



Westminster Presbyterian Church
 Knoxville, TN
 Oct. 6, 2024
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: “Created for Relationship”

Genesis 2:18-24 (NRSV)

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."

So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them, and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle and to the birds of the air and to every animal of the field, but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

“Created for Relationship”

Weeks ago, our Men’s Crafting Theology group met to discuss an article from the *Christian Century* entitled “The great man theory is poison for the church.”¹ Have you ever heard of the Great Man theory? Maybe not by that name, but you’ve probably heard the Great Man theory before; it states that for the most part, everyone, all the time, is pretty much mediocre. And things keep going just as they are. But every once in a while, a great man – George Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesus Christ himself – rises above the fray and moves history and society forward.

¹ Julian DeShazier, “The great man theory is poison for the church.” *The Christian Century*. July 19, 2024. <https://www.christiancentury.org/voices/great-man-theory-poison-church>

Honestly, I don't know about you, but it's what I was taught in school. I learned a series of names, like *Plato, Newton, Napoleon, and Shakespeare*, and I learned to recite the ideas they brought forward or the things they accomplished.

And honestly, I don't know about you, but I can see a bit of the Great Man Theory at work along the walls of this church too. Suffice it to say, it's a bit intimidating to be the new minister, who has to walk through *The Rev. Fritz Shilling Gallery* everyday to get to my office!

Of course, that's more homage to a faithful servant of the church, not the Great Man theory (so don't come at me!) Don't come at me, as I preach this sermon by the Peter Van Eenam memorial organ. Again, more homage to a faithful servant than the great man theory of history.

The reason we read the article for our Crafting Theology group was because it argued that you don't have to be a great man. In fact, it said the great man theory of history is ridiculous (and not to mention sexist!). First, not all of our great thinkers and actors on the stage of history have been men, that's for sure. And also, history moves forward not so much by individuals but by groups and movements of people. The founders were nothing if not for the colonists, not to mention the Indigenous Tribes that helped them survive those first years. Communities, not individuals, create and sustain a movement. Even Jesus needed his disciples and apostles to get the word out. Three women were the first people to proclaim the resurrection, but they hardly ever get the credit.

This article, critiquing the Great Man Theory of history, got mixed results for our crafting theology group. After a couple rounds in, the truth came out. We all want to be great.

It all spans for a mistranslation of Genesis 2, by the way.

The Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.'

This translation suggests that *man* was first; and woman second, created as somewhat an afterthought, and as a helper – an assistant even – a concession to the needs of the man.

And we all know where church people take that interpretation. They and we have used it to justify all kinds of hierarchy, patriarchy, colonialism, all the *isms*, any

type of household or social arrangement that puts one on top and everyone else below.

But the good news of scripture is that that translation, and that interpretation miss entirely what Genesis ch. 2 is actually trying to tell us.²

The Hebrew word used in the 2nd chapter of Genesis, that our translation renders “man” is *Adam*. This is where Adam gets his name, but in the first part of the chapter, *Adam* isn’t a proper noun; its actually a common noun, and it doesn’t mean ‘man’; it’s more neutral; it means just ‘person’ or ‘human.’

And here it gets even more interesting, because the Hebrew word for ‘dust’ is *Adama*. *Adam* is derived from *Adama*. So, when Genesis 2 says, “The Lord God formed ‘the human’ from the dust of the ground,” it’s doing a cool word play. It’s actually saying, “The Lord God formed *Adam* from the *Adama*.”

So *Adam* is rightfully translated generally as “human” but really to capture the relationship between *Adam* (human) and *Adama* (dust), *Adam* could really be translated more like, “dust-creature.”: “The Lord God formed *the dust creature* from the *dust*.”

Apologies, by the way, if we have anyone named Adam in the congregation today, learning for the first time the true meaning of their name.

And Genesis uses the word *Adam*, ‘dust-creature,’ all throughout this chapter. So, its not, *God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone.* It’s *God said, ‘It is not good for the human / dust-creature to be alone.* This human is not given a gender; we read gender into the story.

In fact, it’s not until the dust creature is split into two in verse 22 that the text starts using actual Hebrew word for man “ish” and then the actual Hebrew word for woman “ishha”:

*So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the [dust-creature] **Adam**...And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man [**ish**] God made into a woman [**ishha**].*

² For the following exegesis, I’m indebted to Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Genesis 1-25A* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2018), 47-62.

Far from founding and sacralizing gender hierarchy, the creation story of Genesis puts forward the radical idea that we come from one common humanity. There was no first; there was no second.

The genders and all differences were created simultaneously together, and so we are formed in relationship and partnership with one another.

This Biblical story presents a picture of a God who creates human beings all together, in all our differences. We are made with and for each other, with and for this earth. Each of us always and already connected to one another. The one is never primary. The great man theory is a lie. We are to think of ourselves not solely as an individual *I*, but as a communal *us*, the human community, created together in relationship with God.

It is profoundly telling, that we read hierarchy and dominance into this story that is, at its root, a statement of harmony and equality.

And just think of where these stories of dominance have taken us: Tomorrow, we reach the 1-year anniversary of Hamas's devastating attack on Israel; followed by a year of relentless war and famine in Gaza and now the wider Middle East. *Lord have mercy.*

Yesterday marked the 1-month mark before a national election here in America that we have been hearing about, for, what? - the last 2 years. And every poll shows we, as a country, are as divided as we have ever been before.

On this World Communion Sunday, we are reminded of the things that tear us apart.

The great man theory, the "traditional reading" of the book of Genesis, wars, politics, each of these thrive on lie, that in the world, there has to be a winner and there has to be a loser, someone first and at the top and another at the bottom.

And yet, our faith and our Scriptures call us to a more expansive vision of what this life is about.

Reading back through Genesis this week, I've been thinking about something the daily show anchor Jon Stewart said a few months ago.³ He was talking about election day, about how Nov. 5 is going to be such an important day for this country.

But you know what else is going to be an important day in our country, he asked? Nov. 6. And Nov. 7. And Nov. 8. And every day and every week after that, because as important as an election is in this country, what is more important is what we do, as a church, as a people, as a nation, as a world community, in the days following. Election day is not an ending. In fact, each day is a beginning.

Because we are not isolated individuals, each alone striving for a place at the top. We are instead made with and for each other, a human community, whose fate is not so much in the hands of one but in the countless hands of the collective. And each day this collective has a choice, between domination and cooperation, between exclusion or love and grace. And as Genesis affirms, it is not good, for the dust-creature to be alone.

I can think of no better expression of that, then what has come from the aftermath of Hurricane Helene. Countless churches, including this one, have banded together to collect and send aid, money, water, and food. And not just churches. On the streets of Asheville today, restaurants that once charged \$40 a plate are now handing out free and hot meals. Neighborhoods are banding together to share supplies. People are opening their homes up to individuals and families displaced by the flood.

This isn't a story of one act, one person, or even one group. After the flood, after the election, after the war, after the next big difficult thing you and I are going to face, it's going to take countless acts, big and small, for us to rebuild, for us to get through it together, for us to be the people God made us to be, formed in relationship, formed for partnership instead of competition.

When you find yourself overwhelmed these days; when you find yourself anxious or afraid; when you find yourself, caught up, in all that weighs on you and pulls you spirit low, remember that you do not go through such days alone. We don't go through these lives, these troubles, each heartache and each triumph, alone. Rather, we go with, and for, and beside one another – not just an *I* but also a *we*. Whatever

³ See Dean Obeidallah, "Jon Stewart's return to 'The Daily Show' reminded us to take him seriously." *MSNBC*. Feb. 13, 2024. <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/jon-stewart-the-daily-show-return-rcna138566>

you brought here today, remember that we are meant to be in it together, because that is how God formed us.

Friends, this is the message of Genesis;
it is also the message of World Communion Sunday.

As I said in announcements, on this World Communion Sunday, we are celebrating with breads from around the world. Each station will have a different bread from a different region.

Why?

Because we affirm God's grace is not confined by a single national border or ethnicity; it knows no bounds, it connects us across every barrier.

Because we know God's grace blesses us as the world community, formed in relationship.

Because the church manifests itself in a beautiful tapestry of cultures, each unique, but all connected together, created together by the God who loves us all.

Friends, fellow dust-creatures, world-citizens, global church members:

See, and feel, and taste this good news. You are not alone. God formed and forms and reforms us, into a beautiful and diverse people, together in difference: The people of God. Amen.

Invitation to the Table

I would invite up our many bread-severs now as we prepare for the Table.

Friends, this is God's Table.

It knows nothing of domination or exclusion.

Its only word is inclusion and celebration.

It's only question is:

Not: where do you come from?

Not: what have you done?

Not: are you worthy?

It's only question is:

Has everyone been fed? Has everyone been fed?

Because Christ's grace is for everyone.

God's love is upon everyone.

And so, this table embraces all.

And so, in the Kingdom of God, people will come from N and S and E and W and sit together at table, and see one another for who they really are: children of God.

And so our savior invites all, invites all.

To share in the feast that he has prepared.

Come! The Table is ready.