



It Is Not Good To Be Alone

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 12:28-34

January 24, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I stood on the playground of the Hawthorne Elementary school in Atlanta. We were picking teams for kickball, a staple in my 6th-grade phys-ed class. It was my third day as a Hawthorne Hornet, as my family had just moved from Alabama. One by one, each kid was picked. You know where this is going. I didn't get picked. Fortunately, at my age, I am no longer scarred by that moment of rejection. But the truth is, I still remember it. There's a lot about 6th grade that is washed from my memory so cleanly that it is as if it never happened. But that November day in 1971, I still remember. When you are told, we don't need you, it's hard to forget.

It was just a few weeks ago when we celebrated that God couldn't bear to stay away from this world that God created out of love, from you, whom God created out of love. And so, the love of God was born on an ordinary night, to a world that not only took little notice, but a world that made no room for God. Fortunately, this would not be something Jesus would remember. But he surely came to know that the world he loved had no room for him.

So, later in his life, a bible professor, a man who spent his life studying the scriptures, came to Jesus and asked, "What is the most important commandment?" It wasn't hard for Jesus to answer: You are to love God with all that you are, and you are to love your neighbor as if your neighbor's welfare matters as much as your own.

The Bible Scholar says, "that's exactly right, Jesus." And Jesus says, "you are not far from the kingdom."

There is no surprise here. You learned this in Vacation Bible School if your parents were the type to send you to such. We know that our lives are defined by love. So, when this man poses his question,

we might think, "Oh, call on me, I know that one. It's love." We, too, might be not far from the kingdom.

When 2020 blew in 12 months ago, we began the year with high hopes and bold plans. But then we learned a whole new definition of March Madness as the greatest public health crisis in our nation's history has ravaged us, with thousands dying daily now. We have witnessed extreme social unrest. Public conversation is frequently offered without respect for the truth.

All of this has left a common assessment that 2020 is a year to forget. I agree. But I also know that forgetting can be risky. We have been, and are still, in a situation of crisis. You don't ever want to waste a crisis. Sometimes difficult circumstances teach us things about ourselves and about our faith that are not as easy to see when things are well. So, over the next few weeks, I will share with you a few things we may want to remember about this otherwise forgettable year.

One of the strange things about this year is how we have been cut off from important people in our lives. There are also folks you live with whom you may feel can't be escaped.

2020 has been a lonely year. I am even missing meetings. I never thought I would say that. I never mind them, but miss them? But I can't wait to be able to sit with folks at a table and talk about things that matter and things that don't. It has been a challenge not to be able to give that kind of attention to the relationships in our lives.

I think if loving God and neighbor is what we are for, then 2020 has shown us the importance of two things. There are others, but for the sake of time, let me suggest two.

1 This passage calls us to be a good friend. I hope when we can finally speak of COVID in the past tense, that we might remember friendship is not simply an experience, but a practice. Let our calendars reflect our hearts.

When our Bible student gets all the answers right, Jesus says, “you are not far from the kingdom.” If I understand the text, the “not far” is a signal that there is more to faith than knowing the right answers. The word is to be lived.

I hope that as 2021 unfolds, we are given opportunities to live our friendships. To practice kindness and support and simply sharing life together. Love is not something we think; it is something we do. It takes time and intentionality. I know for myself, and you may be ahead of me on this, but I don’t want to go back to the way things were before. I want to be intentional about communicating to the people I love that I love them. The first thing the good book says is that it is not good... to be alone. One of the Ordination Vows asked of our new officers earlier this month was, “Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry?” Being a friend is holy work.

2 But there is a second thing about this holy word that I find relevant for this season, particularly because this word is spoken by the one for whom the world had no room. In addition to being a good friend, I think Jesus also calls us to be a good citizen. Part of loving our neighbors is paying attention to those for whom the world has no room.

That was part of the social unrest we witnessed in 2020. There were also many who raised their voices during the political campaigns to say they are being ignored by the march of American culture.

2020 has shown us a paradoxical economic reality. The stock market has climbed in dramatic fashion. At the same time, we have witnessed unprecedented, unaddressed need all across the country. There are millions of people who depend on food pantries like the ones we have here at Village. Almost nightly, it seems, on the evening news, we witness cars lined up for blocks, if not miles, in

search of food. It appears that 2020 will be another year when the benefit of the economy will again become more and more concentrated among fewer and fewer, while increasingly citizens in the bottom half of the economy find no escape route. This growth in poverty is not just an economic problem; it is a spiritual problem.

Sasha Abramsky is a journalist who spent over a year documenting the stories of the poor. He wrote, “There is a loneliness to poverty. Poverty pushes people to the psychological and physical margins of society—isolated from friends and relatives; shunned into dilapidated trailer parks, shanties or ghettoized public housing; and removed from banks and stores, transit systems and cultural institutions... They cannot afford to vary the routines of their daily lives. Embarrassed by their poverty, worried about being judged failures in life and humiliated by that judgment, many told me that they withdraw from all but essential social interactions.”¹

Anne Case and Angus Deaton are both economists at Princeton and they found that the shame of poverty is at times devastating. They report that after a century of steady increase, from 2014-2017 life expectancy in the US stalled and even declined. The problem, their research indicates, is what they label “deaths of despair.” These are deaths resulting from suicide, overdoses or alcoholism. The surge is found in largely blue-collar communities that have been left behind in an economy where the rest of us have no room for them. I can’t imagine those numbers will improve in 2020.

Michael Sandel, a moral philosopher at Harvard, says part of what is happening is the poor know the American narrative, and it says, anyone can if not rise from rags to riches, at least make it economical if you only try. So, if you are poor, it’s your own fault.² Finding little prospects other than food pantries, in 2016, more Americans died of these “deaths of despair” every two weeks than died in 18 years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.³

Now I know nothing makes us more nervous

1 Abramsky, *The American Way of Poverty* (2013), p. 5

2 Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020), p. 199

3 Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020), p. 200

than talking about the economy. It is for some a holy idol that cannot be questioned, regardless of the results. But in Christian faith, talk about money is always talk about people. Just turn on the evening news and witness the lines of people on the edge.

I got an email from a food pantry volunteer just this week who said, "It is moving to watch people tearfully express how grateful they are for the help of basic necessities like food, but it is humbling to talk with people who have never had to ask for food before and are so embarrassed they can barely look at me."

I believe that our food pantry will be more necessary in 2021 than ever before. In addition to our pantry at the Meneilly Center, our VOA site has created a Pop-Up Food Pantry that has served over 1,100 families in need just since June. This is wonderful. It is faithful. It is also an indication that there aren't enough food pantries in the nation to take care of this problem. And food pantries can only address hunger; they don't address the shame.

There is hardly a social-justice ministry in this city that we don't have a relationship with at one level or another. And after more than 70 years of such work, some things have gotten better, but too many

things have not. And too many are ever fragile as they try to hold on to the dignity of human life.

Christ teaches that our neighbors' welfare matters as much as our own. Of course, we know that. Because we know that, Jesus might say we are not far from the kingdom. It sounds good. But the truth is, he was not far from the inn. It's just there was no room in the inn. When it comes to the ever-increasing number of neighbors who find no room in the American Inn, we need to do more than blame them for their poverty.

I remember a chilly day in November of 1971 when I was told: we don't need you. I imagine Jesus knew that the world had no room for him, and because he did, he had a soft spot in his heart for those the world leaves behind. So, we should, too.

I wish I could give you the answer as to how to change this. My light doesn't shine down that path very far. But 2020 has shown us that it is no longer okay to assume that increasing poverty is acceptable.

If we are smart, we might rise to the top. But if we are good, if we are righteous, we might also see those who don't rise to the top, and do what we can to make room for them.

This sermon was delivered by Rev. Tom Are, Jr., at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, Kansas, 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard, or watched on the church's website: www.villagepres.org/online.
