

**“WE ARE NOT ISLANDS,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas,
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In 1841 a young man named Henry David Thoreau decided to retreat to the woods to live on his own for a year and get closer to nature. With his own hands, he built a small cabin at the edge of Walden Pond, a small lake, outside Concord, Massachusetts. There in solitude he recorded intensely-experienced impressions of his daily life. Out of it all came a book which he called *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, plus some essays. Essentially, Thoreau’s writings are a witness to the beauty and complexity of nature—flora, fauna, animals, and insects. But so much of what he wrote is also a celebration of rugged individualism, independence, and self-reliance.

Thoreau’s do-it-yourself philosophy ignited a spark in the American imagination that has never burned out. Over the years as our American nation has drifted and shifted from being a more community-minded society of joiners to a society of individualist and loners, Thoreau has kept up a legion of admirers and fans. Early on among them was that local guy, the pioneering automobile legend Henry Ford. If and when you visit Henry Ford’s Fairlane Estate in Dearborn when it reopens after its complete restoration, you’ll find one of Thoreau’s sayings or aphorisms carved into the fireplace mantel of the large downstairs room where Ford held his famous square dances. The mantel quotation from Thoreau reads: “Chop your own wood and it will warm you twice.”

I admit that the words of Henry David Thoreau have had their appeal for me over the years. Almost every time I visit Boston I make a special side trip to Walden Pond which has become a state park with its own beach and docks for swimming. Wherever I find myself, I also enjoy moments of personal solitude and consider self-reliance to be a virtue, for the most part. Yet as a Christian believer, who prizes the teachings of scripture above all else, I recognize that when it comes to individualism and self-reliance, we can have too much of a good thing. Carried too far, the virtues that Thoreau exemplified at Walden and trumpeted in many of his writings can impoverish our lives, rather than enhance them.

The seventeenth-century Christian poet John Donne once presciently remarked that “No man is an island.” He meant to include women in that too. Donne’s point is that human beings are inherently social and sociable. God created us for relationships. Our lives are diminished without them. So often those who stress their own personal independence are in a state of denial about real human life. We need each other to thrive. We constantly depend upon each other, whether consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly.

Popular culture recognizes this even if it doesn’t always own the fact openly. Reflecting something very deep in our human psyche, most of the great figures of popular literature

and film have been sustained by relationships. On his desert island, for instance, Robinson Crusoe had his companion Friday. Similarly, as he chased windmills, Don Quixote had his sidekick Pancho Sanchez. The Lone Ranger and Tonto rode together. So did Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Then there was Thelma and Louise—'til death did they part.

More ordinary, day-to-day life is just as telling. As men and women, we fare best with companions. Babies need to be physically held and receive emotional attention. Without it, they frequently die or suffer life-long psychological impairment. As we also have found out, many kids don't learn well in isolation either. Kids with adult mentors, whether a parent, teacher, or coach, thrive best in school together. And church kids with positive peer groups really do have a better chance of navigating youth and adolescence without getting themselves into big trouble.

Meanwhile, studies further show that what's true for kids is true for adults. Did you know that married men with families live five years longer on average than single men?

Of course, in this day when addictions seem so rampant, we hear a lot about "Self-help groups." But the term "self-help" in these cases is a misnomer, isn't it? All these so-called "self-help" groups that enable people to improve their lives are all about group-help. Essentially, they are gatherings for folks to provide mutual assistance, support, and guidance. They also invite and invoke the help and companionship of a "higher power," which at least in this place we are not reluctant, embarrassed, or ashamed to call God.

Christians like us make a mistake if and when we deride the old African proverb that it "takes a village" to raise a child or ensure the moral, spiritual, and physical well-being of any and all. Christian life is all about being part of a faith village in which we look out for each other. Although it always makes a place for solitude, the Christian life is about partnering and togetherness—not living solo.

Consider what scripture says. In the Book of Genesis, where the Bible begins, God declares: "It is not good for man to dwell alone." (*Genesis 2:18*) Genesis' first chapters are about God's quest to ensure that Adam has a fit helper, whom he can also help. Subsequently, all the great patriarchs of ancient Israel, such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, have great matriarchs at their side, namely, Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. One of the most cherished Old Testament stories is about a mother and daughter-in-law whose devotion to one another is total. In the Book of Ruth, Ruth, a foreign Moabite woman, non-Jewish, refuses to abandon her elderly, widowed, destitute, Jewish mother-in-law, who has tragically lost her two sons, possibly to an early pandemic. In a poignant moment, Ruth tells her mother-in-law: "Where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people and your God my God..." (*Ruth 1:16*) Today,

perhaps because of Ruth's moving example, those who don't care about other people and relationships are coincidentally called *ruth-less*. The Hebrew sage Ecclesiastes sums up the moral spirit of the Old Testament when he declares that "two are better than one" for if one of them falls, the other is there to lift him up. (*Ecclesiastes 4:9-10*)

A similar stress on companionship and cooperation is to be found throughout our Christian faith. They say that three's a crowd. But don't tell that to God who chooses to make his appearance to us as a trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Likewise, as we see in the New Testament, Jesus, who always walked with God and the Holy Spirit, also sought out the companionship of fellow human beings. He gathers twelve apostles to walk with him through thick and thin. And when Jesus has to send them out into the world to share the gospel through word and deed, he dispatches the apostles in pairs, rather than as solo agents. (*Mark 6:7; Luke 10:1*) Two together, Jesus declares, are always better. Their shared prayers are far more likely to be blessed by the presence and power of God's spirit. (*Matthew 18:18*) Likewise, as Jesus contemplates life for his followers after he faces Calvary's cross, he promises that "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I will be in the midst of them." (*Matthew 18:20*)

None of this means we can't talk to God on our own. Sometimes we also have to deal with circumstances and situations in life without the support of partners, relations, and friends. Yet we shouldn't over-glorify these go-it-alone times or make a fetish out of individualism and self-reliance. Our lives are not going to amount to much in the end if we are not caring and sharing people, coming together in community. We are certainly not being Christ's true disciples if we hold ourselves aloof from others or exclusively devote ourselves to doing things our own way without being sensitive and considerate and cooperative towards others.

Admittedly, partnering with others may mean compromise of our own vision of what should be. It can also slow us down. Yet if we partner and cooperate with others the outcome and results are usually better and more durable. Doing everything our own way can be just plain selfish. Doing everything ourselves reveals is the antithesis of good Christian-minded leadership. It is not a virtue. It does not demonstrate strength. Yes, the relationships we build in getting something done often are as important as what we get done. Means *and* ends both matter.

A year and a half of the COVID pandemic has left us all relationship challenged. Circumstances have forced such a profound social isolation upon us all that there is now a hesitancy about rekindling relationships. As the flare of tempers and even violence across our nation shows, we have almost lost touch with what it means to be civil and cooperative. I have to keep that in mind myself. But God did not create us to be islands

unto ourselves. We need each other. We need community. We need togetherness to thrive. God made us this way.

In his own ministry, Jesus made even further clear how important it is to get together, to be together, to walk together with mutual respect, kindness, and compassion. One of the bright moments of that ministry was Jesus' miraculous transformation of water into wine so that a joyous wedding feast at Cana could be celebrated without interruption or a dampening of spirits. (*John 2:1-11*) Conversely, one of the saddest times in Jesus' ministry was in the Garden of Gethsemane was when all his apostles fell asleep on him and he found himself profoundly alone in his anguish. Remember Jesus' plaintive cry? "Will no one stay awake with me a while?" (*Matthew 26:40*)

As a pastor, it worries me that, aided by convenient technologies, we have developed habits of self-isolation that are going to be hard to break. The human voice, the human touch, the human presence—just being together in the same room with others—have no substitute. Virtual may be good and help get us through hard times like those we have just experienced in our year and a half of pandemic. But real is always better.

Let me close with a very real, true story. Pardon me, if you've heard it before. I grew up with two very different parents. My father was a lively extrovert who loved being with people. My mother was a more reserved introvert who, when she wasn't working as a classroom teacher, preferred to keep to home-and-family related activities. Unfortunately, for her, my father was in the habit of sometimes calling up at 3 or 4 p.m. to announce he had some out-of-town business guests, often from overseas, who needed to be entertained. He intended to take them out to dinner and wanted my mother to join them.

My dear mother hated these calls. The nerve of my father to call up at the last minute in this way! My mother made it a habit never to answer the phone from 4-7 p.m. when my father might telephone. Thus, my brothers and I ended up in the position of intermediaries when my father did call and we answered—which we always did. How I remember those calls and mediated conversations. My father would ask, "Is your mother there?" "Yes, dad," we would answer. "Tell your mother I need to speak to her," he would say. When we let mom know that dad was on the phone, she would ask, "What does he want?" When we asked on my mother's behalf, my father was always honest: "I'm calling because I have an out-of-town guest whom we need to welcome." My mother did not take the news relayed to her well: "Tell your dad that under no circumstances am I going!" We let dad know that mother was very emphatic about her no. "That's all right," my father would then say. "Just let know I'll be home to pick her up at 5:15 p.m." As we passed word back to our mom, she would shake her head to underscore that no was still no. Yet 45 minutes later, she was getting ready. My parents

never said very much to each other when my dad did get home to pick mom up. But off they went. The next morning, lo and behold, my mother was full of things to say about how interesting the night had been—how engaging their guest proved to be, particularly those visiting from overseas. You would never have known that my mother had been so resistant to thought of going out. Funny as it seems now—and funny as it even seemed then—the same scenario played itself out many times over, almost like a ritual.

Years later, when my father died, I used to call my mother just about every night. About two years into her widowhood, my mother with a heavy heart said one late hour to me, “Do you know what I really miss about your dad?... I miss him calling as he did to tell me that we are going out.” “Mother,” I said in astonishment, “do you know what you are saying? You hated that!” “Oh, I know, I know,” she answered in what was essentially a *mea culpa*—guilty as charged. “But your dad was always pulling me out of the house and now I have to do it all by myself and it’s very, very hard.”

Congregation, I found that poignant. I wish my mother could have more fully acknowledged in real time what my father was doing for her. Nevertheless, it was good that, even if belatedly, she could openly appreciate how helpful my father had been for her well-being. In fact, thereafter my mother became conscientious about getting out and about on her own initiative, joining in organized activities and programs that would not have commanded her time before. She made the effort and had the reward of fresh friendships that were encouraging and emotionally sustaining so that she was not so lonely.

Rather than continuing to simply cocoon as we got in the habit of doing over the last year and a half, we too each need, while maintaining whatever precautions are still appropriate for us, to find ourselves some butterfly wings, reconnecting with live people and renewing relationships. And church is always a good place to start.

We are not islands. Whatever our age, young or old, we need others. God made us to need each other. And wherever two or three, or ten and twenty, or even hundred, come together in Christ’s name, we have his own presence and companionship too. May we relish and enjoy the company we share in this community in Christ and in God’s world beyond. **Amen.**

