

Preaching on Covenant in an Age of Individualism

Gibson Stroupe

Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, Decatur, Georgia

I live in Decatur, Georgia, part of the metropolitan Atlanta area. This whole urban area was energized last fall by the remarkable story of the Atlanta Braves, the baseball team that went from last place to the World Series in one season. Even folks who care nothing for sports were caught up in the fever - "how about those Braves!" Many articles were written about the Braves as metaphor for Atlanta and about the power of a sports winner to unite a diverse city. One nationally known columnist even went so far as to claim that the Braves' victory season had somehow enabled us to overcome the plague of missing and murdered children which had occurred ten years earlier. Rather than a sports team on a roll, the Braves became mythic figures in the consciousness of metropolitan Atlanta. The most telling part of this transformation to mythic status was seen in the victory parade two days after the Braves had lost the World Series. Crowds estimated from 500,000-750,000 people overcame their fears and went to downtown Atlanta to see and to touch the heroes. All systems were overwhelmed - the rapid transit, the police, the parade route itself - because no one had expected such a huge response. The crowds were not rowdy - they simply pushed in to touch the hems of the garments of the heroes.

The elevation to mythic status of the Braves is a sad commentary on us as a people. It is a stunning sign of the deep hunger that people have in this culture for meaning and depth and significance in our lives. Atlanta is not a city that sees itself in decay - it is a city that prides itself on its accomplishments, such as the 1994 Super Bowl and of course the 1996 Olympics. And yet, still we are hungry. Still, we lack a center of being. Still, we are lonely.

I want to suggest that this story of Atlanta and its Braves is a warning sign that the train is running loose on the tracks in our culture. Our hunger for meaning and depth are directly related to the demonic power of individualism in our culture. As many have already stated - Philip Slater in *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, Robert Bellah, et al., in *Habits of the Heart*, and Rollo May in *The Cry for Myth* - individualism is a central part of the North American culture. Although we lift up the family as the basic unit in our society, all of our energy and institutions focus on the individual. The television enables us to find relief from boredom and anxiety not by engaging with other people but by engaging any of the 100 channels available, engaging them by our own individual selves. Automobiles express our preference to be by ourselves - mass transit is a failure in this country because the basic unit is the individual, not the family or the community. Computers enable us to write, read, and work without ever engaging another human being. We may "network" with someone through our computer, but we never have to touch or smell them.

The church offers little resistance or insight in this process. We produce videos for our TV's, buy into sophisticated computer systems, and we design our church growth policies to follow the automobile as it takes our members out of the cities. Is it any wonder that most people leave church behind? Is it any wonder that growing churches are those who have learned how to market themselves in a market oriented to individualism? Is it any wonder that people in this culture flock to celebrities like the Braves in order to seek meaning and answers to the hunger in our hearts? The church has long since followed the drumbeat of individualism, and we are silent in our cultural crisis because we have nothing to say.

We live in a vacuum and in a time of crisis. We have no sense of community, and the weight that we have placed on the individual cannot be borne. God did not design human life to be a bunch of individuals whose paths cross only arbitrarily. Human life is meant to be an interconnected and interdependent enterprise. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu recently put it in a speech in Atlanta, quoting an African proverb: "A person is a person through other persons." We all know this, intuitively if not consciously, and no matter how much we travel, no matter how much TV we watch, no matter how skilled we become on our computers, we are still hungry. We are confused because we have followed all the formulas for the idol of individualism, and yet still we are not saved. It is no wonder that we are a violent and hostile people - we have eaten at the table of idols, and we are not satisfied. We are lonely, hostile, and confused.

In our current state of being, two great dangers present themselves. The first danger is continuing disintegration. Many of us hope that we are nearing the end of the domination of the individual, but that is likely to be wishful thinking. The danger here is that the few strands of community that we have left may continue to deteriorate. The economy will continue to demand that all adults work outside the home, leaving the children to fend for themselves in day-care centers. The automobile will continue its dominance, if only because it helps us to escape from one another, and even as its usage continues to destroy our atmosphere. The computer will become even more dominant, perhaps even surpassing the television and the automobile as the supreme graven images of the individual. These trends will combine with the growing dissatisfaction with the last force of community in our culture - government - to make a truly horrific picture: unrelated atoms (Adam's?) each going our own ways, feeling hostile over the demands and need for community, feeling lost and looking for answers.

As grim as this first danger sounds, it is not as grim or as likely to occur as the second danger. This second danger is an outgrowth of the first danger. It is the development of superficial or "cheap" community, the kind seen in an adoration of the Atlanta Braves. In an era when real community is strong, the infatuation with the Braves is harmless. In our era of the individual when there is no real community, it is the firebell in the night. I believe that we have reached the saturation point of the worship of the individual. Whereas that may seem to be good news, it is also a time of great danger. Our hunger for meaning and community is deep and full of longing, and there is plenty of junk food that seeks to bring us a feeling of being filled. The danger is that in our desire to find connections with one another, we will choose "cheap" community, the quick fix. For example, the Republican party knows this longing and is brilliant at exploiting it. From the image of Willie Horton, who united whites in fear, to Clarence Thomas, who helped whites to justify our fears (why aren't all African Americans like him, anyway?), the national strategists of the Republican party are perhaps among the few who understand the depth of this longing. From their point of view, the spawning of David Duke is a pleasant by-product: we can disavow him in public, but we know where the folks he stimulates will place their votes in the long run.

This second danger brings "cheap" community, or tribalism, in which lonely and hungry individuals engage only their own kind, and as cheaply and as superficially as possible. The danger is that the sense of community for all of us lonely people will be bought at the cost of denying the humanity of those outside the camp. It is an old, old story in human history: the use of outcasts to obtain a sense of belonging. From

lepers to infidels to savages to the poor to AIDS, it is the cheapest and most destructive path as we seek to answer our loneliness and hunger.

The church must respond to this calling and to these dangers. Our people, reduced to “individualism as god,” are crying out to love and to be loved, are crying out to belong and to count, are crying out for meaning. The church has been given the answer, the authentic answer: God has made a covenant with us in Jesus Christ. It is a commitment to humanity that lasts forever.

The church must seek to recover the concept of covenant as a response to the destructive and rampant individualism of our age. The idea of covenant is prominent in the Old Testament - God makes a covenant with Abraham and Sarah, with Noah and his family, with the people freed from slavery in Egypt. The concept is less prevalent in the New Testament, but its emphasis is central to the Lord's Supper and to the Cross. “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” Indeed, the church has divided the Bible itself into the old covenant and the new covenant.

Reformed theology lifts up “covenant” as one of our essential terms. A covenant is a binding agreement between two people or two parties, each agreeing through vows to complete certain actions. God promises to love and sustain us - we promise to love, worship, and serve God. The old covenant depended on our ability to fulfill vows to God - the new covenant in Jesus Christ acknowledges and emphasizes our failure to do this. The good news is that in spite of our failure, God continues to fulfill the covenant and to give us salvation and love. God has elected us to be a part of the covenant - that is the good news for us.

It is the unconditional nature of this covenant that offers us hope in our age of despair. God is aware of our failures and our messes, but God remains committed to us in Jesus Christ. God stays with us; God will not desert us. That is the nature of the power of covenant theology. Jeremiah's image of the potter is helpful here. The potter seeks to shape the clay - if it does not work, the potter may break the pot and start again, but the potter will not give up on the process. It is that determined commitment on the part of God that is at the heart of “covenant.”

The idea of the covenant recognizes the importance of the individual. Each of us can claim the promises lifted up by Paul in Romans 8:31-39. The bedrock of God's commitment is fundamental to each of us, and it is this commitment, and this commitment alone, that gives us dignity and hope. Dignity because God has claimed us as a daughter or son, no matter what the world tells us, no matter how badly we fail to live up to the covenant. Hope because we can count on God's continuing to work in our midst, whether the economy is collapsing, whether we are being oppressed, whether we are lost in a maelstrom of idolatry. The concept of covenant does not deny the importance of the individual. On the contrary, it is the only real source of dignity and hope for the individual. Jobs may come and go; racism ebbs and flows; the world lapses into chaos, but we can count on God's love that is seen in the covenant of Jesus Christ.

Even as the idea of covenant lifts up the importance of the individual, however, it also calls individuals out of ourselves into relationships with others, into community. Indeed, God does not make covenants with individuals. *Please note:* God does not make covenants with individuals. In our Reformed emphasis on the importance of the individual, we have forgotten this fundamental truth. God does not make billions of covenants with individuals. God has made a covenant with God's people: the community of faith in Jesus Christ which God has called out of the world.

This concept of God's covenant with community of faith is rooted in both the Old

and the New Covenants. Abraham and Sarah are called by God to be the forebears of a people, a community. Noah and his family are called to be the forebears of a new, redeemed people. Moses is called to lead a people out of bondage in Egypt, and he receives the laws of the covenant on their behalf. When Jesus speaks of the new covenant in his blood, he is speaking to the community of the disciples, the roots of the church. The Biblical witness emphasizes this point again and again: God's covenant is not with individuals but with a community.

Reformed polity recognizes this also. We don't preach to one person or to one family at a time. We preach in the context of community. We do not celebrate the sacraments with one person or one family except in extraordinary circumstances, and even then the community must be represented by an elder. We can each have private time with God, but authentic worship requires that we be in community with others. These are not controversial parts of the Reformed tradition. They are fundamental to our tradition but are often lost in the crush of individualism in our culture.

This Reformed emphasis on God's covenant with the community of faith called the church offers us hope in this age of disintegration. This emphasis means that we cannot worship God by ourselves. It means that we cannot serve God by ourselves. It means that we cannot know God by ourselves. To our culture of individualism, this sounds like bad news. Yet to those of us longing for meaning, it is good news. It gives us strength to risk reaching out to others. It gives us courage to make demands upon one another. It challenges us to hear that God does not intend for us to fall into tribalism.

Our preaching in this age, then, must emphasize the authentic call that we as individuals have in the God movement. It is a call to hear that God loves us. It is a call to hear that God seeks to bring us into community with others. Our people long to hear the good news of the gospel, and those of us who are preachers are asked by God to share that good news: we are given dignity as individuals by God's grace, and we experience that dignity only as we relate to others in the covenant community.

How can we preach this when the culture is so resistant? Perhaps we can offer some simple but radical exercises to help ourselves to begin to live and to experience the covenant with God. First, let us turn off our televisions for awhile. Let us listen to God's voice, rather than that of a technology designed to sell products to individuals. Let us turn off the computer for awhile. Its main purpose is to extend the power of the individual so that we do not need contact with others. If we turn off these machines for a bit, we will be forced to admit that we need contact with others. We might even force ourselves to have a conversation with another person. And that, indeed, is the most radical act of all in this age. To know and to be known. To hear someone's story, to risk sharing our story. If we feel uneasy about these ventures, let us take heart because we have the promise of the covenant community - God has given us dignity and has claimed us in Jesus Christ. We experience that dignity only in relationship to others - that is the central theme of covenant theology.

If we can begin to preach and to live in these ways, if we can begin to help our people hear the good news in light of the covenant with God, we will know the unifying power of Pentecost: the Holy Spirit lifting up the diversity of many kinds of people; the Holy Spirit transcending the barriers of the world to mold a community of faith. The result will be kin to a tapestry, a tapestry of God's people that tells the story of salvation history. In this tapestry, the individual threads will not be lost. Instead, they will be woven by the power of the Holy Spirit into a larger picture to God's glory. It is the tapestry of the covenant people: given dignity as individuals, finding that dignity in community.