This devotional is the 9\textsuperscript{th} in a series as the ministry is in this time of transition. Be blessed as you support this ministry during this critical time of change.

\textbf{Thank God, We're Not Alone}

Psalm 133:1-3

Now that’s a good thought...togetherness. That is one of the reasons I enjoy the “body of Christ”. As we gather together I am reminded that I am not alone. Not only that GOD is with me, but that other PEOPLE are with me...YOU are with me. I need that.

It is strange, you know. As important as it is to us, we don’t often celebrate togetherness. We do gather at Thanksgiving time and express our gratitude for so many things...for food, for clothing, for shelter, for health, for sheer survival. Why we might even give thanks for our families - I hope we do - but rarely do we ever specifically give thanks for the fact that God has seen to it that we are not alone. That we are more than individuals, that we are a part of a group, a community. What makes our silence strange is that so much of what and who we are is SHAPED by others, the community of which we are a part.

But in spite of that, we Americans tend to ignore community. Our heroes are the rugged individualists of society - the Lone Rangers, the Daniel Boones, the Rambos, the hard-boiled private eyes who go about their work wanting and needing no one. We even try to separate individuals from the teams of which they are so obviously a part, selecting "Most Valuable Players" in games where just one player would be slaughtered without the work of teammates. We prefer to think in terms of the individual rather than any group.

Is that good? Is that healthy? I do not think so. And for that matter, neither do many others. A book came out some years ago called Habits of the Heart(1) that now has become a classic. It was written by some sociologists who wanted to look at our American celebration of individualism to see where it was leading us and frankly, what they found in their research was disquieting. Without going into detail, their conclusion was that all this concern for the individual, a concern that tends to ignore the community, is leading this nation to the place where, one day, we could lose our precious freedom. The authors became convinced, after some five years of digging, that the key to the survival of our way of life will be how much or how little Americans will be willing to stop being overwhelmingly concerned with our
own "private" lives and become willing to once again begin thinking of those around us, to begin to think again of the "common good."

Obviously, such thinking is solidly Biblical. We have a specific command from the Lord to love our neighbors in the same way and to the same degree that we love ourselves. While rugged individualism might be nice for novels or movies or television, but in the world that the Lord presents as the ideal, individuals appear only to have a place as we relate to one another.

Think about what scripture has to say about our interrelatedness. Back in Genesis, in the story of how all this came to be, you will recall that God created something and declared that it was good; God created something else and declared that it was good; something else...good. Do you remember the first time that the creation record says that something was NOT good? Genesis 2:18: "It is not good that the man should be alone." God never intended that we should be JUST individuals - we are made for togetherness.

As you move further through the scriptures and see the accounts of the ancient Israelites, again and again the picture is one of relatedness - related by blood through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; related by tribe through the sons of Jacob; related by faith through their allegiance to Yahweh. In fact, the picture often is the nation thought of in terms of just one person - in Isaiah, Israel is called the "suffering servant"; in Hosea, the nation is shown as the unfaithful wife; in the historical books, the good or evil deeds of the king are thought of as the good or evil deeds of the nation. Israel was not thought of in terms of the rugged individuals who made it up; instead the people were thought of as coming together to such an extent that they collectively became THE rugged individual - the nation of Israel."

The New Testament picture is equally clear. There is Jesus' injunction to love our neighbors as ourselves. There is the example of close-knit fellowship among the apostles. There is the witness of the early church that demonstrated such a bond of togetherness that they were willing to pool their resources so that no one would ever be in need. Then there is that remarkable description of the church that Paul provides when he talks about us as the BODY OF CHRIST - individual members, each with different gifts, but all related by necessity since no one member possesses ALL the gifts. The picture the Bible paints is one that celebrates individual gifts but only insofar as they are put to use for the common good.
One more point needs to be made before we look at what we might do to maintain a proper sense of togetherness. As Christians, we affirm that, no matter how rugged an individualist we might be, the one thing we cannot do is save ourselves. Our Christian confession is that we are totally dependent upon someone else for our salvation - Jesus Christ. No individualists need apply.

All right then. If individualism is potentially such a problem, how do we begin to overcome it? First, we will REMEMBER where we have come from, the people and history that nurtured us and brought us to where we are. That will mean looking at our families, our communities, our nations, to learn from the rich cultural resources which have shaped us. That means study, but the reward will be that we will begin to realize our connectedness with the world in some new ways. Albert Einstein once said, "A hundred times a day I remind myself that my inner and outer life depends on the labors of other men, living and dead..."

Second, we will educate our children to look at themselves in the same way, as related to more than just a tiny circle of family and friends. That means we will not be content to train them in school to be technically competent to handle some job. This world is more than nuts and bolts, but for our children to learn that, the education they receive will have to place more emphasis on the liberal arts - language skills, literature, history, music, drama. To teach them only specialized technical competence says to them that the rest is unimportant, that the only thing that matters in life is making a living. That is not true. We do our children a disservice if we allow them to grow up without the kind of broad-based education that will prepare them to genuinely be a part of the world community.

The idea of making a living brings us to a third point: we will start looking at work with new eyes. We will begin to see work more as a vocation than as simply a way to put eggs on the table. Over and over, we hear the complaint that "They just don't make things the way they used to." It is true. And do you know why? It is because looking out for yourself has become more important than looking out for anyone else. People must begin to view their work in terms of the contribution it makes to the common good, not just the contribution it makes to their bank account.

The common good leads us to a fourth point. As a matter of fact, it IS the fourth point. The COMMON good must take precedence over the INDIVIDUAL good. That means we will take a more serious look at how we handle the question of making sure that everyone has what they need to live. Listen to what Habits of the Heart has to say:
Both [the Old and the New] Testaments make it clear that societies sharply divided between rich and poor are not in accord with the will of God. Classic republican theory from Aristotle to the American founders rested on the assumption that free institutions could survive in a society only if there were rough equality of condition, that extremes of wealth and poverty are incompatible with a republic. Jefferson was appalled at the enormous wealth and miserable poverty that he found in France and was [hopeful] about our future as a free people only because we lacked such extremes. Contemporary social science has documented the consequences of poverty and discrimination, so that most educated Americans know that much of what makes our world and our neighborhoods unsafe arises from economic and racial inequality. Certainly most of the people to whom we talked would rather live in a safe, neighborly world instead of the one we have."

Unfortunately, we know we have mixed attitudes about that - we do not like shelling out and shelling out and shelling out for welfare programs. But if the common good is important, we WILL need to do something - money for job training and retraining, money for child care, money for remedial education, money to take care of those who are not physically able to support themselves. We have no choice if the common good is genuinely important. With the poet we will realize,

No man is an island; No man stands alone; Each man’s joy is joy to me; Each man's grief is my own.

Remember what Jesus said? "The last shall be first and the first shall be last."(3) If we are to ever to think in terms of relatedness and to celebrate and give thanks for togetherness, we will stop making our goal in life that of being NUMBER ONE.

It seems an anthropologist, a man whose life work was spent in the study of human social and cultural development, died and came up to the pearly gates. But being the scientist that he was, before accepting St. Peter's invitation to come in, he made a special request - he wanted to go down to Hell to have a look-see. The privilege was granted, and when the ebony doors were opened, he was amazed at what he encountered. Inside he saw a vast banquet table laden with every imaginable good thing to eat and drink, but the people around it all looked like cadavers - emaciated and starving. Their arms were bound in front of them, straight and stiff in splints, with the result that no one could get his hand to his mouth. It was a ghastly and unbearable sight, so the man hurried back to St. Peter ready at last to make his entrance.
In a moment, the pearly gates were opened to him, but the sight that he saw took him by surprise. Once again, he was confronted with a banquet table laden with all manner of good things, and around it once again were people whose arms had been stiffened with splints. But here the people were happy and well-fed. "I don't understand," said the man. "The circumstances seem the same, but there is such a difference."

"It is all really quite simple," said St. Peter, "you don't feed yourSELF with arms like that, but you CAN feed your neighbor. Up here, you see, we have learned to feed each OTHER."

Most of us sit down at tables heavily laden with all manner of good things. And no doubt, before we eat, we will bow our heads to give thanks for the bounty God has provided. We will give thanks for the food. We might even give thanks for clothing and shelter and general well-being. If we’re not too hungry we might even thank God for the families and friends with whom we gather. But God’s people would do well to remember to offer thanks for one thing more - togetherness...not just the togetherness we share with relatives, but the togetherness we share with all humanity, and the togetherness offered to us in Jesus, the one scripture says sticks closer to us than a brother.

When times are hard and life gets us down, we are not alone; we have each other and we have Jesus. When sadness and grief are overwhelming, we are not alone; we have each other and we have Jesus. When the pain is great and almost unbearable, we are not alone; we have each other and we have Jesus. When we are finally beaten so far down that we can hardly remember up, we are not alone; we have each other and Jesus. When we come to the end of our road and life's brief day is done, thank God, we are not alone, we still have each other, and we have Jesus!

How good and pleasant it is when brothers [and sisters]...red, and yellow, black and white - brothers and sisters of every skin and tongue and tribe...brothers and sisters of every age and background...how good and pleasant it is when brothers [and sisters] live together in unity." Thank God, we are not alone.

Amen!