

It's Complicated: Community  
Rev. Jamie Butcher

Esther Perel is a Belgian-American psychotherapist known for her work in human relationships. Brene Brown is an American professor, social worker, podcaster and author. They are powerhouse thinkers and thought leaders in our modern-day understanding of relationships. And I think they would both agree with our title on this topic for the sermon series: It's Complicated.

So far, we've looked at friendships – how important they are to us and how often the Bible lifts up friendships as meaningful. Last week we looked at ancestors. The Bible is chockfull of relationships with the people and promises of our past while encouraging us to not stay stuck at the graves and move forward with hope. Next week is partnerships or romantic relationships. And today we'll look at the complications of community.

Even though we know, the Bible isn't an answer book, I pray we have found scripture to be deeply influential in how we live our lives and respond to the world around us. I pray we have found these holy words to be authoritative as we move our ways through complicated relationships in our day to day world. But now, back to Brene Brown and Esther Perel .

In a recent podcast with on **Unlocking Us**, the two chatted about challenges for today's humans. Esther talked about real AI threat. No, not artificial intelligence, but artificial intimacy. She talks about the widespread longing and yearning for connection and community to transcend the burdens of the self. She posits that the burdens of the self have never been heavier than they are today.

We are a people who have and who enjoy unprecedented freedom – freedom to do and think and act in unique and individual ways. But, Perel says this freedom of the individual leads to a tyranny of doubt and uncertainty that is unprecedented. Certainly, we have all heard of or experienced in some ways the epidemic of loneliness, anxiety and despair that is characteristic of our modern western world. Particularly after COVID, we began to hear more and more about the stress on individuals and the missed connections in community spaces that no longer give us what we need.

Brene Brown and Esther Perel go on to list examples of *artificial intimacy*. You are probably already anticipating some of them. Of course, social media, “I can have 1000 friends but no one to feed by cat.” Esther says. Brene tells the story about dining with her daughter who brings out her cell phone to snap a photo of the dish before they can eat. Is it real, does it exist, if we don't broadcast it to the world? She asks.

And while phones are a huge part of the separating dynamic – a vulnerability shield, the call them – we don't need to restrict our focus to social media users. Artificial intimacy is other things too.

My favorite example is from Perel riding the subway in New York. No one looks at anyone else in the eyes anymore. She has this lovely, lilting accent and she says, “The commute is very

boring now. Where is creativity and spontaneity? Where is small talk that actually allows us to develop social skills. Where has all the flirting gone!”

Someone recently told me a story that illustrates this point. She has a gratitude journal where she records her highs and lows for each day. She shared that so many times her gratitude made its way to the pages from surprising and spontaneous interactions with strangers. The lady on the elevator who wouldn't let her leave until she performed a piece of the song to which she had been humming to. Applauding her as she exited out of the sliding doors. Or the man behind the desk who mimicked the sound of her heels on the floor with a twinkle in his eyes as she click-clack by. The dodging and weaving with the person at Home Goods, (Those aisles are so packed, we all know), that they went back and forth so many times, the stranger said, “Well, we might as well start dancing” and they giggled their way to the checkout counter.

Perel says we live in a contactless world where there is very little friction and this creates a particular kind of loneliness. If everything is supposed to be polished and glossed, then you don't get to experience experimentation, doubt, friction, conflict that are part of **fierce intimacy**. Which we need. Which we want but we no longer have. Our community connections have changed.

The passage from Hebrews today describes communities of fierce intimacies. The author is writing to a second generation of the church, most likely a Greek speaking community in Rome that includes people of Jewish background. By the time the homily arrives to them, they had been through a lot – suffering, public abuse and persecution.

And there are hints in the text, that some of them have given up and begun to abandon the community. The connections are not worth the struggle. The benefits do not outweigh the pain. But the letter encourages them to weigh things on a different scale. Persevere, the preacher says, “Gain confidence of Christ, confess your faith, and get real. The line is that they are to “provoke each other” to love and good deeds. Yes, the Greek word for provoke means what you think it means. Create friction! Esther Perel would approve. Sharpen the mind or temper, excite, impel, spur on – fight for what is worth fighting for. Don't give up and float away.

It's good advice because artificial intimacy is creeping in congregations too. Take this simple example. Fewer and fewer people attend church every Sunday. That means there's less engagement with church folk who you see in the pews. Even if the intention is there, you don't necessarily time your attendance to match up with your friends & you miss your church people.

I didn't know this was going to be a sermon about attendance, but that contact matters. At a previous church a pew group – that was their primary connection – ZOOMed every week during COVID to check in! And someone I spoke to recently, talked about the warmth she felt here related to this idea. She had been to other congregations – larger ones – and never saw the same people twice. But she saw them same people Sunday after Sunday here. And she felt that connection.

In the podcast, Perel doesn't give the church as an example of a community of fierce intimacy. She doesn't see worshipping communities as a salve for modern loneliness. But she does see the loss of religion and places of connection as the root of the current crisis.

In western world we no longer live in traditional tribes and communities with clear authority from religion and social hierarchy. When we moved in the world in those ways, we claimed a confidence from stories were clear and answers that were certain to big life questions about suffering, evil and mystery. This approach provided a ton of certainty, but not much freedom or personal expression.

But today we no longer live in these types of communities. And the individual is now the central unit of concern. And we have the freedom to find the answers within ourselves. There is beautiful permission here to generate multiple stories and celebrate unique identity. And yet, Perel says, this places a burden on the self that creates pressure she talks about on the individual self. This is where we see more loneliness and despair and anxiety.

And so people look for answers – because the questions still loom. And now we look in what is a busy free market of stories. But now the stories are told she says, not by tribal leaders and religious authorities, but by people who have good marketing and branding. And don't have the experience to tell such foundational stories.

Whatever else you might say for the church, we can all agree that the marketing and branding is terrible. But, we can also say, that every Sunday we recite ancient words for generational confessions. We recite creeds and read texts that have been passed down from the ages. We sing hymns from centuries ago. We use liturgical language is steeped in tradition. And this provides Perel would say there is relief from the pressure on the individual to recite words that do not change.

The writer of Hebrews would say hold fast to the confession of faith. “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering.” Their confession is of faith in Christ and Christ's faithfulness in which we find relief, confidence, assurance, hope. The same promise that has formed communities and supported legions of people across the globe down through the ages.

Last week at Session, it was a gift to hear statements of faith. Paragraphs written about church, God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Our incoming elders told unique stories of their spiritual autobiography. The ways family and faith had shaped them. They wrote these statements in their own words. But each of them was rooted in our ancient language, anchors from Confessions and scripture throughout their work.

It was incredibly meaningful, deep listening was offered, tears were shed, special dresses were worn for the occasion. Maybe loneliness and worry were held at bay as we rooted in a contact-full community with an ancient belief system.

And it led me to think what if the church, this church, Covenant has something the world really needs. What if we are a provisional representation of what God intends for all humanity, like the

Book of Order says, because of our fierce intimacy and our dogged contact with confessions of faith.

We have the potential to be a community of real intimacy, provoking, sharpening, each other toward love and good works. We have the potential to be a community of real confidence, NOT the individualized elevation of our own opinions or flashy things. But as a community of confidence that comes from our conviction that in life and in death we belong to the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia. Amen.