



COMMUNAL DIMENSION

[INTRODUCTION]

In this class we've been considering spirituality from the perspective of a pilgrim. We recognize that we all come from very different places, but we share a common interest: uncovering or discovering or stumbling into the treasure buried in the field of religion—Jesus of Nazareth.

Together we've explored three of the four dimensions of Jesus brand spirituality: the **active** (doing) dimension, the **contemplative** (being) dimension, the **biblical** (learning) dimension.



Today, we finish with **the communal (relating) dimension**. Jesus brand spirituality is a path that leads beyond individualism toward community.

**The aim of Jesus' work in relationships is to gather a beloved community** – a movement, a social network, a corporate enterprise organized around his teaching and empowered by his presence – **in preparation for a new creation**. So **every step we take to deepen our connection to his community** – where we practice the skills of cooperation, of love, of mutual respect, forbearance, conflict resolution, forgiveness, the balance between stating our own needs and taking concern for the needs of others – **is one step closer to knowing Jesus**.

*(Note: please read chapters 9 – 11 in Jesus Brand Spirituality for background on this class session.)*

### [EVERYTHING ABOUT GOD IS RELATIONAL]

What is soul? Is it an invisible, immaterial entity shackled to our body?

The biblical conception of the soul is much more earthy. In the Bible, we don't have a soul in a body; we are bodies and we are souls.

*And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. (Gen 2:7, KJV)*

The human being becomes a living soul when a connection occurs with God. **Connection** creates soul; relationship creates soul.

Through Jesus we gain an understanding of God as a being marked by connection and relationship. God, in his very God-ness, is ongoing relationship. The word for this is **Trinity**.

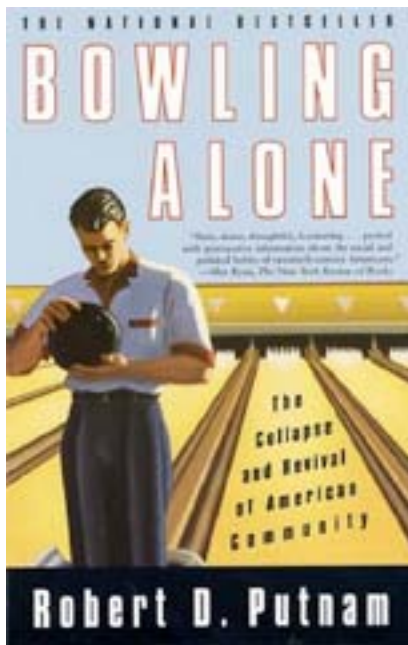
God is **a community of persons**: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.



God is **irreducible** relationship. Everything about God and everything that comes from God is relational.

People need connection with God, and they also need connection with other people. Even after God breathed life into the human, more connection was needed than existed. God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18).

The myth of **individualism**, that we need only to rely on ourselves and should not dependent on others, makes it hard to appreciate how interconnected everyone and everything is. It’s one of the reasons it’s so difficult to mobilize political will to deal with environmental threats, which have to do with incredibly complex and interconnected systems of global climate.



In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, sociologist Robert Putnam describes the decline of what he calls **“social capital.”** Social capital consists of the connections we have with other people at work, at home, and in various organizations or groups. Beginning with the baby boomers, social capital has been in steep decline.

**Jesus brand spirituality is a path that leads beyond individualism toward communities organized around his teaching and empowered by his presence.** The Greek word for such communities is **ecclesia**, translated “church.”

There are three expressions of “church” mentioned in the New Testament.

**1. The church universal:** The members of the body of Christ throughout time and space; the “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1)

2. **The church local:** The church in a particular town or city
3. **The church in the home:** Like a bible study or small group

Jesus prepared his first disciples to participate in these communities by giving them a new commandment: “you must love one another” (John 13:34). The New Testament writings have about forty such sayings, including “forgive one another,” “correct one another,” and “bear with one another.” The church is where we practice these “one another” sayings.

### [FORGIVENESS: THE REPAIR MECHANISM]

**Communities that form around a shared commitment to Jesus become learning laboratories of love.** Forgiveness is a major centerpiece of these laboratories, and a repair mechanism for our damaged connections. Forgiveness is a major theme in the Jesus path that leads us away from evil. It’s part of what delivers us from evil, including the wrongs we have done and the wrongs done to us.

It’s a key part of the prayer that Jesus taught his earliest followers (Matthew 6:9-13):

*Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from the evil one.*

Jesus offers a different path of deliverance from the evil of enemies: love of enemies through the practice of forgiveness. Jesus communities are meant to be places where forgiveness is valued, modeled, and encouraged.

[ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE, PROPERLY UNDERSTOOD]

**The preeminent revelation of Jesus: “God is love” (1 John 4:16).** Not just “God is loving,” but “God IS Love.”

God is love because God is, within himself, irreducible, loving relationship. Jesus understood himself to be in the closest possible communion with the one he called Abba, Father. And he felt himself to be filled with and empowered by one he called Spirit.

**God is:**

**A Father** ever generating Love

**A Son** ever receiving and reciprocating Love

**A Spirit**, generated by the Love between Father and Son

It is in the nature of love to generate more love and to share love; hence God is **creative**. Out of love he made and makes a universe of others to draw into his love.

To understand Jesus is to properly understand love and the reality that God is love.

**Understanding Jesus is a different process than mastering Christianity.** Jesus, being a person, is a subject, not just an object. Objects—like systems—can be mastered, but persons want to be understood, known, loved.

God is love. What are some attributes of this love?

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 Cor. 13:4-7)*

## [DISCUSSION GROUND-RULES]

1. What's shared in the group stays in the group.
2. No one is expected to share on any given topic; it's fine to pass.
3. No unsolicited advice giving.
4. Take your fair share of the time.
5. Be respectful of the viewpoints of others.

## [QUESTIONS TO GUIDE DISCUSSION]

*Note on discussion questions: questions are drawn from both the book and the class, so feel free to develop your own questions if class attendees haven't read the book.*

1. How do you think you've been affected by what the author describes as "the myth of individualism" or what Robert Putnam describes as "the loss of social capital" [see pp. 184-187]?
2. What opportunities do you see in your own life to participate more meaningfully in the communal dimension of spirituality?
3. What one thing about the church (your own, those you know of, or your impression of the church at large) would you change to make it more in keeping with the spirituality of Jesus as you understand it?
4. Do you see any difference between saying "God is loving," and "God is love"?
5. What differences do you see between a spirituality that seeks understanding and one that seeks mastery? Have you ever felt that your approach to spirituality was more about seeking mastery than understanding? Describe what that was like.
6. What are your thoughts on the tension between the certainty we crave and the idea that our knowing is always partial, at best? Have you ever found yourself acknowledging less certainty than you once had concerning a matter of faith or spirituality?

