

It is not good to be alone

Every culture has its own characteristic strengths and blind spots. In fact a culture's blind spots often arise from over-relying on its strengths. At least so it is with us. In our culture our greatest strength and our greatest weakness is our emphasis on the individual. It is our greatest strength--we aspire not to merely to live our lives but to make of them a work of art--a creative expression that is uniquely us. And so we are encouraged to become independent: to be self-reliant, self-assertive, self-confident. And we are taught to appreciate the individuality of others, to be tolerant of those who look different than us, or who think differently than we do, who live a different lifestyle than we grew up with. It is our appreciation of individuality that makes our country so richly diverse; that makes us a sign of hope for humanity in a shrinking world.

But as we also know our emphasis on the individual is also our greatest weakness--for we can tend to think that we have achieved our independence independently, all by ourselves, that we raised ourselves up by our own bootstraps. And so that we don't owe anybody anything. That we don't need anybody now--or that we shouldn't.

In this context, today's first reading has an important truth to teach us. It helps to right our balance. "It is not good for the man to be alone." We need love to become an individual. For it is only through the love of others that we can become confident about ourselves as individuals. It is only through their response to us, that we learn that what we have to say matters, that what we do makes any difference. We simply can't become ourselves by ourselves. And it would not be good for us if we could. For we would be missing out on so much--missing out on what makes life worth living in the first place, what makes our successes exhilarating, and our failures bearable--our being able to share them with others..

Today's first reading teaches this truth through a kind of fairy tale. Having created man from the earth, God comes to realize that his work is not yet complete. God comes to see that a man is not enough, that that man needs a companion--someone for the man to share his life with. And so he sets himself back to work. He scoops up some more clay, and wanting to be creative presents the man with a new companion that looks a little different. But the man is still not happy--"That's a cow," he says--"I am not going to share the rest of my life with a cow." So God goes back to work. But the man isn't any happier with God's next effort. "That's a bird," he

says--"how could you expect me to live my whole life with a bird?"

The man is picky. But God keeps at it. He ends up creating all kinds of animals, each one more different than the last but none that satisfies his first creation--none that satisfies the man. Not that the man doesn't find anything good to say about them. He can appreciate something about each of God's creations--the dog for instance, the dog is a great companion for going on long walks, or going out hunting--or the cat, the cat is so soft and cuddly, the cat is great to have curl up beside him in the evening. But no animal God creates is wholly satisfactory to the man. There is no animal that the man is prepared to give his whole life over to.

Until God comes up with a new idea altogether. He puts the man to sleep. And as he sleeps God removes one of his ribs and from this rib He creates something like the man himself. When God presents this latest creation to the man--He finally gets the response he's been seeking. "At last!" the man says, "At last, here's a creature that's bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. Here is someone I can share my life with."

Now some women are not too happy with this story. For some men seem to think that it means that women ought to look up to men as their seniors and their paradigm. But other women read the story differently. They argue that what the story says is that the woman completes creation. Indeed that God could only create woman after a lot of practice--whereas the man, creating him was a snap. Who is to say?

What we can say for sure is that Creation is only complete with both. That *we* are only complete with one another. Over the last dozen years or so that lesson has been re-affirmed by the gay marriage debates. Gays and lesbians too feel the need for a better half. They too find it is not good for them to live by and for themselves alone. And kind of like God in Genesis, the Catholic church has also been finding its way on this issue. Twenty years ago it could still affirm that homosexual love was "objectively disordered" and having a homosexual orientation, let alone the other letters in LGBTQ+, was a tragedy to endure. A few years ago though when Pope Francis was asked about it, he famously replied to a reporter "who am I go judge?" He's the pope that's who! Now Francis is not ready to reverse the dogmatic teaching of the church. Afterall, the church spans a lot of cultures and attitudes on LGBTQ+ range immensely from affirmation to condemnation. But he has put his thumb on the scale on might say, on the side of pastoral practice. In other words, like Adam, he exhorts us to lean into love, to seek one about whom you can say, "this one is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh" in whom you can

recognize your other half.

For in the end, whether formally married or not, none of us can live for ourselves alone. That is the bottom line. Not just that we should not-- but that we cannot. For we owe our very existence to the love of others. So too we owe whatever meaning our existence will have to how we choose to share our life with others, and how others end up sharing their lives with us.

Love is not easy. Love takes practice. Love hurts. For love is a living being. We celebrate its birth. We mourn its passing. But far worse than to have loved badly, is to have tried to live without love at all. The greater sin is not to fail in love, but to cynically give up on love altogether. So again, like God in today's fairy tale we need to keep at it. Whatever our past failures, we must persevere. For even our failures bear life within them. Even our mistakes are good for something--not least what they can teach us about who we are and what we may need to learn.

Even for God, who is love itself, creating love is not a snap.