

## **The World is Not Enough Part VI: Mavericks, Silos, and the Kingdom of God**

I observed yet another example of something meaningless under the sun. This is the case of a man who is alone, without a child or a brother, yet who works hard to gain as much wealth as he can. But then he asks himself, 'Who am I working for?' Why am I giving up so much pleasure now?' It is all so meaningless and depressing. Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out to help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone? A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back to back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple braided cord is not easily broken (Ecclesiastes 4:7-12 New Living Translation).

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The myth of the rugged individualist runs deep in our culture. We see it in many of our celluloid heroes, like Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry, the Man with No Name, any number of John Wayne's characters, or even the renegade good guy gunslinger of the Star Wars universe, the aptly named Han *Solo*. And speaking of apt names, let's not forget Maverick from Top Gun, or for those of a certain vintage, James' Garner's Maverick. Yes, our culture loves its Mavericks, lone wolf heroes who live life on their terms, desperadoes who embody the very essence of freedom. Of course, it's a croc. The freedom they embody, well, as the Eagles sang, 'freedom, well, that's just some people talkin'. [Their] prison is walkin' through this world all alone.' In most cases, the Mavericks find this out, or, if not, they ride off into the sunset of a sad existence. And in many cases, even when they were living their best maverick life, they weren't foolish enough to try to live entirely on their own. Even Han Solo had Chewbacca.

In our passage today, the Teacher addresses this ridiculous allure of the maverick, shredding it with a variety of powerful metaphors. He does so because being a maverick is one of the ways people try to find meaning in life apart from God; the classic, 'I'll live life on my own terms!' He begins with the pathetic image of a man working on great things for the sake of no one but himself, painting the wisps of

smoke that slip through the fingers of those who seek to find meaning in such a life. We might here think of *Ebenezer Scrooge* in his counting house, sealed up and 'solitary as an oyster,' having rejected all human companionship in the pursuit of personal gain. Or maybe Mr. Potter from *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey's antithesis, 'a warped frustrated old man' with no one to love, no one to love him, and no one with whom to share his inordinate wealth. People may content themselves for a time with such pursuits, but in the end they reach the place identified by the Teacher, where they ask 'what's it all for?' The point is simple: the solitary life is quite unsatisfactory. True, we all have different personalities, and some prefer more company than others, but to live solely for oneself, without any connection to other human beings or intercourse with a broader community, is a sad way to live. We were meant to live for more than this.

And so, the Teacher speaks to the *power of partnership*. 'Two are better than one,' he tells us. This section of Ecclesiastes, often read at weddings, leads many to think it's all about marriage. But while a good marriage is an excellent illustration of the principle, the Teacher is addressing relationships in every part of life. We're just generally better off walking through life with others. There's a reason why Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs, why Paul had a ministry team, why Moses appointed elders to help him solve the disputes of the Israelites, why David had Jonathon, or Jeremiah, Baruch, or Mary, Martha. Things work better when we do life in partnership with others. The Teacher offers us several reasons why, beginning with *productivity*. Building off his metaphor of the lone businessman or woman, he notes that two people working together 'get a better reward for their toil.' That just makes sense. From there, he points out that two are also better than one in *the event of trouble*. If one person falls, the other can help them up, but if you fall alone, you may be down for good. Just imagine if Frodo had taken the ring to Mordor by himself (you had to see that coming). He'd have died where he fell on the slopes of Mount Doom, if not sooner. But as it was, he had Sam to help him along the way, to pick him up when he fell (I may not be able to carry the ring; but

I can carry you!). Life is hard, and sooner or later we all find ourselves in the position of needing someone to help us carry on.

Two are also better than one, the Teacher says, because they can keep each other *warm*. ‘Two people lying close together can keep each other warm, but how can one keep warm alone?’ Here, we may well think of married couples, and surely we can. In his commentary, Philip Graham Ryken quotes Dean Martin: ‘the snow is snowing, the wind is blowing. But I can weather the storm. What do I care how much it may storm? I’ve got my love to keep me warm.’ Nice. But even he notes that, again, this isn’t really an image of marriage; it’s actually an image of travelers in the wilderness. The desert gets cold at night, and a pilgrim walking alone will freeze. But if he or she has a companion, they can sleep back to back (more on that in a moment) and warm one another with their body heat. Which leads to his final metaphor to illustrate his contention that two are better than one: the metaphor of *protection*. ‘A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back to back and conquer.’ Again, the image is of travelers in the wilderness suddenly put upon by marauders or wild animals. Many predators, whether wolves, marauding outlaws, or velociraptors, will come at a lone traveler from multiple directions to maximize their chances of victory over prey. A lone traveler can only see in one direction, with a maximum view of 180 degrees. But back to back, two people can see 360 degrees and thus more successfully fend off an attack.

Such are the Teacher’s illustrations to prove it is better to live in partnership with others than to live the life of a maverick. Simple lesson, really. But now I have the task of trying to tie this into our lives in some way. I could, of course, talk about how this applies to our individual lives but you probably get that already. I mean, you’re in church, and one of the reasons you go to church is that you don’t want to face life on your own; you understand the need for community. So, what strikes me is today is the application of the Teacher’s teaching, not so much to maverick individuals but to *maverick churches*. When I was a kid, one of the things I loved about my church was that we often did things with other churches. We had picnics,

concerts, special worship events and discussions. Churches did that sort of thing in those days (anyone?). They got together, understanding the need for connection in the broader BOC. Such times stand among my fondest memories of church. They helped me understand there was more to the Kingdom than my little corner of it.

I don't often see that kind of partnership these days. I'm sure it exists somewhere, but I don't see it much. Instead, when I look at the church landscape, I see a lot of silos standing within sight of each other with little to no interaction, let alone cooperation. I suppose there are many reasons why. Sometimes, it's because of toxic church leaders intent on building their own empires; they couldn't care less about connecting with other churches. Sometimes there are serious differences in theology (most are minor, but some are serious; there are some theologies that are toxic). But most of the time, I suspect the problem is that we're so busy trying to keep things running in our own silos, trying to survive and thrive, that we don't feel we have time for each other. So, we focus on ourselves, building our own churches, fixing up our own buildings, propping up our own ministries (as if they were 'our own') to the neglect of one another. And all the while, we watch as the silos fall. As one by one, churches close their doors like so many video stores in the late 90s.

I can't help but wonder how that might change if churches would simply heed the Teacher's words. If we would realize that two, or more, are better than one. That we could be more productive working together than working alone. That we could help one another in times of trouble. That we could share our resources. That we could have each other's backs. I mean, isn't that we're supposed to do? Isn't that what Jesus prayed for on his way to the garden, that his followers would all be one?

I don't know how to fix this. I'm just raising an issue. Truth be told I haven't always done so well in this area myself, mostly as a result of frustration whenever I've tried. There are many obstacles to the kind of cooperation I'm talking about. But maybe it begins with a shift in our own thinking. A shift away from maverick thinking to Kingdom thinking. A shift toward an understanding that we are stronger together

than we are apart. Perhaps, as we continue along our present faith journey, this is something we need to think about, as we discover what God would have us do next.

Let us pray.