

The Journey: "In Relationship"

[Genesis 2:18-25](#)

[John 4:5-15](#)

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Think for a minute about a time when you were lonely. It may have been at a transition time in your life—you had just moved to a new place, and everybody else already had their circle of friends; you started a new job, and there was no one to eat lunch with, or you lost a life partner, and you found yourself very alone at night, in the morning, after work.....it was just so hard. Maybe your loneliness was short-lived—you were on a business trip alone in a hotel room, in a wonderful place, maybe Paris or Tokyo—but alone with no one to share the experience with you. Young people can be lonely, waiting longer to marry, pursuing careers and not relationships, or somehow failing to connect with people with common interests or values.

The woman at the well was lonely. Even though our life circumstances might be very different from hers, we can all put ourselves into her frame of mind because loneliness is such a universal feeling. This woman doesn't even have a name. In that sense, she is anyone. Things hadn't gone well for her—we learn later in the text that she had had 5 husbands and that the man she was now living with wasn't her husband (John 4:18). She is at the well in the heat of the day—at noon. No one else is there. Women wouldn't go to the well in the heat of the day; they would go early when it was cool and then carry the water home for the day's cooking. For some reason this woman was avoiding the other women. It appears that she didn't have sisters, cousins, a daughter, or even a friend in the neighborhood. Perhaps she had been rejected by the other women in the city. We don't know why she had five husbands—they could have died, or left her, or abused her and she left them. The Church has traditionally assumed she was a woman with a bad reputation, that she was perhaps a prostitute. And if she was, how do we know if that might not have been her only way to survive. We should not judge this woman. The writer of John's Gospel really just tells us that she is a woman with a hard life, alone and eager to speak with Jesus.

This woman is different from Nicodemus, whom we met last week. She doesn't have a name like he did, nor does she have his status, but the two go together as we read through the Gospel of John: a man, then a woman; rich, then poor; in the dark, then in the light, a Jew, a Samaritan. The contrasts go together to make paired opposites. But these two opposite characters are alike in one way. They are alike in their loneliness and their yearning. Jesus seems to know that they lack connection.

Humans yearn for relationship, so when we find ourselves lonely that's what we wish for—togetherness. How clearly we see this in the original love story, the story of Adam and Eve. God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner" (Genesis 2:18). This is the second story of God's creation of humankind. This is when God fashioned the first human out of the dirt. Then God goes on to create other

creatures out of the dirt, and instead of the text saying, "And God saw that it was good. And there evening and there was morning," like God said in the first creation story, the one that was poetic and ritualistic (Genesis 1), here God messes around with the dirt and then sees that more still needs to be done. The creative act is messy, and as we will soon see in the story in the Garden of Eden, full of problems. Adam is lonely. And "it is not good that the man should be alone," so [God makes] him a helper as his partner." I think the writer of this second story is right on. We need relationship.

Bruce Feiler analyzes Adam and Eve's relationship in his new book, *The First Love Story: Adam, Eve, and Us*. In the bible, the story is very short. There is more that *isn't* said than is said. So over the generations, people have filled in the missing details—in imaginative literature and in theological interpretation. John Milton wrote the longest retelling of the story of Adam and Eve in 1667. It is the classic epic poem called *Paradise Lost*. A Harvard scholar says of *Paradise Lost*, "Milton explores through Adam and Eve the fundamental challenge of any love relationship: the uneasy, inevitable, and ultimately creative tension between autonomy and interdependence" (Barbara Lewalski in Feiler, 89).

You see, God knows Adam needs a helper and a partner for interdependence, but Eve also needs autonomy. In Milton's extended, fictional version of the first love story, *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve have blissful sex, but then Eve wants something more. She wanders off by herself and encounters a beautiful image in a lake—it's her own reflection. She notes its beauty, but then decides to return to Adam (90). It's her choice; she wants to be with her partner after all. Adam chooses to forgive her for wandering off, so all is well. They have the normal creative tension in their relationship like we all experience, times together and times apart. Then Eve says they should divide the labor in the garden—she sounds like a liberated woman! —at first Adam is shocked—"Don't be absurd!" he says—but when Eve threatens to leave again, Adam backs down. This give and take is quite radical for the 17th century when this story was written, but Adam and Eve actually negotiate!

Since the writing of the bible, and then since English literature of the 17th century, human culture has evolved through the Victorian Age in the 19th century and through Women's Liberation in the 20th century....We can all identify with the tension between togetherness and autonomy. We want to be together—to share life experiences, —but we also want to maintain our autonomy and sense of self.

Some of us may have changed our ideas about autonomy in relationship over the years. My mother was a stay-at-home mom when the majority of women stayed at home. She found her autonomy in her traditional sex role: she did the cleaning, the cooking, and the ironing. (I certainly never saw my dad pick up an iron!) My mother made decisions regarding the children's activities and family purchases. My father was the breadwinner. He brought home a paycheck and took care of the car, the lawn, and fix-it jobs. (I certainly never saw my mother pick up a wrench or a screwdriver!)

In my generation the roles are not so strictly traditional, and in my children's generation even less. I am grateful for autonomy in my work. I have enjoyed being a homemaker, but also a teacher and a minister, and in these careers I've been basically independent from my

husband. We share many things, but we also remain independent of each other in many ways.

Achieving the right balance of togetherness and autonomy for both people may be a challenge. In some couples, one person wants to do things together more than the other person. In some relationships, one person needs more help from the partner than the other. When one person ages or is ill or has a disability, issues of dependence and independence become especially taxing. When a partner dies, what is left for the surviving spouse is more than autonomy; it's loneliness.

Helen Fisher is an anthropologist and human behavior researcher, who uses brain scans to understand stages of love. She finds that as we age, we begin to collect and evaluate data about our partners' feelings, their reactions to social situations, and their emotional states (Feiler, 216). When love works well, we want to help our partners.

Fisher identifies three stages of love: lust, romance, and attachment. Our bible passage today shows the first stage, when Adam discovers Eve and says, "At last! Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh!" That's lust. Then Adam and Eve are naked and feel no shame. They cling to each other and create a family. Fisher would call that romance. (I kind of like the candlelight dinner idea....) The attachment phase came after Adam and Eve were exiled from the garden and had to find a new way to coexist, including having children. They weathered life together.

Feiler says that "love is not just union; it is re-union." "There is no love without time. And there is no love without respect for the other. To have that, you must see the other not as higher or as lower. You must see the other as your equal" (217). Feiler suggests that the word we translate as "rib" perhaps should be translated from the original Hebrew as "side." Adam and Eve stand side by side (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-adam-and-eve-can-teach-modern-couples1489160813?emailToken=JRzfvB7Z3yTgNI2a8wj1FQ0K6A AurMT1XbaX3UNw3HvXq Qve+ozKVwgty7rHmpAE19+sgA4nV6HGGB0TM0BJ/IwA==>).

But, Feiler goes on to say that equality doesn't necessarily mean constant harmony! (234). Adam and Eve survive banishment from the Garden of Eden, the death of a child, and Eve survives the death of Adam (if you believe Adam lived to be 930 years). It is love that keeps them going, over the bumpy road, resilient love.

God didn't want Adam to be lonely, and so he created Eve. Jesus didn't want the woman at the well to be lonely, and so he engaged her in conversation that mattered. He demonstrated accepting love, and encouraged her resilience. God wants us to be in relationship with a companion, where we develop over time a love that fosters both togetherness and autonomy.

The woman at the well comes into her own when Jesus connects with her. Then she is able to go out telling others about the Christ, who knew her and cared about her! She is no longer alone. And she left her water jar; perhaps she's coming back...

We say in Lent, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." This clean heart and right spirit is love. No love story is perfectly smooth, so on this journey of life, we ask God to create in us clean hearts, loving hearts, and a right spirit—again, — so that we might foster loving relationships that last. This is work, but even the first couple struggled. Create in us clean hearts, O God, and renew right spirits within us.