon place her arm around you when you are going through a rough patch in your life and say, "**You're not alone.**"

You and I have not been created for aloneness. In fact, our Sacred Scriptures says very clearly that it is vitally important for our wellbeing that we understand that we are the luckiest people when we acknowledge our primordial need for other people and for community. And part of what the church is for, I think, is to make sure that we do not ever forget that we cannot be human or Christian alone and separated from other people. At the heart of our faith tradition is an invitation to life in community. One of the essential teachings of the Church is that we are meant to share the journey of faith with other followers of Christ. Christianity does not only ask us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves; our religion makes the challenging and categorical affirmation that we cannot love God whom we have never seen if we do not love our brother or sister that is made of human flesh and bone.<sup>3</sup> This is why the Church exists. The Church creates community where we practice how to be human, how to open ourselves to one another and how to love the humanity of others. When we gather together in this place, we are doing something that is deeply counter-cultural. We are making a choice to stand against the loneliness of our contemporary world where a person can have over 500 friends on Facebook and 1000 followers on Twitter and still feel depressingly and acutely lonely.

In her book "*Stitches: A Handbook on Hope, Meaning and Repair*," author Anne Lamott wrote this: "***The American way is to not need help, but to help. One of the hardest lessons I had to learn was that I was going to need a lot of help, and for a long time... What saved me was that I found gentle, loyal and hilarious companions, which is at the heart of meaning... [True friends] help you see who you truly are, which is not always the loveliest possible version of yourself, but then comes the greatest miracle of all—they still love you.***"<sup>4</sup>

---

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

The Church is a sacred space in the world where true friendship is the best theological proof of Christ's saving love. In this sacred gathering, we learn to see the gift of God's good creation in another human skin. Here, we are not afraid to say out loud that, yes, we need God, but we also need each other's help to become the best and loveliest versions of ourselves. Here, we learn to be friends with other people who disagree with us on political matters and hold on to theological views that no longer speak to our hearts. In this faith community that is bound together by the love of the Creator who declared that is unnatural for humans to live alone, we strive to be friends to people who look and sound nothing like us but bear God's image and likeness. Part of what the Church is for, I believe, is to enable the kind of human relationships and connections that are indeed life-saving. This is why we value companionship in the Church. Here, we do odd and weird things like confessing our sins and asking God's help so we may be friends even to people who annoy and rub us in the wrong way. Here, we hold each other in prayer in the difficult moments of life. We cook for church members who are sick and shop for those who are unable to go to the grocery store themselves. We place a rose at the pulpit to celebrate the birth of children and grandchildren. We offer the warmth of our humanity to people who are facing the devastating loss of a loved one. We call each other to make sure everyone remembers that human friendship is one of God's greatest gifts to humankind. We choose to connect with others, stay engaged and reject the idea that we can do it alone, because at Acton Congregational Church life in community matters. Here, we allow ourselves to be vulnerable. We ask for help. We keep trying to be Christians and to learn how to be true friends to each other. Here, we understand that God has given us human relationships and community as the best defense against loneliness. Here, we are willing to accept the work, the joy, and the sacrifice necessary to say to each other, "***I am your friend. You are my sibling in Christ and I love you,***" which really means that we are making an intentional choice to be responsible for each other's wellbeing.

Someone once told me that true community is where they know exactly who you are and miss you when you are not there.

Today is Stewardship Sunday. For those of you who have been a church member for a while, you already know that Stewardship comes around every October like clockwork and, on Stewardship Sunday, you prepare yourself psychologically to hear the pastor bravely try to say something even slightly interesting about generous and faithful giving. If you are new to the church and the concept of Stewardship is unfamiliar to you, the easiest and simplest way to explain what this Sunday is about is to say that this morning we are asking all our church members, all our friends, our entire community to make a financial commitment to support the programs, the mission work, our church staff and the upkeep of the building where we are gathered to worship God and to practice being a friend to one another. Today is the day when we appeal to you to be generous with your money and your time so, together, we can keep Acton Congregational Church alive and vibrant.

A few years back, a visitor asked me on the way out of the church if I felt awkward talking about money from the pulpit on Stewardship Sunday. The only answer I could give him was, ***“If I don’t preach openly and honestly about the church’s needs who will do it?”***

So here I am speaking once again very candidly about our church’s needs. Acton Congregational Church needs your help, and I am not reluctant to tell you that it will take at least \$580,000 dollars to maintain our ministries and the day-to-day operations of our church in the year ahead. We cannot rely on an endowment like so many other historic churches of our size in MA can in times of need, which means that this money has to come from you and me. I am thankful for those of you who fill out your pledge cards every year and give faithfully to ACC, but it is also my responsibility to say that not all our church members do that. In fact, not nearly enough of you pledge. As we slowly emerge from the worst months of the pandemic, it is critical for the present and future of our congregation that we all respond faithfully, courageously and enthusiastically to our Stewardship drive. Our church reflects the broad economic diversity of the human communities that surround us and while we do have financially comfortable members who give sizable monetary gifts annually, ACC depends on the joyful and faithful giving of every single person who values the community of friends we have in our congregation.

Last week, when I sat down to write today’s sermon, I thought about the story I heard – I think it may have been Barbara Brown Taylor who told this story – about a pastor who was invited to preach at a very historic congregation for the first time. Halfway through the service, much to the surprise of the guest preacher, people started getting up and moving to the other side of the sanctuary. After a while, everyone was trying to squeeze into the pews on one side while the pews on the opposite side were completely empty. After the service, the preacher asked one of the deacons what had happened. ***“The church used to have a wood stove on that side of the sanctuary,”*** The deacon said, ***“When it got too hot, people moved to the other side. We don’t have a wood stove anymore.”***

The season of Stewardship can become a hollow, joyless and spiritually numbing annual ritual when the church loses sight of how our giving changes lives and saves people from a lonely existence. Most of you have been members of this church for 20, 30 and 50 years. You have heard more sermons about giving, money, about the church budget, generosity and pledging than you probably cared for. And because of our familiarity with the concept of Stewardship, there is the temptation to write the same dollar figure on the pledge card or give an amount that is reasonable and very sensible without thinking twice about the needs of the church or why we give.

Stewardship, my friends, is not just about giving money to the operating budget of this church. The core of Stewardship is about putting the wellbeing of others in our community ahead of our own. In essence, Stewardship is about imagining how our lives, our money, our gifts, our jobs, our resources and our possessions can proclaim

that all human beings deserve to know God's love and be surrounded by a community of faith where the Holy Spirit instigates us to nudge each other toward the loveliest versions of ourselves. Our giving is not just the dollar amount we write down on a piece of paper; when we give we exercise our generosity muscle, there's no doubt about it, but our giving also affirms that ACC matters deeply to us because it is here that we nurture friendships and human relationships that empower our church to be a living, diverse, imperfect, complex, and very human expression of the Gospel of love in a world where God says to us through the second story of creation that we all have a need for each other because it is never good for any of us to live without a caring community of friends.

I read an article recently that gave a whole new meaning to this season of Stewardship. The writers said, "***The thermometer for measuring meaningful stewardship is less the meeting of an annual financial goal and instead the degree to which a church body looks more and more like [the] beloved community.***"<sup>5</sup>

This year, our Stewardship theme is "**Connecting – Communing – Celebrating.**" These 3 "C's" are inspired by Paul's pastoral instructions to the Christians in Rome. For the first time in human history, a multi-cultural, socially, racially and economically diverse group of people was being asked to care for one another and to live in harmony with each other as neighbors and true friends rather than as irreconcilable strangers. The secret to glorify God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one voice, Paul told the Roman Christians, is to do what was unimaginable to them, that is to connect with other human beings instead of looking only after their own personal interests. To commune with God, Paul wrote in his Letter to the Romans, they had to be a true community where for the sake of love and friendship, they would live their faith not privately, not quietly, not alone or apart from those who they judged as being weak and needy, but boldly, not preserving and protecting their gifts and time, but giving generously and placing the needs of the community, especially of the least among them, ahead of their own. "**Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor.**" The Apostle instructed the Christian community in Rome.

This morning, I ask you for your most generous and serious consideration about our desire to be the beloved community where we build each other up. This week, you will receive a letter from the Stewardship Committee along with a pledge card. Before you decide on your financial commitment to our church, I invite you to take a moment and remember how this faith community has connected you with people who have been your friends through bright days and dark times. Let your gift reflect your gratitude for the people in this church who have taught you to love God and live bravely as a follow of Christ in the world. Don't put any number on the pledge card until you have had time to remember those sacred moments when this congregation inspired you to be a much better version of yourself but still accepted you for whom you truly are. Before you email your pledge or drop it off at the church office, think for a while about the amazing human

beings who worship at ACC and have stood by your side prayerfully so you would not ever feel the emptiness of isolation. Give, not as an empty annual ritual you go through every October, but as a celebration of your deep need for God and for other people, especially for the people in this congregation who share the journey of faith and life with you. Rather than going through the motions and putting any comfortable amount on your pledge card, give priority to the needs of our church where, by the grace of God, we never have to face the world completely alone. Give in proportion to your true ability and to our need so we can continue to be a community of faith that connects with one another in person and virtually and communes with God and with one another and celebrates the gift of having this congregation in our lives. Give generously in gratitude for this community where you are known and missed when you are not here. Give so our church can continue to love humanity for the sake of Jesus Christ and be a Christian shelter in the world for all who are searching for true friends. Give joyfully as a human being, a person of faith, a follower of Christ who understands that you are the luckiest person in the world because you are profoundly aware of your God-given need for other people and for this faith community where, together, with one voice, we gather weekly to build up each other and praise God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Julie Styne, composer; Bob Merrill, lyricist – “People,” released in 1964.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:1-2:3.

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:20.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Lamott in Stitches: A Handbook on Hope, Meaning and Repair, location 314 [Kindle edition].

<sup>5</sup> By Farley Lord and Christian Peele in The core of stewardship is love, published in the Presbyterian Outlook, 29 February 2019 [<https://pres-outlook.org/2019/02/the-core-of-stewardship-is-love/>].