

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

May 14, 2023

I and Thou

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

You may recognize the title of my sermon, it's the same as the title of Martin Buber's influential work from 1923. I HIGHLY recommend this short (~120 pages), but groundbreaking book.¹ While Buber arrives at his thesis, which I will get to in a moment, from a German-Jewish perspective, he draws upon the teachings of Jesus regularly. While he doesn't cite John 14 anywhere to my knowledge, I believe his main thesis is exactly what Jesus is getting at in this section of his Farewell Discourse.²

Before we get to Buber's "*I and Thou*" and how it applies to what Jesus is teaching we need to take a brief look at the literary context our Gospel reading. Jesus has dined with his disciples and Judas has left the group to fetch the temple authorities.³ Chapters 14-17 (the Farewell Discourse) then follows the meal. This discourse is an extended teaching aimed at preparing the disciples for what is to come: Jesus' arrest, trial, torture, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Jesus is trying to get his followers ready for life and faith without his earthly presence.

The themes of this discourse are his departure and the sending of the Advocate (Holy Spirit) to be with the disciples, the indwelling of the Father in Christ and Christ in his followers, Christ as the source of connection and community (Jesus as the Vine), the work of the Comforter, contrasting Jesus' love with the world's hatred, and finally ending with a prayer for his followers. In our Gospel reading today we find ourselves in the section dealing with the sending of the Advocate and how through the Holy Spirit, God dwells in Christ and Christ dwells in us. We also learn that this indwelling is accomplished through mutual love.⁴

¹ A free scan can be found here: <https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~akantor/readings/BuberMartin-i-and-thou.pdf>

² Chapters 14-17 of John

³ John 13

⁴ John 13:34-35 (NRSVUE)

Now, what does this have to do with the existentialist philosopher, Martin Buber? Well, Jesus is teaching about righteousness, or how to live as we are created to live. He is explicitly teaching his followers how to exist in the world after he ascends to the right hand of the Father. Buber's work, inspired by the likes of Kierkegaard, is aimed at understanding how humanity exists in, and interacts with, the world around us. So we have an intersecting point between the teachings of Christ and the philosophy of Buber; and it is a fascinating intersection!

Buber posits that we have two basic relationships with the world around us, and those relationships determine how we interact with, and experience, the world: the *I-Thou* relationship and the *I-It* relationship. *I-Thou* relationships are characterized by mutuality, directness, mindfulness, authenticity, and ineffability. In *I-Thou* relationships each individual meets the other as a unique and full human being, worthy of dignity and respect. *I-Thou* relationships are equal ones where the individual understands their own complexity and acknowledges the complexity of the *Thou*, the other individual. These relationships are concerned with dialogue, understanding, and communion.

In contrast to *I-Thou* relationships stand *I-It* relationships. These relationships are characterized by objectification and instrumentality. In *I-It* relationships an individual views the other as an object to be used or manipulated. *I-It* relationships involve a lot of labeling and dehumanizing; they do not recognize the worth, dignity, or even the humanity of the *Thou*, the other.

Now, back to the Farewell Discourse. Jesus is teaching his followers how to continue to walk his Way once he's gone. And he does so using the language of love and mutuality: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another,"⁵ and "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love,"⁶ and "so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them."⁷ This Way of love helps us to recognize the mutual indwelling of God in us, and us in one another through that shared indwelling of God.⁸ This loving indwelling and mutuality that Christ is teaching as righteousness ...how we are created to live...sounds a lot like those *I-Thou* relationships Buber described, don't they?

⁵ John 13:34a

⁶ John 15:9

⁷ John 17:26b

⁸ John 15:4

The trouble today is, just as it was two thousand years ago in the time of Christ, that most of us live unrighteously. We live as we were NOT created to live. We treat too many of our relationships as *I-It* relationships when we were created for *I-Thou* ones instead. And this is especially problematic when we start to treat our relationship with God as *I-It*, but more on that later.

I have preached a few times lately on the dangers of labels and dehumanizing others; two of the most common results of *I-It* relationships. Here in John's Gospel, we find yet another teaching of Christ's that seems aimed at this same point. We do incalculable damage to others when we live in *I-It* relationships with them. We cause horrendous pain and suffering when we reduce people to one aspect of themselves or only seek use out of our relationship with them. And yet we see that everywhere in the world around us!

No wonder Jesus taught that the world, the cosmos, is opposed to God... hates God. He taught that there's more to existence than "getting ahead" or "being successful." He revealed the emptiness and despair of relationships that are nothing more than a "means to an end." Jesus holds up a mirror for us and for the world, and we generally don't like what we see in it.

But if we can get past the discomfort of seeing how broken we are, how broken the world is, we can begin to change ourselves, which is the only way we will ever change the world. Perhaps we can even begin to join in God's redeeming of us and the world; working to create the kingdom of God in the here-and-now. Righteous living, living as we were created to, means acknowledging our own worth and dignity, as well as the worth and dignity of others...of the *Thou*. It involves recognizing our own humanity and the humanity of the *Thou*. We were created for this life because we are made in the image of God who is the source of life and love, the source of connection and communion.

It should come as no surprise then that when we love we are living out the indwelling of God in us. Our text tells us that "[Jesus is] in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."⁹ This expression of indwelling is sandwiched between "If you love me, you will keep my commandments"¹⁰ and "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me."¹¹ The sum of God's

⁹ John 14:20b

¹⁰ John 14:15

¹¹ John 14:21a

commandments is to love and loving means the indwelling of God. Loving God means loving others...loving the *Thou*...and loving others, loving the *Thou* is how we love God. Very circular, but also quite straightforward! We are made for love...that's it...full stop.

All of this requires the setting aside of our own wills, giving up our self-idolatry. For the temptation is great to treat our relationship with God as an *I-It* one, in which we are primarily concerned with what God can do for us. This path leads to a false *It-God* that resembles our values, beliefs, and desires; we are adept at making god in our image. But God is not *It*, God is the ultimate *Thou*. And as the ultimate *Thou* we will eventually have to wrestle with God as we confront the mirror God holds up for us, much like Jacob did at Peniel.¹²

But such wrestling is what we are created for. The *I-Thou* relationship leads to deep connection and communion with God and with one another. It is these relationships that make us whole and fill us with purpose, identity, and abundant life. This is the mutuality found in the South African philosophy of *Ubuntu*: I am because we are. Righteous living is living in the loving mutuality of *I-Thou* relationship with God and with the world around us. And it is this righteousness that our souls yearn for...this is the life for which we are made. A life of communion. A life of *I-Thou*, or more simply...a life of **WE**. Amen.

¹² Genesis 32:28