

## ***"The Myth of Being Independent"***

*Part IV of the 2025 Lenten Sermon Series  
"What is the Value and Importance of Being Religious?"*



This is now the fourth sermon in a series which I have been preaching this Lent, exploring in the face of increasing "nones" in America, those who choose 'none of the above' in religious preference, what, if any, value or importance there is in being a "religious" person today. Two weeks ago, we saw how there was something inherent in our biological make-up as humans which allows us, unlike other primates, to step away from our immediately reality before us and imagine other possibilities,

other scenarios, even other worlds, which leads not only to social bonding, but which has also led all known human civilizations to have some kind of science, literature, and organized religion. Last week, we saw how this attraction to religious gatherings may differ from person to person, but also rarely has to do with the so-called established creeds and doctrines of this or that group. I said last week, what brings us together here is religious questions, not our religious answers. Most of us gather because of our inherent desire for community.

And yet, from a child's earliest age, independence is extolled as the most important virtue, not community. We talk about "doing things on your own" as sign of our maturity, not "getting along with other people" or "placing nicely with others." I certainly know that I celebrated my children exerting their independence as they were growing up, and becoming less and less reliant upon their parents. So, yes, some independence is perhaps worth honoring, while it is also important, if not vital to us all, to acknowledge at the same time that none of us are ever truly 'independent,' it's an illusion. We did not and could not survive on our own as infants, and few of us will die quietly in our sleep without the aid and comfort of others at our bedside. And during all those years in between, we are

undeniably dependent upon one another in so many and various ways!

And yet this country continues to extoll its Myth of Independence, that romanticized American ideal of rugged individualism, the notion that we can live without the support of others, which is so ingrained in our nation's culture through our depictions of the frontier spirit, in the stories we tell of our ancestors and pioneers, the pilgrims and settlers and explorers, the tales of the mountain men in the Rockies and the cowboys on the plain, and of those independent entrepreneurs and moguls that built America, as though they did so without the aid of all the others, the ones who actually built the roads and infrastructure that their companies relied upon, and the workers in their own factories, and the individuals who taught them and their children along the way, and those who nurse and doctor us all when we are sick, and those who manage our financial system, and stabilize our marketplace. Still, this most toxic national myth is that we as Americans must "pull ourselves up by our bootstraps," as if we could, and then sadly believe that we have. For we Americans far too often imagine that we are indeed self-made men and women, that we alone have determined the direction of our lives and the nature of our fortunes! And yet as I have said before, the three most important factors in how our lives turn out are totally out of our control, namely,

where, when, and to whom we are born. We are not self-made men and women. Every one of us has been dependent on the support of others all along the way – whether that's family, friends, or community – and whether we are willing to admit it or not!

And because Americans are taught that we must go it on our own, we often then force ourselves to slog through many crucial human experiences alone, like illnesses, or job-loss, or personal failures – abiding instead in our lonely solitude, isolated from one and another by necessity we think. And even when we do get assistance, we so often feel the need to play down the help that we get and the support we receive, because it is somehow shameful to need or welcome the aid of others. In extreme cases, we often see asking for help as something to be avoided at all costs, which can also be and is deadly for us in many situations, as in the rising suicide rates of older men in this country, who are some of the least likely to ask for emotional assistance, so ingrained are they in the American myth.

Or worse yet, we will sometimes label relying on our close friends and partners as "codependence," so great is the fear of so many at needing others, so frightening is the idea of our own vulnerability. Still surprisingly, we are often today told by self-help manuals that we should only look to ourselves to achieve mental well-being, even though as we have seen in this

sermon series that we humans are inevitably and biologically and genetically primed for and require communal connection and social bonding for our survival. We need each other in order to be and to remain healthy, both physically and psychologically. Thus, we must all expose the absolute fraud of the American myth of independence and rugged individualism, and focus on our need for community.

Consequently, we all need to acquire instead "*The arts of dependence,*" the personal skills needed to find and to strengthen the community around us. We all should be learning the talents needed for being helped and for helping others, for our own sake, as much as for theirs, simple skills like the ability to easily talk to strangers, or learning to ask 'open' questions of others and then to listen, simply remembering other people's names, and learning who they really are. We all need to make the effort to stay connected with family and neighbors and old friends, and keep in touch. We all should be seeking out small groups and opportunities to gather, to share, to heal, pushing ourselves sometimes into situations we might avoid. We need to help the strangers in our midst, especially the ones disdained by our communities, the ones we usually shun, who are alone. Thus, the arts of dependence also mean learning to acknowledge and reveal our own vulnerabilities and accept aid ourselves with grace. We all need other people in our lives. And

it takes dignity and skill to learn to lean on friends, on loved ones, on colleagues and our neighbors – and even on the church or the state. Being personally vulnerable and disclosing our own shortcomings takes courage, which is why perhaps we so often retreat back into solitude. It is easier, we think, to wallow in self-pity than to ask or to receive help.

Recognizing 'the arts of dependence' really means acknowledging how most Americans actually live: Some 25 percent of adults in the United States have some type of disability; more than 56 million Americans are enrolled in Medicare, while many others need childcare assistance or SNAP benefits, or live in shelters, or visit local food banks for basic needs, or buy their household items at Goodwill or charity shops, or who are just lonely and unloved. In other words, tens and tens of millions of us, of our friends, our neighbors, and our fellow Americans are dependent in some way on support from one another, and there is no shame in that.

For needing and giving support, be it physical or mental, is part of engaging with others in social bonding, part of living in a community, with having friends and family and neighbors. Therefore, let us all just admit that asking for help and working with others demands a lot of us, demands our patience, humility, and refined social proficiencies which many of us do not come by easily. We need each other, and therein

lies the principal benefit of church, of small gatherings, of so-called 'religious' discussions, where we can learn and practice these needed skills, while pondering together the meaning of life and the mysteries of the universe together.

Thus, it's time for all of us to re-evaluate this facet of our lives, our religious nature, as I call it, for we have seen over the past few weeks that social bonding is an essential feature of human behavior. We are born with the skills to be dependent upon one another, to need other people in our lives, to flourish in tribes and neighborhoods, and not be alone. One might even call it "the art of living in community with one another." For there is a great benefit *to us* in caring for others. The volunteer cooks and servers at the weekly Tuesday Night Supper for the poor at my last parish repeatedly told me that they got so much more out of the experience than the hungry guests did, that serving others fed them spiritually and emotionally in ways unanticipated and unrealized.

I hope we can all recognize and develop the arts of dependence in various ways in our own lives, ways of helping others, and ways that we have been helped, and how churches and small groups and local community serves this very need in us. We all ought to puncture the triumphal and false story line of individual success and the Myth of Independence. For coming to accept and appreciate that will help us to identify with those

who are more obviously dependent and needy, including those people who rely on our help to survive, as we all do in the end. Think of Jesus' parables and the command to love another as we have been loved, even our enemies and those who hate us! That's why it is so important as human beings to engage in the activities that call on us to support one another, to give blood, to donate food, to volunteer, to do more than write a check to some charity, to remember others in our prayers and to check in with them in person, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and dying, and to welcome the stranger in our midst, this is at the very heart of our religious discussions.

On the smallest level, we must start by rewriting our own personal narratives about our achievements, and recognize the value of community in our own lives. And so, if dependence is so important to our health and well-being, what are the real dangers to all of us of isolation, which just so happens to be our topic for next week's sermon. Amen.