

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
The Genesis of Our Faith: Sabbath  
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Genesis 2:18-25; Philippians 2:1-11

I can remember the first time I saw a Cirque Du Soleil show. There was a time Cirque Du Soleil was just one traveling troupe that performed in parking lots under big top tents. When they would come into a city nearby my brother would buy us tickets and we would make a grand night of seeing the show. I loved the energy in the parking lot, the way they lit up the tent to make it visible from any angle. The people selling food and colorful brochures and the general joy of the crowd. We all knew we were about to see something amazing.

I can remember my first Cirque Du Soleil show because halfway through the first act as people flipped and flew through the air above me I glanced down at the floor and realized there was a whole different show happening out under the trapeze as well. Other performers were watching from the sidelines. Fully engrossed by the act currently performing as the audience was. They reacted with oohs and aahs like it was their first time seeing the show too. As the show went on I realized they were the following acts about to go on. And the acts that were done then switched spots with them and watched from the sidelines. The acts were switching places and swapping roles of performer and observer.

A year or two later I learned why the performers stayed on the sidelines. One reason was there was literally no backstage in a tent, but they also were there to spot the other performers and keep each other safe. I figured this out because an act slipped, missed a hand hold, and the person balancing at the top of the human tower came tumbling to the ground. Cirque Du Soleil does not use safety ropes, or at least they didn't in the 90s. With grace and ease a couple performers from another act stepped forward from the side of the stage and caught the falling artist in their interlocked arms.

This is the structure God creates in our Genesis passage today. A structure of balance between being the main attraction and being a helping hand. It is the type of community Paul urges the early church to be as well.

Paul reminds the early church their place is to be Alongside one another, counterpart to each other in community. He uses language like being of the same mind but this does not mean agreeing on everything, it means being committed to the wholeness of the community together.

Paul uses Jesus as the ultimate example of how to keep the wholeness of the community as one's focus. Jesus could perform miracles, but he allowed the newly sighted person or the formerly paralyzed to be in the spotlight too. He allowed them to speak their truth as he slowly slipped away to the next town. Jesus could have easily, and with every right, taken the spotlight, but he knew the community would be better if they knew the stories of these other people too. Jesus lifted up humanity as a whole and made spaces for lesser heard voices to have their moment at center stage.

Paul is not creating a new way to be in community based on Jesus' example, he is calling Christian communities back to the created purpose of a diverse humanity. There was a time when humanity was just one being, the Adam of Genesis 1, but then God saw that it was not good for the Adam to be alone, and so the ezer kenegdo was created and a suitable helper was made.

Before I get farther into ezer kenegdo's creation I want to take you through this Genesis passage and touch on a few shortcomings of the English translation.

First: The "Adam" Pastor John pointed out last week is better translated as "humanity." One being created entirely in God's image. In Rabbinic tradition, The Adam contained both male and female characteristics, male and female soul types, and male and female body types. When Jewish readers heard, The Adam at the beginning of Genesis chapter 2 they did not attach a gender, it is all in one.

Then we hear that The Adam is in need of a helper. God says "It is not good for ha'adam (humanity) to be alone. I will make them a helper (an ezer kenegdo)." God and the Adam look for an ezer kenegdo (suitable helper). No animal created to this point fits the bill so God begins creating again. Humanity is put to sleep and their side is separated from themselves.

Here is the second place the translation we have in our pews fails to help us see the depth of what is happening. When we use "rib" it makes it sound like a small little thing was taken and a new person formed. The Hebrew word translated here as rib, in every other part of scripture is translated as side. God does not take a rib, God takes a whole side of humanity. This is an equal slice right down the middle to create two sides of humanity!

The Adam confirms the equalness of this dividing. When he wakes up, he suddenly is aware of his gender being in opposition to the gender of this being in front of him. He suddenly knows who he is because he is in the presence of his opposite. While before he had been the Adam he now declares he is "Ish" - he is man. And this new creature is "ish-shaw" woman. Ish and ish-shaw are now separate but related to one another because they are both originally from the Adam. The man continues to confirm the equal parts by saying not just bone of my bone, not just my rib, but flesh of my flesh. He recognizes their interconnectedness though separated more than they were before, they are still very much a part of one another. There is a strong relationship between them. They know who they are better because they see the opposite.

From what I know about God, I highly doubt we are looking at a creation of two options, just male and female. God just doesn't work in neat lines like that. When God created animals he didn't create a couple of options he created trillions. When God gave humans talents and passions, there aren't two options or even two extremes on the same line, there are billions of combinations and expressions of talent, passion and personality; languages, races, nose shape, and colors. God does not create in simple mode, so I cannot accept that when God separates humanity into two sides that this was the one time in God's existence that God said, "two is enough." God does not change, God loves the complex.

So if we are not looking at a straight line with two extremes, what are we looking at when God pulls these two sides of humanity apart? If you have ever seen that toy that starts as a small sphere, and then you pull apart two sides so that it creates a huge sphere, that is what I think it looked like when God created the diversity of gender. God grabbed the two sides of male and female and unfurled a very complex structure.

Inside this sphere structure are millions of opposing points connected by a line between them. So the inside of the sphere is a complicated web of opposite gender identities. The minute God let go of the sphere it was impossible to tell which two points were male and female to begin with.

You might think, "we know what male is and what female is," but we don't. Not according to God's definitions. We never get that definition in the creation story. We have our social idea of what makes someone male or female, but even within those expectations I think we can all identify something in us that makes us slightly less than perfectly male or female. The reality of the web inside the sphere is we don't know which way is

female and which way is male. We are all a little off of the expected gender norms. I hate snakes and love dresses but I also love football and hate pink, so where does that leave me in the sphere? None of us have any idea, we are all some combination of male and female and neither.

But when the sphere was first created it didn't matter anyway if you knew where you were in relation to the two random points God originally pulled apart. The only thing that really mattered was why God had pulled open humanity like this in the first place -- which was to create ezer kenegdos, suitable helpers -- someone to be a counterpart for another human.

Ezer kenegdo is the third translated bit that needs some unpacking. Ezer kenegdo is used in three contexts in scripture. One is here in Genesis to describe the reason God separates humanity. The second is to describe how God steps in to "help" us, and the third is to describe a military force. When ezer kenegdo is used to describe God, it is as an all powerful defender and champion. When ezer kenegdo is used to describe a military force, it is the company that steps in to save the battle from imminent defeat and whose lended strength wins the day.

Ezer Kenegdo is not a docile servant there to help when needed. This helper is a powerful champion for the cause of another. They show up at the exact right moment to clinch the victory. When God sees that it is not good for humanity to be alone, it is because God sees days ahead where we will need people to fight for us. This is why humanity is separated so that we can be each other's warriors.

Paul is reminding the early church of this created purpose. There are times we need to realize our battle is not the priority, and we humbly come to the aid of another who is struggling. If we are pulling too hard for too long on our end of the line, our counterpart on the other side of the sphere is going to get weak and that side of the perfectly round sphere is going to collapse. If we favor one end of the line over the other, the sphere stretches and warps.

In God's plan we all have our time to be performers, and we all have a time to be observers on the ground ready to step in if disaster strikes. We are entrusted with a performance, an expression of God's image that we show the world through our identity, AND we have a counterpart, an ezer kenegdo, that is also supposed to show their equal but opposite side of God's image.

Life in community is then a balance of taking center stage and sitting on the sidelines. If we take up all the time in the spotlight and never fulfill our role as ezer kenegdo, the sphere warps farther.

We can clearly see how this has happened in our world when we consider gender. The sphere has collapsed on itself and created a binary that God did not intend. As humans we are uncomfortable with complexity. We want to classify and make patterns out of God's complex structures. It is so much easier to see another human and say Male or Female rather than open ourselves up to the reality that it's just not that simple.

What has happened is whole sections of our sphere are going missing because their humanity is denied. Their ezer kenegdo refused to stand up for them. The average life expectancy of a transgender female of color is 35 years. Many of these women are murdered before reaching the age I am now because people do not see them as valid humans and feel threatened by their insistence on existing. But I would argue they are more human than many of us will ever know how to be, because they have traversed the inner web and gone from one side of the sphere to the other. Imagine what wisdom they hold about what it is to be a human. Imagine what they can teach us about occupying our area of the sphere and how to more wholly express the image of God that we hold within us because they have experienced that image from different vantage points.

We have to balance our times to shine with our ezer kenegdo responsibilities. One thing that keeps us from being able to support our counterparts is knowledge about them. But we do have the world's knowledge in our pockets if only we can take a moment away from performing and be the spotter. If you don't know what transgender means, google it. If you see a Pride flag and you don't know what it stands for, google it. If the stonewall, pink triangles, or die-in don't mean anything to you, please spend some time learning. [www.history.com/pride](http://www.history.com/pride) has a great page of articles for Pride month.

We have forgotten to be ezer kenegdo and champion the cause of our counterparts. Our sphere has collapsed, which is terrible for our gender queer siblings, but worst of all it means we are no longer expressing the fullness of God's identity as a community of humanity. We are favoring two parts of a structure that has billions of parts. We have to salvage this sphere and bring wholeness to humanity's expression of God's image or else we may not recognize God when the time comes to meet them.