

Sermon, September 5, 2021
Isaiah 57:14-21 & Romans 12:1-2
“Shaped by Community: Stronger Together”
Rev. Dr. Brian Jones, Senior Pastor



This is Father Damien. In the mid to late 1800's when father Damien was ordained, he was sent to serve several parishes in the then colony of Hawaii. Of course, as fantastic as that sounds, and I'm sure in many ways was, it was also very difficult. At the time, Hawaii was struggling economically. And while those who owned business, plantations etc. did well, most of the Hawaiian's suffered, and those were the people Damien ministered to.

There was also another problem. Many of the islands of Hawaii were in a health crises. Infectious diseases ran rampant. As Hawaii became colonized and more people from other countries settled in, they brought disease with them, disease for which the Hawaiians had little immunity because they had not encountered them before. Small pox was just one of the things they had to deal with.

But another was leprosy. Leprosy was also on the rise, so much so that the government began a leprosy settlement on the island of Molokai where they shipped anyone who had contracted leprosy.

Regardless, it was a desolate place with little hope, full of people who had a disease, who were shunned by the rest of the world, a world that was often afraid of them. A world that took away their humanity. People stopped seeing the person and only saw the disease.

But into this world came Father Damien, who, when he heard that the arch bishop was looking for someone to go and serve the people on Molokai, volunteered. He went to Molokai and began a mission amongst those in the leper colony. And that's where he spent the rest of his life in ministry to those diseased, to those that were hopeless and helpless. Constantly letting them know Jesus loved them and truly embracing what it means to be the hands and feet of Christ. Several years ago, Damien was made a Saint in the catholic church.

But while I hope his story inspires you, I also want to share it with you for another reason. Can anyone guess what Father Damien died from? Yes. He contracted leprosy. That might be the most unsurprising ending one could imagine. Father Damien spent all of his adult life, the last 16 years of his life amongst people who had leprosy and eventually got it.

There is no surprise there. If someone spends all their time around an illness and they are not protected from it, they stand a good chance of getting it. And that's not news to us in the world we live in today. I won't ask for a show of hands, but I wonder how many of us have washed our hands more in the past 18 months than the rest of our lives combined? Anyone remember when your hands didn't smell like hand sanitizer? Remember a couple of years ago if you saw someone wearing a mask, you wondered what illness they were battling. Today, it probably doesn't even register.

Why? Because we understand that if you are around an illness, if it surrounds you, you stand a good chance of perhaps getting that illness. If you are around illness and disease all day, you stand a chance of being at risk. If you are around healthy people all day, the risk is different. In other words, just like Father Damien, no matter how good our intentions may be, no one is immune to their environment. Your environment matters. We are affected and formed by our environment. And we understand that physically, of course, that's why people take precautions. If I visit someone in the hospital, sometimes there are signs that say stop before you enter this room, put on a gown and gloves. And I do it, why? Because I know I could be affected by the environment, by the person, and I could take that and infect someone else.

Well, this is also true for us spiritually, mentally, and emotionally, as well. We are affected by the environment in which we are surrounded. If we are constantly surrounded by a toxic environment, we can become spiritually, emotionally, mentally toxic. If we live in a healthy environment, we need to be much healthier. But we seldom think about this. We are, in our culture, such individuals that we assume our spiritual health is all about us. Or our mental and emotional health, as well. It's about us and what we do.

But the truth is, we have been created to function in community. And we are affected by the community, for the environment in which we surround ourselves. Ever get up in a good mood, go to work, be surrounded by a bunch of unhappy, grumbling people? What happens to your good mood? It goes away. Ever get up in a bad mood, the weight of the world on your shoulders, and your kids or grandkids get up and jump up on your lap, giggling and happy? What happens to your sour mood? We are formed by the environment in which we put ourselves.

For that reason, we are starting a new series this morning called “Shaped by Our Community”, and over the next few weeks, we are going to talk about the specific people you need in your environment in order to be healthy and grow spiritually. And no one is exempt. We all need these.

But this morning, I want to share with you some basic principles of how to surround yourself with a spiritually healthy, emotionally and mentally stable environment. Our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah gives us three principles we will see in each one of the different people we need in our lives. These are the common threads.

You cannot live well and be healthy in a toxic environment. So what does a healthy environment look like? Let's go back to our passage from Isaiah. God speaks through Isaiah and says Build up. In fact, He says it twice. By the way, this is a literary device in Ancient Hebrew to denote something is important. It's repeated. Build up. We all need people around us who will build us up. If you don't have people around you that build you up, you will find yourself in a toxic environment. So who is it that builds you up? Who are the people in your life that you know will encourage you, pray for you, stand by you? Do you have people around you that build you up? You need them.

This is so important that I will go so far as to say if you have relationships and people around you that don't build you up, you need to change the relationship with that person. If you have friends that constantly wear you down, don't be around them very much. Look at your social media. Does that social media, whatever it is, build you up or does it tear you down? Is it helpful or toxic? Do you feel better or worse after you have been engaged? If it's not building you up, leave it. It's toxic. If you find yourself getting mad, angry, walk away, don't comment, turn it off. No one is immune to toxicity. It's OK for you to change the dynamics of your relationships if they are not building you up. Now hear this, I am not saying leave the relationship. I am saying take steps to make it nontoxic and healthy. Build each other up.

God says prepare the way. Do you have people in your life who are preparing the way for you? Do you have people in your life who make your spiritual life easier? Who prays with you? Who talks with you about the deep spiritual things in life? Who is such a balm to your soul that just being with them makes it easier for you to experience God's love and grace?

Finally, find someone who removes the obstructions. Who is it in your life that, while building you up and making it easier for you to experience Jesus, also holds you accountable? Calls your sin what it is? Works with you to remove it from your life? Who calls you to accountability?

Who comes to mind that builds you up? That preps the way? That removes the obstructions? How healthy is your environment. And I wonder when others look for someone in their life who builds them up, who is such a loving person that, just by being around them, makes it easier to experience Jesus grace, who loves them enough to hold them accountable, do they think of you? Do you make other's environment healthy or toxic? What will you do? Amen.