

Separately Joined

Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’ –Mark 10:9

How to be a part of something, while remaining fully yourself? Asking this question draws attention to one of the biggest paradoxes we face as human beings, within ourselves, as members of our families, as inhabitants of planet earth. Let’s start with the big picture. All of Donald Trump’s comments at the United Nations this past week were about Americans rethinking the above question. How is the United States a part of the greater world order and how is it sovereign, sufficient in itself? Citizens of Armenia asked this question last week on the 26th anniversary of their Independence as a republic; since independence how has Armenia become more fully itself, and how has it remained a small player in the larger play of Russia, Europe and the US? Great Britain, though, is perhaps agonizing over this question the most as it negotiates the details of Brexit. How will Britain be independent, but also remain very much a part of the European family of nations?

You can’t escape the seeming paradox of how to be a part of something and how to remain fully yourself, and it’s not just nations that wrestle with this question, its all of us. All of childhood and especially the teenage years are working out the messy transition of how an adolescent remains part of his family, yet becomes their own person. “Yes, you can die your hair blue and pierce your nose, but no you can’t do soccer on Sunday mornings; that is family time, church family time.” All of married life is working out how to both sacrifice for the team, and at the same time tend to who you are as an individual. Yes husbands you can watch golf for a couple hours every Saturday as you watch the kids. No husbands, you can’t just go off and play golf every Saturday.

This question of how to be a part of something, while remaining fully yourself is not only a global struggle, or a family struggle, it runs so deep as to even be a psychological struggle. We might not be used to thinking of it this way, but there are many “people,” with many voices, who inform our thoughts and decisions. In my mind I have the rule obeying Fr. Hovnan who is obedient but can be judgmental. I also have the rebellious Fr. Hovnan who stands on inner principal but can be willful. I have the ‘animal’ Fr. Hovnan who has sleep, food and emotional needs right now. But I also have the rational Fr. Hovnan who can see what’s best in the long-term, not just right now. If one of these guys, any one, is doing all the talking, then I am in trouble. If one of these guys isn’t doing any talking I am in trouble. To be psychologically healthy, to be whole, all of the different voices within you, even and especially the ‘bad’ ones, must be recognized as individuals, as you, but also as only a part of you, just one voice in a chorus.

The question of how to be a part of something, while remaining fully your self is the most important question put before us in this life, and sadly the question we are most prone to get wrong. From the very beginning, Adam and Eve’s original sin, our original sin is our inability to be fully our self and fully intimate with God and others. It is this, in the end, which is the root cause of every depression, every family division, every war that has darkened the light of this world.

History has shown that we as individuals and a society will never be able to resolve this age old question on our own, but as always our church points us to the only true answer, which is God Himself. It is the Christian understanding of God alone which reveals and resolves the paradox of individual and relationship, in the nature of God’s triune self- a God who is both 3 and 1. God models in His self what it is to be perfectly distinct as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and perfectly self-giving and obedient to each person. Christ models in His self, our church-his body, how we can at once be fully ourselves and fully intimate with others, by confessing the divisions of sin which fuel the world; pride, envy, anger, sloth, covetousness, gluttony, and lust, and abiding in communion with God and each other.

In this life, you can’t avoid the paradox of how to be a part of something, while remaining fully yourself. It is a crack that is baked into creation as we know it. Apparently, there is a gap between us, a hole in our hearts, that forces us to reach out to God and others to bridge that gap, to fill that hole. And so therefore “what God has joined together, let no one separate,” now and always; amen.