

INTRODUCTION:

1. [Image] An indigenous Brazilian man died recently. He was the very last of his people and tribe. We don't know his tribe's name. We don't know what their language was. We do not even know his name. Because of this he was just called "The Man of the Hole" based on the large holes he dug inside his homes. They were an isolated tribe that lived in the rainforest. Most of his people were victims of genocide in the 1970s and were killed by greedy farmers who wanted their land. In the 1990s his last of people died and he was all alone. He did not want contact with the outside world, as you can imagine based on how we treated his people. So for the last 30 years of his life, he lived completely alone. No family, no friends, and no community at all. There is a lot to unpack in his story, but I was struck by the loneliness of his life. Can you imagine what it would be like to be the last not just of your family, but of your people? No one knows your name and no one knows your language. Completely alone in every sense of the word. How difficult would that kind of life be?
2. [Need] Now we might not be the last of our people, but we have felt the pain of loneliness. We were not made to be alone. But even when we do experience community it can often be negative and painful. What is the cure for our loneliness and is community so hard to get?
3. [Subject] This morning we are going to talk a lot about relationships and community. We will see Solomon tackle this subject in the 4th chapter as he searched for the meaning of life.
4. [Text] Ecclesiastes 4:1-16
5. [Preview] Today we will talk about the beauty of community, brokenness of community, and the community of Jesus.

First, we will talk about the beauty of community. Our first point if you are taking notes in your bulletin is **We desire community. We desire community.**

All of us desire community and relationships.
From the very beginning in the garden before sin came,
God said that it was not good for man to be alone.

We were created for relationships.

It is a good thing to want people in your life.

It is a good thing to desire relationships with others.

The book of Ecclesiastes can be a bit of a downer.

He has no problem talking about the futility and problems of life.

But in this section,

He does not say that community and relationships are foolish.

He does not advocate for just doing life alone.

We will skip ahead to verses 9-12, but we will cover the rest later.

Verse 9 **"Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil."**

Having a community and others is helpful in our work.

It's much easier to paint a room, rake leaves, or work on an oil well with others.

You have more hands and more help.

And having more people, or a larger community increases the reward.

More work is more money.

But the beauty of community is not that it lines our pockets.

Verse 10 **"For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!"**

Having a community and others around us help us when we fall.

He is not just thinking of literal moments when you fall down and need help back up.

He is thinking about all the times in life you experience suffering.

As Christians when we fall into sin we have a community that helps us come back to the Lord.

We can literally and spiritually lift each other up.

How unfortunate is it for those who have no one when they fall.

Who have to rely only on themselves and their own strength for help.

Verse 11 **"Again if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone?"**

Community helps us when we are in need.

He paints the picture of two people lying down in the cold.

And as they fall asleep they can gather up and use their bodies to warm each other.

Picture two people camping in the snow.

And instead of shivering alone, they huddle together by the fire.

But there are many other situations of need that community helps us.

But it should not just be these moments that community helps us.

We pay each other's bills.

We give away our possessions instead of just selling them or throwing them away.

We provide meals for each other when babies come, or when people are sick

The early church in Acts was a community that always tried to meet each other's needs.

But you cannot meet all your needs alone.

Verse 12 **"And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him"**

Community helps us to endure opposition and hardship.

The author uses an example of one person being assailed or attacked.
And if you are alone you might not win that fight.

Being a wrestler I used to pride myself on feeling like I could take on anyone even those bigger than me, which was about everyone.

But it is much easier to have two against one.
If you have someone else beside you, then you can resist.

Again Solomon is not just giving us good techniques for navigating alleyways and busy city streets.

He is telling us that community protects us.
Having others by our side helps us to endure.

It is much easier to endure opposition if you are not alone.
Imagine being the only Christian in the room where someone says the Bible is a bunch of made of stories.
That's much harder than being in a group of Christians who hear the same thing.

Being together allows us to endure.

Verse 12 continues **"a threshold cord is not quickly broken."**

Community is much harder to break than an individual.

It would be hard to remain a Christian alone,
But it is much easier with a church family.

Sometimes these verses are read at weddings.
But they are not about marriage, but about the beauty of all human relationships.

And this desire for community is not just good, but God-given.

On Wednesday nights we have been going through our series on *Being Human*

We have talked a lot of sexuality and gender, but also what it means to be us.

Part of what it means to be human is to desire relationships.

When God made Adam He declared **"it is not good for man to be alone."**

God wasn't making a statement about singleness and marriage, but humanity.

God designed human beings to be in community with each other.

To be a hermit alone by yourself is in some ways to be less human. It is not good for us to be alone.

So the next time that you are lonely.

Or you are struggling and wishing a friend was nearby.

You are not weak.

There isn't something wrong with you.

You are simply desiring a good thing that you were made for.

[**Transition**] So this desire for community is good and wonderful. Not just because of it's many benefits, but because it is hardwired into our bones and being. But the problem is that we do not always experience the blessings and beauty of community. Why not? Point number 2

Why not? Point number 2 **Sin destroys community. Sin destroys community.**

Your sin never just affects you.

It always affects other people as well.

It is not just our individual sins, but the brokenness and sin of the world destroy communities.

It destroys our ability to have healthy God-honoring relationships.

Throughout most of this chapter, Solomon walks through all the various ways that sin, both individual and corporate destroys community.

Verse 1 **"Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors, there was power, and there was no one to comfort them."**

Here he describes the way that people treat one another in our world. Instead of experiencing worldwide community and peace, there is oppression and injustice.

He does not see community, but he sees **"oppressions."**

Oppression here is the abuse of people.
It is using other people for your own gain.
It is the outworking of greed and selfishness.
Instead of viewing other people as image bearers,
 It views them as commodities to be used and spent.
 Or it views them as obstacles to what we want.

And if they are not people anymore then we can treat them however we want.

We can yell, scream, and emotionally tear down people.

We can enslave them.

We can make them work in horrible conditions

We can pay them less than they deserve and steal their money.

All of these actions destroy community.

And he sees the sorrow of the oppressed **"the tears of the oppressed and they had no one to comfort them!"**

This greed destroys their ability to have community.

"on the side of their oppressors there was power and there was no one to comfort them."

He repeats it the observation.

He demonstrates those in power are using it selfishly and can't be stopped.

And looking at this reality in life brings grief.

Verse 2 **"And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive."**

He would agree with Killmonger, "death is better than bondage"¹

He would rather be dead than have to suffer enslavement and oppression.

He would rather be dead than continue to suffer under life as it is.

But he actually goes one step further in the next verse.

Verse 3 **"But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun."**

He says, that maybe death isn't better.

Because the dead still had to see and acknowledge the reality of life.

Or they had to experience it themselves.

He thinks that those who have never been born are the best off.

Because at least they never knew.

They did not have to experience the pain and suffering of sin.

Both Job and Jeremiah² wish that they had never left their mother's wombs rather than endure and see the suffering of life.

This is a common longing for those who see the destruction of sin.

¹ Killmonger is the antagonist in the comic book film *Black Panther*. The full quote is "Bury me in the ocean, with my ancestors that jumped from the ships, because they knew death was better than bondage."

² Job 3:3-5, Jeremiah 20:18

He goes on in verse 4 to describe another way sin destroys community.
Verse 4 **"Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after the wind."**

Envy destroys us.

He sees how many are only motivated to work because they see what someone else has.

They see money or success and want it for themselves.

Instead of two working together to be more efficient like in verse 9,
Now they work in competition with each other to win.

But this is so empty.

Because there is always another neighbor to be envious of.

There is always someone else with more things you want.

It is never enough.

It is vapor.

I've been reading a few books lately about great athletes recently.³

And these people describe their competitive drive to win and be the best
Competitiveness is another fancy way to describe envy.

We want to make sure that we win instead of someone else.

We need to be the best instead of someone else.

And this destroys our ability to commune with each other.

I can't have a true relationship with you if the most important thing is that I am better than you.

It's a form of selfishness when it doesn't care who it hurts or how it affects others.

³ Primarily *Carrie Soto is Back* by Taylor Jenkins Reed and *Open* by Andre Agassi

But we baptize and idolize competitiveness because we love greatness.
And deep down we are envious too.
We wish that we could be that person.
We want to be the best.

I'm not saying sports are sinful.
But competitiveness is sinful because it's envy.
And sin destroys community.

So he describes a fool's attempt to deal with this problem.
Verse 5 **"The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh."**

This is a weird verse so let's look closer.
Folding one's hands usually describes an absence of work.

This person refuses to play the game.
Since most people work for envy and just to keep up with the Joneses
They quit.
They don't work.
They are nihilistic about the world and just check out.
And this will lead to starvation because they will have nothing to eat.

I do not think this means that they literally become cannibals.
Though that is the picture the metaphor paints.
But their solution of nihilism and rejection of the world does not lead to
nirvana or utopia.
It simply leads to more self-destruction.
It is eating themselves.

Our sin destroys community.
But refusing to even try doesn't create lasting community either.
It won't even make us better or free from pain.
We stay alone and we then we self-destruct.

Verse 6 **"Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind."**

Instead of having idle hands doing nothing.

We should do our work quietly and without envy.

This echoes verses in 1 and 2 Thessalonians if you remember our study of that book.

2 Thessalonians 3:12 **"do their work quietly and earn their own living"**

And 1 Thess 4:11 **"Aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands."**

A life filled with workaholism doesn't work either.

It is nothing but vanity.

We should have hands full of a quiet faithful life to Jesus.

Sin destroys community by making us chase toil.

Verse 7 **"Again, I saw vanity under the sun: one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, for whom am I toiling and depressing myself of pleasure? This also is vanity and an unhappy business."**

This describes someone who is completely alone.

They have no family or fiends.

So they work all the time.

But they never work enough.

They never gain enough toil.

And it never satisfies.

Because we were not made to be alone.

And their chasing of toil is vaporous and vanity.

It leads to more unhappiness and loneliness.

Verses 13-16 describe one of the final ways the sin destroys community.

The most devastating is that sin makes community unfulfilling.
That even this good and godly desire cannot truly satisfy our hearts.

He does so by telling a story of two kings.

Verse 13 **"Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice."**

He contrasts two different kinds of kings.

One king is old and does not listen to others.

He is isolated from community and has no one but himself.

His foolish sin leads to destruction.

But there is another king who is young and poor, but wise.

Verse 14 **"For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor."**

Even more unexpected is that this young king comes from prison.

He is like an ex-con who somehow ends up as president.

Verse 15 **"I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led."**

In contrast, he listens to advice.

It is not just saying that he is the king and leads them all.

But he is popular.

They like him and care about him.

It seems like he is living the American dream with popularity and fame.

He has the community we long for.

But there is a problem.

Verse 16 **"Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind."**

He is still going to die.
And after awhile no one will care.
His name will be a long forgotten king,
Or like a forgotten president like Martin Van Buren, or Millard Fillmore.

The tragedy is that sin destroys community because it fades.
It cannot last.
And even when we have it, it does not satisfy us.

Parts of this chapter often get read at weddings.
The **"threefold cord that is not quickly broken,"**
the **"two are better than one."**
But I notice we don't read the verses after that.
You don't often hear the preacher say,
After his talk about the beauty of marriage, relationships, and community,
You don't hear him keep reading and say

"Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind."

But sin destroys.
We know it to be true.

Marriages end in divorce.
Spouses abuse, neglect, and cheat.

Or death comes.
Becoming a widow or widower is not what anyone expects on the
wedding day.

But marriage cannot save us from loneliness forever.
No community.
No social group.
No team.
None of it truly lasts.

And none of it can satisfy our hearts.
Even if you do happen to find the greatest community.
Wonderful relationships where you are known and can truly be yourself.

It still won't save your soul.
And it will end up disappointing you.
Sin destroys even our ability to enjoy the good community that we find.

[**Transition**] What is the solution? Our desire for community is good, but sin destroys and corrupts it. What can we do?

Point number 3 **Jesus creates a new community. Jesus creates a new community.**

Jesus came down to earth as a Savior.
To defeat the power of sin and death and set us free.

He also came to found the church.
And it was not founded on abstract principles.
It was not founded on thirteen apostles.
This community was founded on the blood of Christ.

At the cross, tomb, and resurrection Jesus created a new community called the church.

And the church Christ created is where true community should be found.

In the Church, the oppressor now longer uses others, but comforts the oppressed and worships alongside them.

In the church we work not to be better than our neighbors, but we work for the coming kingdom.

In the new church, we do not work to hoard for ourselves, but we give everything away to the needy and the poor.

In the new church, those who have no children, spouse, or family find their people.

In the new church, we are all brothers and sisters.

In the new church, our relationships are not based on what we do for one another.

They are not based on our political views or political party.

They are not based on our favorite football team,

They are not based on our interests at all.

Our community is founded in Jesus at Pentecost.

A community and humanity that spans the globe.

You have more in common with the Christian Somalian refugee than your neighbor across the street.

Ephesians 2:19-22 was part of our call to worship this morning.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

We are united by Christ and Christ alone.

He is the cornerstone everything is built on.

And Tanglewood Bible fellowship is not the temple,

But we a brick and stone building the universal church.

And every single Christian is a part of this community.

This is one of the most beautiful things of the church.

We are a new people.

The gospel is not just that Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sins,
It is also that He adopted you into His family.
And now every single Christian is your brother or sister in Christ.

We belong to each other.
We are a church family.
And you can have a place where you are known, loved, accepted, and
cared for.
Not based on anything you do.
But because Jesus says you are family.

Problem is that this is not always what we experience.

So, I do need to make a caveat here.
This is the church and the new humanity that Christ is creating,
But it is still under construction.
This does not always describe reality.
Because sin is still present and is still destroying churches.
and it is especially painful when churches,
 Places that should be the new humanity and a different way of life,
 are just places of sin.

When you go to a church because of the promise of community,
 Only to be betrayed, used, or abused.

It creates an even more profound hurt.
And this is a reality under the sun.

But it does not mean that Christ has failed.
The reality of our suffering does not undo the work of Jesus.
The church is a work in progress just like we are.

Ephesians 5:22 **"Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish."**

The church has plenty of blemishes at the moment.

Sexual abuse scandals.

Televangelists and prosperity preachers.

Celebrity pastors who are all about their image.

Churches that want to be business

Pastors who want political power

And so much more.

And all of this sin stains us.

But Christ is washing His church.

He is doing something new.

And the reality of sin does not free us from our need of community.

We do not get to decide that church is for other people and we can do it alone.

It is not good for man to be alone,

It is not good for Christians to be without a church.

There are absolutely local churches we should flee, but don't flee the Bride

Christ is building His church and every believer is a part of it.

We are in this together as Christ remakes the world.

You will not find a church without sin.

But you also will not find a church that Jesus is not sanctifying.

CONCLUSION:

1. [Summary] We rightly desire community, sin ruins it, but we can find it in the community that Jesus made.
2. [Challenge] Be a part of the community that Jesus is making new.