

## **“The Ties that Bind”**

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Based upon Ruth 1:16-17; Luke 10:25-37

Last week the *New York Times* ran an article about the newest trend in American marriages. It's not the trend to spend obscene amounts of money on dresses and decorations, which has been around a long time, or the trend to do destination weddings which require family and friends to take vacation time and travel just to see the ceremony. No, the newest trend is something called “Unimoons,” or “Solomoons,” in which the bride and groom take separate trips after the wedding, rather than taking a honeymoon together. Explaining her choice, a bride interviewed in the article said, “Neither of us wanted to be where the other one was.”<sup>1</sup> Her husband wanted to be in France watching Northern Ireland play soccer in the European Championship, while she wanted to visit friends in Canada. So right after they were married, they took separate trips, and then came back together to share their pictures and stories afterwards. Not all couples decide to take unimoons because they can't compromise on a vacation, however. According to the article, some do this because they do not feel that both of them can miss work, and still other couples combine unimoons with honeymoons, to allow those who love to travel to spend a longer time away than those who do not. “It's a very individualistic, modern practice of efficiency over everything else,” one groom explained, as if individualism and efficiency are the hallmarks of a successful marriage.<sup>2</sup>

Now I've never been married, so I've never had a honeymoon. But I have counseled and married enough couples over the last 19 years of my ministry to feel pretty confident in saying that the unimoon idea has “bad idea” written all over it. Marriage isn't about individualism and efficiency, it's about love and commitment, compromise and patience. If you don't love your brand-new spouse enough to want to be where he or she is five minutes after promising to care for him or her for always, if you don't love your spouse enough to compromise your individual desires and prioritize your needs as a couple, then I think the likelihood of a life-long successful marriage is slim. It's not that I think people need to travel anywhere after they get married. It's just that for most couples, they are never more besotted with one another than when they first get married. That's when most couples want to be together 24/7. So if someone is thinking “me, me, me” after the ceremony, instead of “us, us, us,” it seems unlikely that he or she will have the commitment to protect the “us” later, when life is hard or boring, the relationship is strained or stale, and compromise is critical to preserve the marriage.

Unimoons, as well as the overall decline in the number of people getting married, are just two of the many symptoms that the hyper-individualism celebrated in our culture is having a toxic effect on “the ties that bind” us together in our society. There are plenty of others. According to another article I read this week, “social isolation, distrust, polarization, the breakdown of family, the loss of community,... rising suicide rates, rising mental health

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<sup>1</sup> Braff, Danielle, “*Until Honeymoon We Do Part*,” THE NEW YORK TIMES, Mar. 13, 2019, retrieved Mar. 18, 2019 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/13/fashion/weddings/until-honeymoon-do-us-part>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

problems, a spiritual crisis caused by a loss of common purpose” all can be traced back, at least in part, to the fact we have elevated the needs of the individual over the common good.<sup>3</sup> But interestingly, so can a very different kind of problem which also plagues our culture right now: toxic tribalism.

It may seem counterintuitive at first that a problem with groups could have anything to do with over-emphasizing individual autonomy. But as *New York Times* columnist David Brooks has persuasively argued, noting the work of a French author named Pascal Bruckner, hyper-individualism ultimately breeds insecurity, and insecurity leads people to seek greater security in groups.<sup>4</sup> As much as we love our autonomy, it is still in our nature to crave relationships. For those who are convinced that their values are more important than anything else, however, not just any group will do. They need a group which shares their values. So instead of forming diverse relationships, they join groups which like and distrust the same things. This explains the rise of hyper-partisanship, racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism in our culture right now. It also explains why so many loners who become shooters, do so by way of joining white supremacist groups. They start out as isolated rebels, but then become empowered by groups which ease their loneliness by feeding their vanity and fears. Basically, we are living now in an age when we have sorted ourselves into tribes based upon who we perceive to be the enemy, as much as what we perceive to be good. We affiliate now more because of our fears, than out of a desire to meet and understand people different from ourselves.

Trying to use his name to promote a healthier alternative, one he called “relationalism” instead of individualism and tribalism, David Brooks has joined with the Aspen Institute, a “non-partisan forum for value-based leadership and the exchange of ideas,” to create something called “Weave: A Social Fabric Project.” The goal of the project is to reward and support healthy community by connecting all the disparate groups and individuals who are working to repair the fabric of society rather than tear it apart.<sup>5</sup> The project has a “Manifesto,” which affirms the need for us to prioritize relationship-building and community service over individualism and tribalism in our country. It calls for a life grounded in the pursuit of moral good for all, commitment to real community, and the quest for understanding.<sup>6</sup> I hope the project becomes a great source of healing and reconciliation because we certainly need that in our society. But it struck me as I was reading the Manifesto, that the ideas Brooks and his team have carefully articulated are not new. Using non-partisan, secular language, it basically affirms what we Christians call the Gospel. Perhaps Brooks did not expressly state this in the manifesto because he wanted to be inclusive of all, or perhaps because he recognized the unfortunate truth that Christianity has also become very tribal these days. But as we can see from today’s Scripture lessons, that is a distortion of the way we are called to be.

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<sup>3</sup> “*The Relationalist Manifesto- The Aspen Institute*,” Weave: the social fabric project, (The Aspen Institute, 2018), retrieved Mar. 18, 2019 from <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/the-relationalist-manifesto>

<sup>4</sup> Brooks, David, “*The Retreat to Tribalism*,” THE NEW YORK TIMES, Jan. 1, 2018, retrieved Mar. 18, 2019 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/01/opinion/the-retreat-to-tribalism>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, [The Relationalist Manifesto](#).

“Wherever you go, I will go,” Ruth says in today’s Old Testament lesson. “Your people will be my people and your God my God.” Although this text is most often quoted in weddings to capture the pull of romantic love (for people who clearly would prefer a honeymoon to a unimoon), when Ruth spoke these words to her mother-in-law, she did not have marriage in mind. Both she and Naomi had lost their husbands. They were grieving and trying to survive. Naomi’s plan for them to do this was for Ruth to go back to her parents’ house in Moab, and Naomi to try to find family back in Israel. But Ruth would have none of it. Although she was of a different tribe and religion, Naomi had become her family. So, she crossed the boundaries of her tribe and her nation in order to stay by Naomi’s side. She opted to take care of her needs while taking care of Naomi’s. It’s extraordinary that this story is plunked down in the middle of the stories of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. It’s important, too, because Ruth ultimately became one of Jesus’ ancestors thanks to her choice, and when Jesus arrived, he came to create a new kind of family of God, by reconciling people, not dividing them.

Today’s parable of the Good Samaritan is the most famous illustration of Jesus’ ministry of reconciliation. But unfortunately, it too has been distorted by human biases and prejudices throughout the centuries, so we must be careful about what we import to, as well as take away from this story. An all too common interpretation summarizes the story this way: a man is beaten and left by the side of the road. Then a priest comes by. He did not want to render himself ritually unclean by interacting with the bloody man so doesn’t stop. A Levite was next, and he too did not want to render himself impure. Finally, a Samaritan passed by. He helped the man on the road, and took him to an inn where he could get further assistance. So, what’s the moral of the story according to that interpretation? Samaritans are good, and faithful Jews are bad, right? But that popular interpretation misses the point altogether. The point of this parable is not to trash one tribe while celebrating another. It is to stop us thinking in terms of tribes and our individual needs, and to get us to start thinking in terms of being a neighbor.

So, let’s get rid of the anti-Semitic argument so we can see what this story is really teaching. The priest was going from Jerusalem to Jericho, in other words, away from the Temple. There was nothing in Jewish law, therefore, which prohibited him from helping a person in need, and plenty in Jewish law which encouraged him to stop. The Levite was also leaving Jerusalem, and according to the law was allowed to touch the man, even if he had been dead. It wasn’t the religion of the first two passers-by, therefore, that was the problem. The more likely reason they didn’t stop is because they were in a hurry, either because they were very busy with their good lives, as the people were in the video we watched, or because they were scared and didn’t want to be mugged themselves. The road to Jericho was notorious for being the preferred territory of thieves, who liked that it was twisty and narrow. They could come upon their victims, and there wasn’t much the victims could do. It’s understandable if the priest and the Levite felt nervous about staying in such a place. But it makes the fact that the Samaritan stopped that much more remarkable. Maybe he wasn’t in a hurry. Maybe he was more courageous or empathetic by nature. Whatever made him stop, he helped the man tremendously. So, the moral of the story is that the Samaritan was the good neighbor that we are all supposed to be.

To get the full anti-tribalism impact of this lesson, however, we need to keep in mind how shocking and unexpected it would have sounded to Jesus' audience to cast a Samaritan as the hero. Notice how the lawyer can't even bring himself to say the word Samaritan, even while he acknowledges that the Samaritan was the good neighbor? That's because in those days Samaritans and Jews were enemies. Their animosity was born out of ancient history. The Samaritans lived in what used to be the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Centuries before, when it was conquered by Assyria, instead of being taken away into exile, the Israelites stayed, and ultimately intermarried with the enemy. So, generations later, the Jews from Judea saw them as sell-outs and half-breeds; they loathed them for abandoning God. At the same time, the Samaritans felt the same way about the Jews, who themselves had intermarried when they were exiled in Babylon. Each group felt it was more faithful to Yahweh, and each group felt the other, because of its lack of faithfulness, was "the enemy."

When the Samaritan turned out to be the hero of the story, the lawyer and the rest of Jesus' audience were shocked. They also felt blind-sided because when Jesus told the story, he had set them up to expect that the third man would be an Israelite like them. You see there were three "tribes" typically referred to in rabbinic stories. The priests were one, the Levites, the second, and the third, the Israelites. But Jesus switched tribes on them to teach them two lessons. The first was that even those outside of our tribes can be good neighbors. All of our judgments of others, all of our labels of them as "enemies" and us as "heroes" are absurd in the eyes of God. The second was that instead of focusing on the tribes of others, and their rightness or wrongness, we should be focusing on our own behavior. This is clear from the fact that Jesus never identified the ethnicity of the victim. If he had answered the lawyer's question, the lesson would have hung on whether the victim was a neighbor we are called to help. But instead he asked a different question, "Are you a good neighbor like the Samaritan?"

The beauty of this parable is that if we take it seriously, it both appeals to our hyper-individualism and snaps us out of it simultaneously, by asking each of us to ask ourselves whether we, individually, are good neighbors in the way we care for others. The focus of the lesson isn't on the others. We aren't allowed to judge the victim on the road for being foolish enough to take that road, or for being weak or anything else. We also don't get to limit our responsibilities by considering his tribe. The focus is on what we do or fail to do that makes us a good neighbor to anyone who needs help. Do we behave as those who are too busy to stop for someone in need? Do we behave as those who are too scared about our own security to help others in need? God's command to love our neighbors as ourselves is a command to take self-love and make it communal love by putting yourself in the shoes of the victim. It is to define our lives not by who we hate or fear, but by how well we help others.

When we do this, our measure of individual success changes. To succeed we have to step outside of ourselves and our tribes. We have to discover the needs of others. This is the basis of healthy community. Healthy community is grounded in love and the quest for understanding. It allows for individuality because it is grounded in the idea that diversity is a gift not a threat. But it does not elevate the needs of the individual over the needs of the group, or the needs of some groups over the needs of others. Martin Luther Jr. called this kind of community which is

grounded in mutual understanding, respect, love, and service, the “beloved community.” The Bible calls it the kingdom of God.

This afternoon there is “An Interfaith Vigil, Conversation, and Teach-in” at the Muslim Makkah Learning Center on Brandy Farm Land in Gambrills to help nurture the bonds of the beloved community in response to the violence in New Zealand. Unfortunately, it is at the same time as our bowling fun. That fun is important, not just because we’ve paid for it but because it strengthens the bond of inter-generational community here. So, we aren’t canceling it. But if you weren’t planning to bowl, I hope you will plan to stop by the center to express the love of God and to learn more about our neighbors. It’s the neighborly thing to do. And I hope if you are going bowling, as I am to celebrate this God-given community, you will keep in mind that you don’t need an invitation to a formal event to reach out across the boundaries of tribe to convey God’s love and celebrate our common humanity. I’m sure you could stop by the Learning Center at a different time to show your support and concern.

David Brooks and the Aspen Institute call those who work to strengthen the ties that bind in society “weavers” because they mend the parts of the social fabric torn by our individualism and tribalism. Christ calls those who do this good neighbors. Think about how many tribes you call your own. Think about how many tribes you ascribe to the enemy. It shouldn’t take someone being beaten and left for dead, or someone being attacked by an individual empowered by fear and an automatic weapon, to get us to see the human beings behind the labels as part of our God-given family, and we can’t build a lasting relationship with one another as long as we say, “You go your way and we’ll go ours.” The road ahead is narrow and twisty, and no one really knows what or who lies around the bend. But Christ has made it clear. It’s better for all of us if we stick together and help each other, and it’s definitely the neighborly thing to do. Amen.