

INTO THE FRAY: THREATS AND HOW WE FACE THEM

The Anti-Social Century

Romans 12:1-2, 9-12

October 19, 2025

A neighborhood restaurant on a summer evening. A family walks in expecting the usual chaos—laughter, clinking glasses, the hum of conversation. Instead: silence. The dining area is empty. Here's the paradox: business is booming. The bar is covered with large brown bags, each numbered and waiting. Customers walk in. Dashers dash in. They grab a bag. They leave. No eye contact. No words. No laughter. No lingering. The space once filled with familiar faces and casual encounters is now a silent exchange for meals that will be eaten alone. The empty bar is a parable for our time. It's happening everywhere.

Researcher Derek Thompson calls it the "anti-social century." We are engineering entire lives around avoiding any human contact. Work from home. Shop from home. Worship from home. Dine at home. Date from home. We don't look at each other in the eyes, and the loss is profound because the anti-social century isn't only making us lonely—it is eroding our capacity to live with difference. When we stop sharing common spaces, something in us atrophies. Disconnection drives us toward extremes.

This is not just a cultural shift. This is a spiritual crisis.

We seem to have forgotten: You cannot be faithful all by yourself. In fact, it's a theological impossibility. God's nature is relational—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, an eternal communion of love. In Christ, we profess that God took on human flesh and lived among us. Together, we are his body.

Paul is writing to the Christians living in Rome. These are Jews and Gentiles who are beginning to struggle to bridge the divides between them, beginning to find ways to be the Church together in a daunting place and time. And to the Romans, Paul describes community as the very shape of Christian existence. Not one practice among many, but the nature God has given us. He urges an embodied faith.

I appeal to you. I urge you. I beg you. Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.

Your bodies? Not your thoughts. Not your beliefs. Your bodies.

Why bodies? Thoughts can be private. Beliefs have the air of abstraction. But bodies require something the anti-social century is aiming to eliminate: Friction. Presence. Vulnerability. Bodies make our interdependence undeniable.

Paul says: present your bodies. The work of the Spirit requires your flesh and blood.

He continues. *Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world.*

What is the pattern of this world? In the anti-social century, is it not isolation sold as independence? Is it not self-sufficiency marketed as success? Is it not the belief that the good life means you need nobody? Paul pleads with the church: Do not conform to that.

And then he gives us the grammar of Christian life: *Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Live in harmony with one another.*

Do you hear it? One another. One another. One another. The Christian's life is relational by design—we belong to each other.

Over in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul makes it even more explicit. He says the church is a body. Not metaphorically. An actual body. The body of Christ. Then in one of my favorite verses in all of scripture, Paul says there is one sentence that no believer is ever permitted to say to another believer: *I have no need of you.*

Think about that. The one sentence forbidden to us. *I don't need you.*

The anti-social century insists success means standing alone. Paul insists that posture is impossible for Christians. It warps our capacity for compassion. It turns difference into threat, making us more entrenched in our ideology, more brittle in our relationships, more anxious in our souls. The answer to this fracturing isn't political contempt. The answer is presence. The answer is showing up.

Sociologist Marc Dunkelman has a term for what we're losing. He calls it "the middle ring." What you're going to need to do is picture three concentric circles. The inner ring—that's your closest friends and your family. The outer ring are those acquaintances you barely know, hardly interact with. But the middle ring—that's where we used to live our lives. That's the neighbors you'd wave to on the way in and out of the house. The parents next to you in the pickup line. Church members who knew your name. The barista who remembers your order.

When the middle ring collapses, those people disappear from our lives. And without everyday encounters with people who aren't exactly like us, they become abstractions. And abstractions can be twisted into threats.

So we retreat. Online, mostly, where mysterious algorithms sharpen nebulous fears into named enemies, where we spend hours scrolling content specifically calibrated to drive us apart. This can have tragic implications. The common thread among those who commit acts of mass violence is not a single ideology. It's the corrosive effect of isolation. People physically alone, who are marinating in grievance and rage on message boards, disconnected from the humanizing friction of shared physical space.

This is how a society fractures. But the Church knows another way.

Author Jonathan Rauch has been studying this crisis, and here's his conclusion. Healthy religious institutions aren't just nice to have—they are load-bearing walls for democracy. When churches collapse into fear-driven tribalism or apathetic irrelevance, democracy itself is at risk of collapse.

But when churches practice what Rauch calls "Thick Christianity"—that is, embodied community that forms our

character, that cultivates our forbearance, that teaches us to live with people we have disagreements with—we become the antidote to extremism. A hedge, a wall, against the coming collapse. We do this not through developing better arguments or achieving cultural dominance, but through the costly work of showing up.

Breaking bread together makes abstraction impossible. We find ourselves bound to people we didn't choose, held together by God's grace. That doesn't mean we ignore harm or avoid hard conversations. It means we commit to the work of love. That we do what no other institution is designed or capable of doing.

Can I be frank? If everyone here agrees with you about everything, we're probably not building a church—we're building a bunker. I had lunch this week with a leader in our city. He mentioned that he knows two members of Second Church whose perspectives are (how do I say it?) widely divergent. He said, "I couldn't believe those two went to the same church." I grinned. "Welcome to Second, my friend. I never get bored." Look, I know there are voices out there right now urging lockstep uniformity or insisting that faithful people must all think alike. Do not listen to them. *We need each other.* I see it here.

Two Sundays ago, a worshiper met me at the door. She had tears streaming down her face. She said, "It's been a (forgive me, pastor) hellacious week." Health struggles. Work grinding her down. Family worries keeping her up at night. Another week filled with brutal headlines of a world coming apart. She'd barely slept that night, and she was exhausted.

She confessed, "I almost didn't come. But then," she continued, "when I sat in the pew, when people began to arrive, when the prelude started, I felt like I could breathe again."

She showed up. And something shifted. *We need each other.*

One Thursday night each month, in this building, young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities gather for a new ministry. We call it The Belonging. Participants share a meal, play games, build friendships.

In time, they are creating the kind of community we all long to experience—where there is laughter without pretense, where there is presence more important than performance and belonging with no condition.

Time and again, this is what I hear. I hear stories of people who hold church hurt, who have been told they were not welcome, who have been shamed for asking hard questions, who have been excluded for being exactly who they are—by the very communities called to welcome them. They've carried it for years. Some have carried it for decades. Then, with a courage I find frankly miraculous, they walk through our doors. They sit in these pews. They wait to see what will happen. And I pray they find a home here. I pray we honor the gift they bring, the gift they are. *We need each other.*

In this moment, when isolation breeds extremism, when disconnection fuels disgust, when loneliness literally takes lives, can the church be the answer? Can we show a better way to live?

Look around. In these pews, you will find parents who have rearranged their entire weekend around being here—families who tell the soccer league, the travel team, the culture of endless activity: this matters more. Here you will find young adults who are choosing to build community in person rather than curating it online. Up there you'll find choir members who give up every Thursday night to create beauty together in this space. In our pews you will find adults who show up as they have for decade after decade because they know this body needs their presence. You'll find people who offer rides. You'll find those who deliver flowers, who send notes. People who text: "I didn't see you on Sunday. Is everything okay?" *We need each other.*

In a culture engineering our isolation, these are not accidents. They are practices of quiet resistance in the anti-social century. They are shaping us, slowly, gradually, over time. They are shaping us into a peculiar people, a body gathered not by our preference but by God's grace.

Kurt Vonnegut—famously skeptical of religious institutions—in 1965 was asked to give an address to young people, and here's what he said. "The most daring thing you can do is to

create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured."

That's a mission statement. Our work. But I do want to be clear: it will cost something. Yes, your Sunday mornings if you'd rather sleep in. Your carefully curated community. The comfort of distance. The luxury of needing no one. But listen. The church does not exist to make your life easier. The church exists to make you different. And it matters.

When you show up week after week—when you link your life to people you didn't choose, when you stay through disagreement and disappointment, when you practice forgiveness not just profess it—you are being formed into something this world cannot produce, cannot manipulate, cannot market or commodify.

So, friends, when you walk out those doors today, you have a choice. You can return to the life the anti-social century is selling you. It is sorted, solitary, and self-absorbed. Or you can stay here. Stay with us. Stay connected. You can let this community challenge you. You can let this community disappoint you. Need you. Shape you. Break your heart. And, by God's grace, set you free.

Isolation is not freedom. Independence is not strength. You cannot be faithful alone.

I don't need you—we cannot say it. God forbid we come to believe it. In this disintegrating world, the disease of loneliness is spreading. But there is another way to live. Together. For God's sake, let's choose it.

Pray with me: Holy One, knit us together and shape us in your love. Amen.