

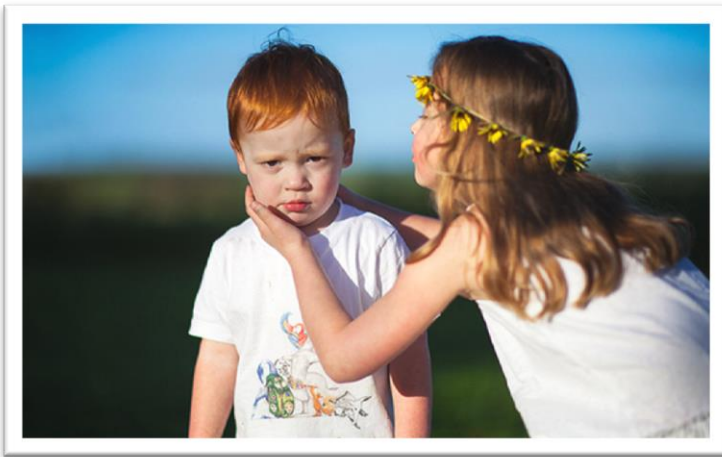
Together Part 1

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Genesis 2:15-22 Luke 10:25-37

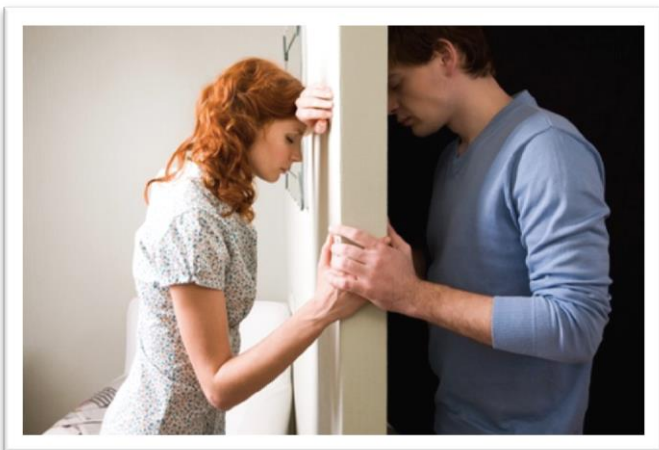
I want to begin a series this morning around a very common theme which I suspect we all take for granted and yet which is anything but common in the world. The word which describes this theme is the word '**together.**' Now I don't know about you but I've always found



this a difficult word. I have childhood memories of my mother, in particular, using this word to get me to do things I didn't really want to do...

"Richard, can't you play **together** with ..."

"Richard can you please put your room back **together!**" "Richard why on earth do you and John get so silly when you're **together** with...!" "Richard I want you to go **together** with your brother to the ..."



The fact is we humans don't do '**together**' well. Yes we can fake it for a while – we can love it for a while but if we look briefly at marriage, the institution which is supposed to enshrine the joy to togetherness in our society, we find that it is nearing a 60% failure rate

and so we'd have to say that **together** is an issue for us.

Nations struggle to stay together; regions struggle to stay together; cities become divided over things like stadiums and frankly even churches divide quite easily.

So why is it that we have such a struggle with staying together? The issues we have with together go right back to our Creation and they begin not with a problem but with a wonderful intention – that we should be a race which is, for all intents and purposes, **together!** Let's have a closer look at that...

It is common when reading the Genesis account of Creation to think of it as an act of complete independence and innovation on the part of God. And indeed, for the most part it is.



But at least one part of Creation wasn't. The part we've read today reveals that the creation of Women is in fact a response to a problem – that of the loneliness of Adam. We find Adam surrounded by all this

incredible beauty and grandeur but, despite this, he finds that something is wrong... inside. And that something wasn't fixed by all the wonderful animals and the amazing variety God had made. Instead, what he needed was, as he says



later, **'bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.'** And so in response to this deep need of Adam's God creates Eve.



Now there are some amazing lessons to be learned here not least of which is that from the very beginning God took Adam so seriously that he was willing to allow Creation to be directed by his wishes and if ever there's a sign of how much God values our partnership here it is.

Another possible direction for our study would be to examine this as evidence of how open God is to our desires and suggestions – God is Jehovah Jireh – the God who provides. One further possible track we could follow comes with the realisation that from the very beginning woman was a solution to a problem and, if we're honest, they've been solving men's problems ever since!

But I don't want to go down any of these paths this morning because I think there's a much greater principle at stake here.

You see Adam realised something that we would do well to acknowledge again and again in our own lives, something that I believe stands behind and underneath human existence and perhaps all existence; something that I'd call a life principle and this is that we are created to be and belong... **together!**



And it's fascinating to watch how this is reflected throughout scripture because it never disappears. The true state of humankind is that **we are at our best when we work together.**

This is nowhere more obvious than in words God uses to describe what Eve will be. You see in creating the woman God has a specific goal which is expressed in what he calls the woman before He creates her.

In response to Adam's cry for help God says this

¹⁸Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." (Gen 2)

God sets out to make a '**helper**' who will be his '**partner.**'

Helper and partner here is a translation of the Hebrew

עֶזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ (‘*ēzer k^enegdô*)

an expression of two words '*ēzer* meaning help or helper

and *k^enegdô* which is translated in the NRSV 'partner' but in fact the Hebrew has the force of being 'one who is fitted for' like a puzzle piece which fits with its proper neighbour. So Eve was created to fit together with Adam perfectly; she was created to be **together** with him.

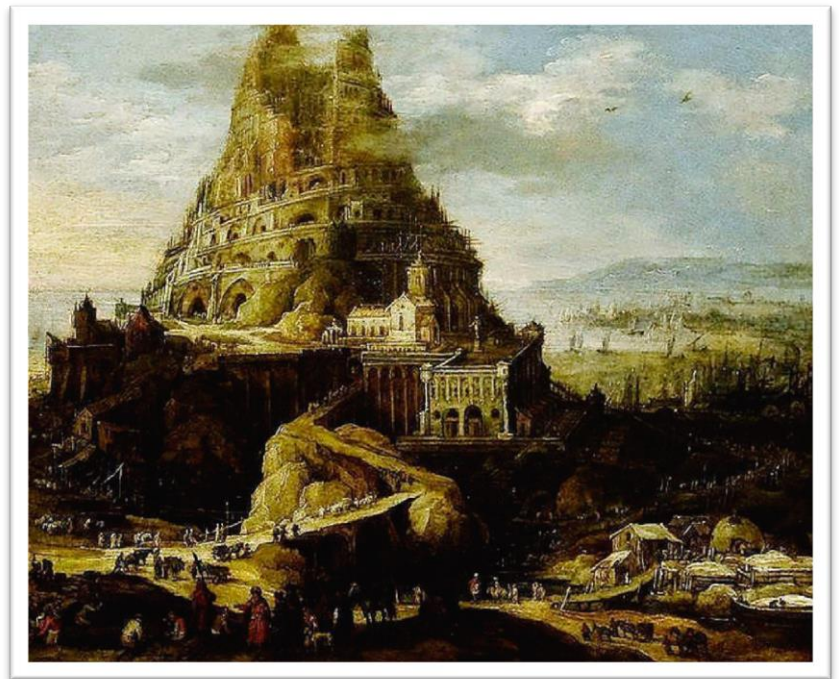
Of course the Fall changes things.

The truth of our need for togetherness never changes but the actual state is distorted by the Fall – something evil is inserted into it so much so that the most intimate act



of human togetherness – the act of sex – leads, for the woman at least, to pain. And for men their intimate connection with the rest of Creation – that **togetherness** which is consummated by Adam’s giving of names to every creature, becomes a curse because the ground grows weeds and can only be made productive by a huge increase in work.

And in the story of the Tower of Babel we have a further distortion of togetherness when that special fellowship which defines us is put to evil use in order to defy God. And all of us who know a bit of history know that the strength which comes with togetherness has



been constantly mis-applied to violent and aggressive ends by people and powers down through the centuries. So far from being something which improves us, **‘together’** became a horror and a menace in many contexts and yet... **we are still made to be together**. The deep truth of the matter is that **God blesses togetherness**.



Please don’t think I’m denying the potential of individuals to make enormous contributions to our lives and to perform amazingly. We all know that with application or with giftedness comes a virtuosity which can astound us. But the truth of the matter is that even with this virtuosity, a group unified

can perform better. This is nowhere better described than in Psalm 33 where the Psalmist reflects on precisely the value of individual strength and says

¹⁶ A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.

¹⁷ The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. (Psalm 33)

The theme, of course, is strength. The King measuring his strength by the might of his army – a vain use of the rule of togetherness – is not to be trusted according to the Psalmist. The warrior, a strong and well trained individual – but in the end no match for a combined force sent against him. The war horse, another great weapon of strength and yet again, horses may well be used **also** by an enemy so simply having them and relying on their individual strength is no guarantee that victory is assured.

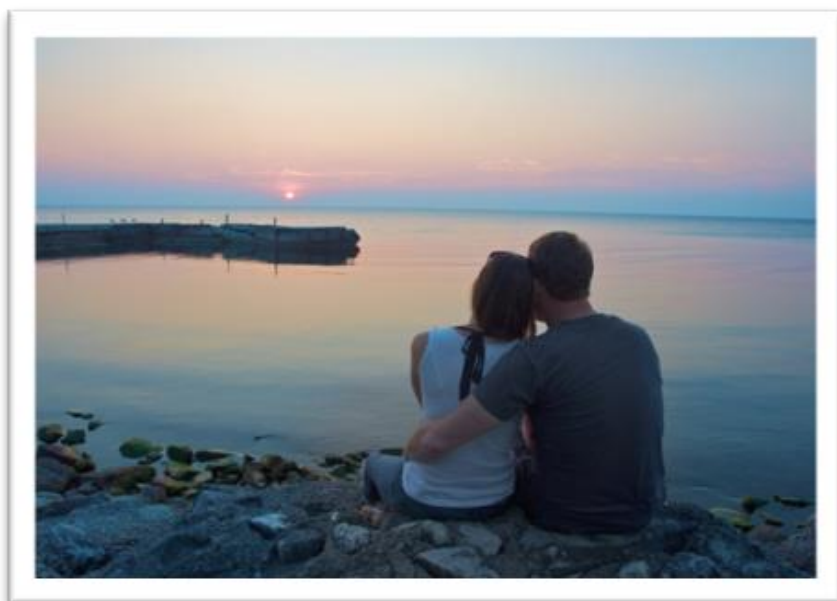
Togetherness can be distorted in so many ways and yet the fact that we need it remains. Every day you and I, even if we're unaware of it, **look to be together with others,**



we look for a life which is 'with others'



which is 'together.'



At the same time the law of sin operating within us will distort that need bringing it into the service of either division or of domination.

A young rabbi found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for the prayers and half remained seated, and each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition. Nothing the rabbi said or did helped solve the impasse. Finally, in desperation, the young rabbi sought out the

synagogue's 99-year-old founder. He met the old rabbi in the nursing home and poured out his troubles. "So tell me," he pleaded, "was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?" "No," answered the old rabbi.

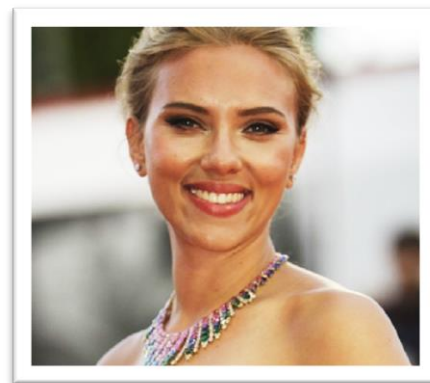


"Ah," responded the younger man, "then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers." "No," answered the old rabbi. "Well," the young rabbi responded, "what we have is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout and the other half sit and scream." "Ah," said the old rabbi, "that was the tradition."

We swim in a highly individualistic society. You and I see ourselves as unique and unrepeatable individuals who may be identified by virtue of our individual characteristics. But other societies and certainly older societies didn't always think this way. Instead they understood themselves as part of a whole; as an individual only on terms of how they were related to certain others. Our society, your society has continued to emphasise the individual so that:

our heroes are individuals,

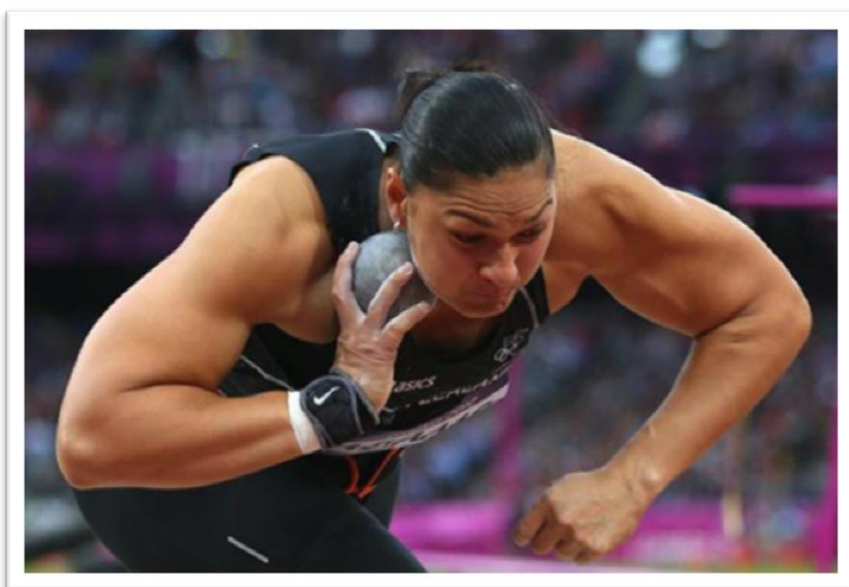
beauty is an individual thing;



relationships are largely about individuals



and achievement is a function of **individual effort and drive.**



If we compare this to the Gospel, however, we discover that this is not the way we are to look at ourselves; that time and again Jesus values togetherness over individuality. Consider these words of Jesus

²⁴A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. ²⁵Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves

Benefactors. ²⁶But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. ²⁷For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (Luke 22)

Identity and honour go to those who serve others...

Again

⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (John 10)

We enter heaven by virtue not of who we are but by virtue of a relationship we have with Jesus the great shepherd. Why did Jesus use sheep in this story? Because sheep are all alike. We are not assessed according to our individual characteristics but according to how we relate to Jesus.

Finally today’s reading – The Good Samaritan

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

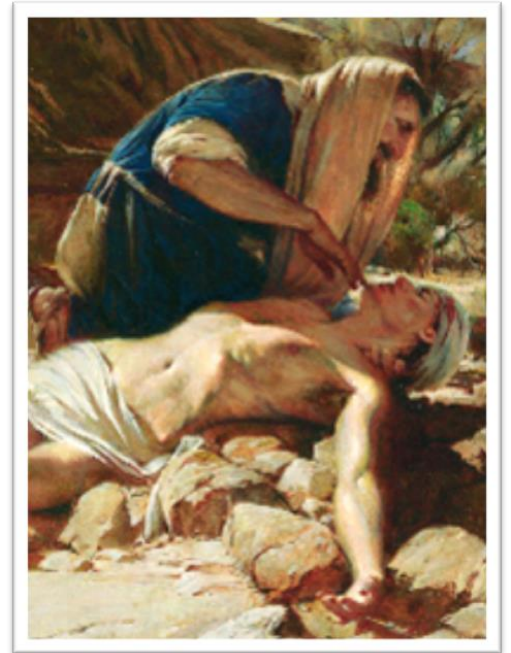
²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as

yourself.”²⁸ And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?”³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii,[£] gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10)

One of the attractive features of a rampant individualism is that we are free not to have to be included with those we find repulsive – we can, because we’re individuals, simply isolate ourselves from such people. But in the parable of the Good Samaritan we find that this very attitude is defined as the opposite of loving one’s neighbour. The priest and the Levite think like this. They define themselves in terms of their individual roles which enables them to ignore the person in need and carry on down the road.

Only the Samaritan sees himself in terms of the need of the other. Only the Samaritan defines who he is by virtue of his relationship to the other and this, says Jesus, is what it means to love.



Together. You and I are made to be together – as difficult as I am to live with, as inconsistent, as faulty, as much a failure as I am – we were made to be together. This is God’s intention and it’s not easy.

I have a challenge for you this week. Who in your sphere of influence do you deliberately discount; walk past; not really want to be seen with? Who do you not want to be defined by? I know it’s a tough question but the thing is, each

time we do this we’re the priest and not the Samaritan; we’re the Levite and not the Samaritan. If you want to be God’s child then He will call you first and foremost to be **together** with others.

