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CROSSROADS: THE PATH TO DEEPER RELATIONSHIPS

How many of you feel like Z, the ant in the psychiatrist's office? How many of go through life feeling unnoticed? How many of us want to feel special? We want to be acknowledged as individuals, not just some cog in the wheel. Did you hear Z's sad cry at the end of his rant? He says, "What about MY needs? What about ME? I gotta believe there is someplace out there that's better than this. The whole system makes me feel insignificant."

What system is Z talking about? Is it possible that the great society that we have created here in North America - this wealth-creating machine, where any dream is possible, and anything we want or desire can be had – is flawed? What went wrong? What is causing our tendency toward anxiety, fear and especially loneliness? What system is responsible for making North Americans the loneliest people in the world?

Before I answer that, I want that last statement to sink in. We, in all our wealth of natural and material resources, are the loneliest people in the world? Does that not seem unbelievable to you? This seems unbelievable when you think of the availability of transportation and the billions of dollars in discretionary money available for entertainment. If we can buy so much activity – how can we possibly be so lonely?

Today more than 75% of North Americans live in cities like Toronto and their suburbs like Markham. We are surrounded by more people than ever before in the history of our continent. With these undeniable facts, how could a Gallup poll rank us among the loneliest people in the world?

Are you ready for the answer? It's something John Locke, a scholar from England, has identified as the "atomization" of society – or people drifting away from each other. He claims there are three problems in our society that lead to this "atomization": The problem of individualism, isolation and what Matt Chapman touched on two weeks ago, consumerism.

Initially, most of us probably see individualism, where we are primarily concerned about our individual wants and needs as opposed to our relational wants and needs, as positive. It is a system that promotes free will, free markets, good self-esteem, and free choices. However, after fifty years of unrestricted individualism, we have come face to face with its dark side.

It seems that individualism erodes our sense of community and belonging. Alexis De Tocqueville observed that society prior to 1950 did not even have a word for individualism because in their time there was no individual who did not belong to a group and who could be considered as absolutely alone. We have become, in the words of Locke, “solo sapiens.”

The second major obstacle to overcoming loneliness that quite naturally flows out of individualism, is the problem of isolation. The inward focus on our own lives tends to create a distorted view of the people who live around us. Polls would suggest that only 16 percent of the people who live around us are truly immoral.

However, if in the busyness of our lives, these are the only people we meet through the nightly news, it gives us the perception that everyone is immoral and is seeking to take advantage of us. Consequently, because we don't know most of the people in our neighbourhoods, we look at them with distrust.

I'd like to read you a great example of what individualism and isolation can result in. “It can never be said that Adele Gaboury's neighbours were less than responsible. When her front lawn grew hip-high, they had a local boy mow it down. When her pipes froze and burst, they had the water turned off. When the mail spilled out the front door, they called the post office and had delivery stopped. The only thing they didn't do was check to see if she was alive. She wasn't.

On Monday, police climbed her crumbling brick stoop, broke in the side door of her little blue house, and found what they believe to be the seventy-three year old woman's skeletal remains sunk in a five-foot-high pile of trash, where they had apparently lain, perhaps for as long as four years.

“It's not really a very friendly neighbourhood,” said Eileen Dugan, seventy, once a close friend of Adele's. Eileen, whose house sits less than twenty feet from the dead woman's home said, “I'm as much to blame as anyone. She was alone and needed someone to talk to, but I was working two jobs and I was sick of her coming over at all hours. Eventually, I stopped answering the door.”

Is that story not a sad reflection on the society that we've created? And I haven't even touched on consumerism. Matt did such a good job of teaching on that problem two weeks ago, I don't even need to go there. We have been sucked into a life devoid of deep human interaction and it has led to an epidemic of loneliness.

Looking back over the past fifty years of suburban life, it has become evident that its attempts to create community have failed. In its development, we ignored what our

ancestors had learned about friendship and community. They taught us, if only we had paid attention, that there are principles governing how to build relationships that promote intimacy and well-being. While our circumstances are different, we have responded much the same way the people of Israel did to the charge of Jeremiah the prophet gave some 2500 years ago in Jeremiah 16:6:

This is what the Lord says: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, “We will not walk in it.”

I want to devote the rest of the message this morning to those relational crossroads that we come to and find out which way the ancients, our forefathers, guided us to go so that we can find rest for our weary souls. But as you come to each crossroads I want you to know that the wisdom they are offering you is simply information. You have to make the choice to go one way or the other. One way leads to freedom, friendship and love while the other leads to loneliness and despair. Choose wisely.

1ST CROSSROAD: I CAN CHOOSE TO WALK ALONE OR WITH OTHERS

The first crossroads we come to is the choice to walk alone or to walk with others. How many guys here grew up either reading comic books, watching T.V. series or movies about heroes? Everyone one of my heroes growing up had a great sense of justice, had great physical presence and courage but what they didn't have were a community to love them.

From the Lone Ranger, to Batman to Clint Eastwood's "The Man With No Name" from all those spaghetti westerns to Rambo, we witnessed our heroes fight the good fight...alone. Oh sure, they may have had someone working for them but very rarely do you see them interacting as just friends or involved in regular activities with them. In the background of all their stories, there is only pain, sadness, disillusionment with society and loneliness.

John Ortberg, in his book, *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*, said this: "There is no pain like the pain of loneliness. "If loneliness is common for women, it is epidemic among men. One survey indicated that 90% of the male population in America lack a true friend. But we prefer not to talk about it. Loneliness, said Mother Theresa, is the leprosy of modern society. And no one wants anybody to know they're a leper." Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Whoever cannot stand being in community should be aware of being alone."

Marla Paul, a columnist with the Chicago Tribune once concluded her column on loneliness with these words: "I recently read my daughter Hans Christian Andersen's, The Ugly Duckling. I felt an immediate kinship with this bird who flies from place to place looking for creatures with whom he belongs. He eventually finds them. I hope I do too."

This crossroad is vital because without knowing it many of us are walking down a road that's becoming more and more isolated from people. There are a lot of reasons for this. It may be because of some past pain in your life and you've said to yourself at one time, "I am never going to let someone hurt me like that again!"

It may be just because you're too busy. You're building this and doing that and earning that and you don't have time for relationships. It may be you're just inconvenienced by relationships. Whatever it is, we find ourselves becoming more and more isolated many times in life.

The danger of this is we find ourselves all alone and incredibly vulnerable. Because that old saying is right: "There is strength in numbers". Look at what the Bible has to say about this. Ecclesiastes 4:12, "A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back to back and conquer. Three are even better; for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken."

Study after study tells us that people that take the time to develop relationships are happier people, they're more successful in their jobs, they're healthier people. A Harvard Researcher discovered the people who had bad health habits such as poor eating and exercise habits but strong social ties lived significantly longer than people with good health habits but were isolated. In other words, it is better to eat Timbits with good friends than to eat broccoli alone.

Today, some of you are thinking, it's true; "I am isolating myself more and more. I've just been too busy. I've just gotten too irritated with people. I've been too afraid." So right here, right now, this is the moment to decide to start working from a biblical perspective to walk with others. How do you do that? What's the first step to deciding to connect with people in a greater way? What do the ancients say?

The Bible tells us in Hebrews 10:25, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another." In order to develop a relationship with people you actually have to continually meet with them. You can't just think about it or hope that it will happen. You have to meet with them and get together with them.

And God knows we struggle with that. He knows that we don't have the time or have the ability to conquer the issues that keep us from meeting, so He writes us this word of encouragement. The early believers in the church took this motto to the extreme as we find in Acts 2:44: "They were all together and they shared everything." They were together. They developed a relationship. That's part of what it means to be a part of a church, to develop these relationships.

As TOB continues to grow it becomes an increasingly easier place to hide. It's an easy place to NOT develop relationships because it's so big. You can come and you can hide in a crowd. Some of you are coming for the first time. You're starting to join us. You want to be able to come and check us out anonymously and see what we're all about. But some of you have been hiding in the crowd for too long.

It's time to step out. If we're going to make relationships work, it's going to take some risks like...meeting people, saying hello to familiar faces, going out to for lunch and duh, duh, duh, duh...having non-family members in your home and perhaps even joining a small group. We call them Roots Groups here to promote the idea of spiritual connectedness and growth.

Take that risk and watch how God can use that experience to put you together with some people who quite possibly can become your best friends, people you can lean on during the tough times. God wants you to be in regular, close fellowship with others so you can develop the skill of loving. Love cannot be learned in isolation. You have to be around people – imperfect people.

2nd CROSSROAD: I CAN CHOOSE TO PRETEND OR BE REAL

The first relational crossroads is to walk alone or walk with others, the second crossroads that we come to in our relationships, is to choose to pretend or to be real. Jesus had a word for people who pretended or faked it. He called them hypocrites. They were a group of guys who struggled a lot with this issue. They were the Pharisees.

Here's what He said to them once, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean." That got their attention! He continued, "You're keeping it really nice looking on the outside but it's like putting whitewash on a tomb and it's still just as ugly on the inside." In other words, "Why don't you take the time to work on the inside?"

Any idea how much work it is just to keep up appearances? I know some of you know exactly what I'm talking about. To pretend to be something you're not day after day can exhaust even the best swindlers. In fact, for some it's downright scary. I think what people wake up to is that life on this road is not sustainable.

At least it wasn't for a man who was so desperate for work that he applies for an opening at the zoo. "Well, it's a little unusual, but I *do* have something," said the zoo director. "Our gorilla died some time ago, and we haven't had the money to replace him. If you're willing to wear a monkey suit and impersonate an ape, you've got the job."

It didn't feel terribly authentic, but the man figured a job's a job, so he signed on. After a few awkward days he began to get into the spirit of the thing, and soon he becomes one of the zoo's prime attractions. One morning he was swinging from one vine to the next with a little too much animation and inadvertently swung himself right over the wall into the cage next to his – which was occupied by an enormous African lion. The man could feel the lion's hot breath on his face. He knew he was a goner. Reflexively, he began screaming for help, when suddenly the lion whispered urgently to him, "Shut up, you idiot, or we'll both be out of a job!"

The tendency to hide or pretend is so strong that psychologists sometimes speak of the "impostor phenomenon": the universal sense that at some level I'm faking it - that if others knew the truth about me, the jig would be up. The more skilful we are at impression management, the more we are trapped in our true aloneness.

But we were not made to live this way. The apostle Paul says that in true community, love is to be genuine. In Romans 12:9 "Don't just pretend that you love others, really love them." The writer of Acts says that in the new community, people met with glad and sincere hearts; they learned to stop pretending to be other than they were.

Ephesians 4:25 says, "What this adds up to then is this: no more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbour the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other. After all, when you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself." Imagine what your life would be like if all pretense were to vanish from it. Imagine the freedom and relief of not trying to convince anyone you were smarter or better than you are. This is really God's plan for human life.

Alan McGinnes notes that one of the most unique and attractive aspects of the life of Jesus, was His utter transparency. Unlike so many leaders who go through life at a distance

from their followers, Jesus lived a common life. He let his friends see Him in unveiled moments of joy, sadness anger and fatigue.

Jesus' followers never had to guess whether He was delighted or disappointed. To make sure that His disciples understood that this strategy of self-disclosure was deliberate, He said to them just before He died: "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you."

How are you doing with this? Is there anyone in your life who knows everything about you? Coming out of hiding doesn't just help us feel physically better; it is needed for the healing of our souls. Maybe you have been carrying a secret for years. You try not to think about it – but it's always there. It keeps you from fully experiencing love.

Even when someone tells you they love you, inside you say to yourself; Yes, but you don't know the whole truth about me. You might not say these things if you really knew. This is why knowing and being known go to the core of life: You cannot be fully loved if you are not fully known.

This leads us into the final crossroad that we've going to face today. It's perhaps the toughest crossroad of them all because it involves one of our most precious commodities: Time. The third crossroad is where I can choose the shortcut or the long haul. It's a formidable decision that comes at a high cost of time and energy.

3RD CROSSROAD: I CAN CHOOSE THE SHORTCUT OR THE LONG HAUL

People rarely drift into the type of community and friendship that we've been talking about this morning. Alan McGinnes notes that rule number one for entering deep friendship sounds deceptively simple: Assign top priority to your relationships. Ironically, we tend to devote massive amounts of time to making money, running errands, and succeeding at our jobs, but we neglect giving our most valuable possession – time – to the experience for which we were created: community.

One of the most countercultural statements in Scripture is a description of the early church. In speaking of the people's oneness of heart and mind, the writer notes, "They met together daily." They worshiped together, ate together, talked together, prayed together – on a daily basis. No wonder they grew so close.

We try to create first-century community on at twenty-first century timetable – and it doesn't work. Maybe the biggest single barrier to deep connectedness for most of us is

simply the pace of our lives. How often do you hear or say things like, “We’ve got to get together soon” or “Let’s do lunch in a few weeks when things settle down”?

The requirement for true intimacy is chunks of unhurried time. If you can fit deep community into the cracks of an overloaded schedule – think again. Wise people do not try to microwave friendship, parenting or marriage. You can’t do community in a hurry. It’s a long haul. It’s the hard way. You can’t take the shortcut in relationships.

It is not enough just to say relationships are important; we must prove it by investing time in them. Words alone are worthless. In 1 John 3:8, Jesus says, “My children, our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action.” But don’t mistake action for provision.

Men, in particular, often don’t understand this. Many have said to me, “I don’t understand my wife and kids. I provide everything they need. What more could they want?” What they want is YOU! They want your eyes, your ears, your time, your attention, your presence, your focus – your time. Nothing can take the place of time and attention.

The most desired gift of love is not diamonds or roses or chocolate. It is focused attention. Love concentrates so intently on another that you forget yourself in the moment. Time says, “I value you enough to give you my most precious asset – my time.” Love means giving up my rights, my comforts, my preferences and my precious possessions for someone else. The only perfect example of which is Jesus who gave up everything to have a relationship, to love us.

So there we are at that crossroads - deciding which way we’re going to go. Do I take the shortcut and short-change my relationship? Do I focus on my personal success? The twentieth century was littered with people who achieved great things but never connected. People who accumulated vast amounts of wealth, fame or power but never had love; People who had a Rolodex of contacts but not a single friend. Everyone of them died with bitter regrets. Every one.

Conversely, I have never known anyone who succeeded at relationships – who cultivated great friendships, who was devoted to their family, who mastered the art of giving and receiving love – that had a bad life. No matter how little money we have, no matter what rung we occupy on the corporate ladder of success, in the end what everybody discovers is that what matters is other people. Human beings who give themselves to relational greatness are the human beings who lead magnificent lives.

I think that Jean Vanier, the founder of the world famous L'arche community for the mentally handicapped said it best: "A community is not simply a group of people who live together and love each other. It is a place of resurrection." Being in deep community or friendship is life-altering and life-giving in the most literal sense.

When you come to the crossroads, choose to walk with others, to be "real" or open with each, and for the sake of yourself and others, choose time and the long haul.

CONCLUSION

I'd be leaving you without the final piece if I didn't talk to you about the one relationship that helps you and strengthens you at every one of these crossroads. I'd be leaving you without sound biblical advice if I didn't talk to you about the One Person that loves you more than anyone else. He's the one person that can help you make the right choices and then help you to help others along this very path.

That person is Jesus Christ. Don't think that He doesn't want you yet, or He won't take you in until you've got it right. He wants to enter into your life right here, right now. Look at how He talked about it in Revelation 3:20, "Look! Here I stand at the door and knock. If you hear Me calling and open the door, I will come in and we will share a meal as friends."

That's His picture. He says, "Here's what I want. I want a relationship with you. It's like I'm standing at the door and knocking. If you'll open up the door I want to come in and I want to sit down with you. I want to share a meal with you. I want to have a relationship with you where we talk about what's going on in your life - where we talk about what you're struggling with, where we talk about the victories and the joys."

You see what I've been talking about this morning is really one crossroad: It's the choice to live in a human kingdom or God's Kingdom. This man-made kingdom offers me a life of possessions, power and positions but ends in emptiness and loneliness - while God's kingdom offers me a life of freedom and friendship forever. The choice is yours. Choose wisely.