

Matthew 18:18-22

"Inside-out"

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By now you all have heard me preach more than a few sermons, and you've probably noticed that I will oftentimes reference books that I've been reading in the sermons I preach. I have an unquenchable reading habit, and Amazon.com, I believe, is one day going to have my credit card bronzed and hung on a plaque in their corporate office. The things that I read have a way of seeping into my study of the Bible, and most of the time that's a good thing. Now I say "most of the time" because, on occasion, I like to read a book or two on quantum physics. In advance, I would like to sincerely apologize for what you all are about to hear. But I just can't help myself. Bear with me.

At some point in human history, it was decided that in order to learn as much as we can about the world around us, we had to start reducing things to tiny bits. Scientific progress allowed things to be sliced and diced smaller and smaller until we finally discovered something called an "atom", which was the tiniest little microscopic speck that made up all things. When we discovered the atom, quantum physics was born, and an entire discipline arose

out of the study of these smallest known particles of matter.

Eventually someone wondered if atoms could be sliced and diced themselves - maybe they were made up of even smaller stuff! So, in a huge circular tunnel called a particle accelerator, they crashed two atoms into each other at incredible speed. Sure enough, they split into all kinds of tiny little subatomic particles, the smallest of which is called a quark. Now, the first physicists to ever do this thought they would be able to isolate one of these infinitesimally small particles, and there they would behold the secret little building block of everything in existence.

But there was a problem. Quarks don't like to be alone. If you try to separate two quarks from one another, they will always find their way back together, no matter what you put between them, no matter how far apart you try to separate them. It is impossible to study a quark in isolation, because by itself, it stops being a quark. Some strange force that we don't understand binds these subatomic particles together and simply won't let them go. Quite literally, togetherness, and relationship are built into the very fabric from which all things are made.

Now you might be wondering what quantum physics has to do with anything religious or church-related, but there is a connection. Consider the uniquely Christian notion of a triune God, a God whom we experience not as a singular entity, but one-in-three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If you want to know who God is, you have to speak of God the Father, the creator of all that is, and God in Jesus Christ, the redeemer of all things, and God the Holy Spirit, who sustains us. God is all of those things together, and so all Christians know that togetherness and relationship are a fundamental part of who God is.

Similarly, if you want to understand something about human beings, it makes no sense to study one in isolation from other things. Even the most private and individual parts of ourselves are only comprehensible in relationship to other people. Quite literally, by ourselves we are not ourselves, and to understand who you are, and who other people are, you have to understand yourself and others in relationship. Once again, togetherness and relationship are a fundamental part of what it means to be a human being. In order to be a person in the fullest sense, you need other human beings. You need things like love, and companionship, and

relationship. What this all means is that whether you're talking physics, religion, or psychology, there's no such thing as an individual anything. The identity of all things must be understood through togetherness and relationship. For those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus, that has incredible implications.

In a recent study conducted by sociologist Robert Bellah, 81% of the American people say that an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independently, without relation to any church or synagogue. There is a trend of religious individualism which sees faith communities as impediments to religious truth. In Bellah's book, *Habits of the Heart*, he mentions the now infamous Sheila, who said: "I believe in God. I can't remember the last time I went to church. But my faith has carried me a long way. It's 'Sheila-ism.' Just my own little voice." This kind of sentiment is not uncommon. I have friends who say things like, "I can be a good person without going to church," or, "I'm going to raise my child to discover religion on their own and come to their own conclusions about God." What fascinates me as I hear all of this is that nowhere else in our society do you see this trend toward individualism as you do with respect to religion. As a parent, if A.J.

wants to learn how to ride a bicycle, I'm not just going to let him figure it out on his own. And if he eventually says he wants to be an astronaut when he grows up, it's probably best that he not try to figure that out on his own, either. In every aspect of life there seems to be an understanding that you have to be with and learn from other people. But suddenly when we begin talking about religion, or God, or church, the best path to understanding is the solitary one, the one with no fellow travelers who might lead you astray. It's the one that reduces the story of the human and the divine to just me and God. That's all that matters.

The problem with that way of thinking is that it's not a part of any other reality we know. That's not what psychologists tell us about the human self. That's not what sociologists tell us about what it means to be a human being. Even physical science, with its tendency to reduce, and divide, and isolate, eventually comes the point at which things just don't make sense unless they are in relationship with one another. If you aren't exactly the scientific type, that's okay. Consider what the Bible has to say on the matter. Nowhere in the Bible is there any kind of suggestion that it's

sufficient simply to exist in isolation from other things. Of course, that doesn't mean that it hasn't been tried before.

In the fifth century there was a Christian from Syria named Simeon, who thought that the only way to achieve perfect love for God was to have as little contact with people as possible. So in the year 423, when he was about thirty years old, he began to live on a small platform on top of a pillar out in the wilderness. At first the pillar was only about twelve feet off the ground, but it was subsequently raised when people started traveling from all over the region to see Saint Simeon of the Pillar. Simeon did depend on those travelers to climb a ladder and give him food, but still the pillar was raised, and then raised some more. Eventually the pillar reached the height of sixty feet, where very few people could reach him, and Simeon lived there for another thirty-six years before he died atop his pillar.

Now, before you're tempted to write Simeon off as some lunatic who lived a long, long, time ago, consider that there might be ways in which his legacy lives on. There is, for many Christians and many churches, the constant temptation to view the world around us as one big mess from which we must eventually escape.

There's the temptation to keep our eyes fixed on the *next* world, the spiritual, heavenly world, while ignoring the physical world of the present. The world can do whatever it wants to do, as long as we've got our treasure stored for us in heaven! The Bible does say things like, "Do not be conformed to this world," (Romans 12:2) and, "Do not love the world or things in the world" (1 John 2:15), and we might take those things to mean that we should separate ourselves from the world as much as we can. Let's just focus on our future glory, our heavenly reward. Let's turn a blind eye to social justice, to the poor and needy, to the broken parts of the world so that we can just focus on us and God. Us and God. That's all that matters.

But you know what, as long as Jesus is the head of the church, he won't let us do that. Did you catch what he said to his disciples in our New Testament reading for this morning? *Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of them.* Why did Jesus say that? He could just as easily have said, "Where any one disciple goes in my name, I am there with him." But he didn't say that; he said two or three. With those little words, those little numbers, Jesus sounds like a quantum physicist. He's telling us that Christians are like quarks: they can't be understood

apart from each other, the fullness of their identity is only expressed through relationship. If you reduce, divide, and separate them until there's just one Christian, it stops being a Christian.

The presence of Jesus, his living Spirit here with us, is fully realized only when we practice togetherness and relationship. A lot of times I think we hear Jesus say, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I will be in the midst of them," and we think that just means he's here with us when we gather for worship under one roof. But if we truly believe that Jesus meant what he said, and he is in our midst whenever we are together, then that means he's not only here in the chapel or the sanctuary where we worship, but also in the Kerr building for Wonderful Wednesday and Room in the Inn, and the classrooms for Sunday School and Disciple Bible Study, and in the Habitat House where people are working, and in the courtyard where people are talking, and in the youth lounge where they are texting each other. And if Jesus really is in all those places where we gather together, then he's not just sitting there watching us and eating popcorn. No, he's doing the same thing he's always done! He's welcoming the poor and the outcast, he's forgiving the sinners and caring for the sick, he's

reaching out to the stranger and comforting those who live in sorrow. And he's sending us out to do the same thing.

If you read scripture carefully, you'll notice that every single time that the disciples are gathered together under one roof, Jesus (or the Holy Spirit) is right there in the midst of them to *send them out*. At the last supper, Jesus prays for his disciples saying, "I am not asking you to take them out of the world. . . . As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." (John 17:18) After Jesus' death on the cross, when the disciples are cowering in a room with the doors locked out of fear, Jesus appears suddenly in their midst and says, "As the Father sent me, so I send you." (John 20:21) Then at the day of Pentecost all the disciples were gathered together in one place, and suddenly there was a violent wind, and tongues of fire, and the Holy Spirit in their midst. They began speaking, not in a language that they already knew, but in languages that those outside the room could understand. All three of these instances, in which the disciples gather together, feature a movement from inside-out. The message is clear: Christian community is not something that just happens *in here* when we are gathered by ourselves, but *out there* where the world waits.

That's the funny thing about church. If a church is not connected, not in relationship with the outside community, it stops being a church. The good news is that Jesus is constantly working in our midst, moving us to take what happens *inside* the church *out* in to the world. So, why not try something a little different? Instead of becoming Philadelphia Presbyterian Church of the Pillar, let's share what we have not just with each other, under this roof, but also with those outside, in this community. Instead of meeting at church for Bible Study, go meet in a local restaurant or coffee shop. Instead of having Sunday School in a classroom, meet outside somewhere in Mint Hill where people can see you. Instead of assuming that church is just something that happens here under our roof, take it to the grocery store, and the mall, and the bookstore. Take it to the daycare, and the school, and the football game. Take it to the hospital, and the nursing home, and the urban ministry center. When you practice your faith, not by yourself, not just under the same church roof, and not apart from the world, but in it, a funny thing happens: you discover the most fundamental part of what makes up a Christian.

Thanks be to God. Amen.