

4 Horsemen of the Modern American Apocalypse

2nd Horseman: Individualism

1 Cor 12:12-27

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

It's our 2nd week talking together about the end of the world. If you weren't here last week, throughout August we're using the powerful image of the 4 horsemen of the apocalypse from chapter 6 of Revelation. Through this image, we're asking, "are there 4 "horsemen" today—4 warning signs alerting us to a deeper dis-ease in modern America?" Last week, we explored our addiction to our phones and the captivity of our attention.

What's the 2nd horseman? It's a big gross "I." King Me. An over-inflated, far-too-important, way too aggrandizing sense of Self. Individualism is rampant. It's fitting that we have a Narcissist-in-Chief because the Self rules America. What if the very existence of this autonomous Self is a lie? I heard Black theorist Adrienne Maree Brown say recently, "individualism is a myth." Is that true? Are we all fundamentally connected? Do we all belong to something bigger than the self? Could it be that it is really that bigger thing that defines us? For many years now, our culture has put the individual first—at great cost. The tyranny of individualism is the 2nd Horseman of the modern American apocalypse. But before we get deeper, let's read a Scripture that offers a different vision of what you and I are.

In Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthian community of Jesus-followers describes the interplay between individual and group by using the metaphor of a human body. As you listen, hold this question of which is primary, the individual, or the group:

¹²Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many. ¹³We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴Certainly the body isn't one part but many. ¹⁵If the foot says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not a hand," does that mean it's not part of the body? ¹⁶If the ear says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not an eye," does that mean it's not part of the body? ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, what would happen to the hearing? And if the whole body were an ear, what would happen to the sense of smell? ¹⁸But as it is, God has placed each one of the parts in the body just like God wanted. ¹⁹If all were one and the same body part, what would happen to the body? ²⁰But as it is, there are many parts but one body. ²¹So the eye can't say to the hand, "I don't need you," or in turn, the head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you." ²²Instead, the parts of the body that people think are the weakest are the most necessary.... ²³But God has put the body together... so that there won't be division in the body and so the parts might have mutual concern for each other. ²⁶If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it. ²⁷You are the body of Christ and parts of each other.

Take a minute to receive and make sense of this metaphor by talking together. Which does Paul think is more important, the individual or the group? How does this metaphor sit with you? (*conversation in the congregation*)

The ways you and I come to think about identity—individual and group—are hidden in the background of our lives. But there are times in your life—often when we are participating in groups—when these questions move to the foreground.

- Have any of you been a member of a team, or coached of a team? Which is better—to score a goal and your team loses, or you don't score but your team wins?
- Have any of you here today served in the military?
- Any of you have a family? You've all explored these questions in your family. Does everyone get to do their own thing? Do you ever have to put aside what you want for the sake of the group?

Institutions—which is another name for these “groups” we participate in—often tell you “it's not about you.” Groups we belong to make us see that we're part of a larger whole, and that larger whole often has goals—winning games, defeating an enemy, preserving culture and tradition, or in the case of the church *building beloved community*—these collective goals often require you to put your individual needs aside. At least for a while.

But for decades in America the power of groups over our lives has been shrinking. The power individual self-determination has been on the rise.

If we scan history and diverse culture, you quickly realize that there is no fixed idea of the “right” relationship between individual and group identity. It's a historically and culturally relative definition.

Go back in time 1000 years ago, and it's certain those folks didn't think they were free to direct their own lives and choose who and what they wanted to be. Your life was determined by family, social class, and God. The questions all of us struggle with would have made zero sense:

- what kind of job do I want?
- where will I live?
- what should I do in my free time?
- what should I do with my money?
- what is the purpose of my life?

Over centuries the individual Self began to emerge out of the shadows. Something in the human spirit welled up. In our political life, we began to imagine that individual people have “rights.” You have a right to be free from others depriving you of your life, your freedom, your voice, your property. Political individualism was supported by changes in religious ideas: the Protestant reformation asserted this radical concept that God works in every human heart. No one else can tell you what to think about God—“God alone is Lord of the conscience.”

Our country elevated the individual like no culture in the world ever had. We wrote universal individual political rights into our Constitution and we protected those rights—unless you were Black, or a woman, or gay, or poor. Our economic system—capitalism, the free market—was modeled on the idea that the best way to serve the common good is for all of us to act in our own self-interest. America developed mythologies about the individual—none more powerful than the myth of the “self-made man.” The Christian religion played right along focused the essence of faith on the question “are you saved?”

Do you see how this idea of “King I” was built with many hands?

For a long time, America had really strong institutions—groups. Groups were a check on the power of individualism.

Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville marveled in his tour of America in the 1830s what “joiners” we were—there was a society, an association, a group for *everything*. Americans have always known how to work together.

During the Great Depression—when the economy collapsed and ¼ of all Americans were out of work, and people were starving. Americans mobilized in vast, interconnected networks of support. Food banks, soup kitchens, mutual aid societies, unions; government created Social Security, regulated markets, and progressive taxation. In World War 2, the threat of Nazis and Imperial Japan galvanized Americans into a common effort; people from every background pitched in, united in sacrifice for the common good. Black churches were the organizing centers of the Civil Rights movement.

Beginning in the 70s, institutions in America began to crumble. Robert Putnam wrote a groundbreaking book *Bowling Alone*. He marshalled data and it all pointed to one thing: Americans weren’t joining groups. You know what happened? Social cooperation and social trust began to fall apart. Without institutions to give us a sense of “we,” we became a nation of “me’s.” The reasons are too many and too complicated to name, but they include:

- Government corruption
- Ill-conceived and unjust wars
- Liberation movements that upset white male supremacy
- Neoliberal economic policy
- Technologies that privatized entertainment
- The steep decline of organized religion

Without places to learn and practice communal belonging, we regress into a world formed only by our own wants and needs. We’ve lost a shared moral or ethical vocabulary. “Morality was once revealed, inherited and shared, but now it’s thought of as something that emerges in the privacy of your own heart.”

Everything is up to you. What to do. How to define and create the good life. How to be happy and satisfied. To know what is right, what is good—it's all up to you. The Self is King. Long live the Self.

What could go wrong when the Self rules? For one, we might find ourselves always fighting with one another when our personal desires inevitably conflict with others'. For another, we may find ourselves living in a Darwinian world of survival of the richest, with no capacity to articulate what we owe to one another. We may find that we are richer and freer than any people who have ever lived and yet we are unhappy—because human happiness requires that we belong to something bigger than ourselves—that we feel like our lives are woven into the lives of others in a meaningful way.

I want to come back to where we began: to the central question of which comes first, the individual or the group? Are you primarily an individual—a free and autonomous being who chooses your path in life? Or do you primarily belong to something larger—a family, a culture, a people, a species, a faith—is your individuality bound by its connections to that group?

For what it's worth, I don't think the Bible has clear unambiguous answer to the question of which comes first—the individual or the community.

The Bible is surely one of the world's great sources of individual dignity. "The Lord is my shepherd," "I am fearfully and wonderfully made" the Psalmist declares. Every individual is a unique expression of God's own image. God moves in the heart of every individual human being—"God, you have searched me and known me." Resurrection affirms the unique value of every one of God's beautiful human beings. Our tradition affirms individual dignity.

That said, the vision of the individual that prevails in modern American cannot be reconciled with the story in Scripture. Everywhere in scripture, individuals affirm their belonging to what we call "God's people." We are our brother's keeper. We are to love and serve one another. We bear one another's burdens. We share our goods so that no one has a need. We honor God through right relationship, not individual achievement. More than that, the Scriptures constantly implore us to widen our spheres of mutual belonging, to expand our sense of who is in "God's people"—to include the foreigner in our community, so that children are in the middle, so that the materially poor don't suffer, we are told to think less of ourselves and more for others. The virtues our tradition cherishes—compassion, mercy, generosity, humility, love—these are not individual virtues. They are relational virtues. They are what we do to create deep, healing bonds with others.

God has put the body together... so the parts might have mutual concern for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it. You are the body of Christ and you belong to one another.