

Actual Message:

Introduction:

Smoky Row! We're back in our walk through all sorts of aspects of what it means to live in our society now, and we're talking about a handful of interconnected topics. As we look at each of them, they give us a chance to think about how we're living in light of all the complexity we feel, and all the stuff we hear and read about.

Today we're talking about the public and private spheres of life, the public and private spheres. We'll talk about how we can understand public and private life, what Scripture has to say about these areas, and what it means to live faithfully when it comes to what's public and what's private.

First, of course, let's pray.

Prayer:

What are we talking about?

To talk about the public and private spheres of life, we have to first of all define what it is we're talking about. And we sort of intuitively "get" the idea of these things, right? But we need to think about them for a second.

Public:

The public part of our lives is that part which people see, you

know? It's the places we go and other people are around, or could show up at any moment and we can't stop them. What's public is what's out in the open, and accessible to others.

Private:

And we tend to define private not on its own basis, but as the opposite of whatever is public. What's private is accessible only to us. These can be activities, thoughts, emotions. We can talk about places that are private places, by which we mean places other people don't have free access to. And we treat our interior life--the life of the mind, our thoughts and feelings--as private, something people don't have access to.

Talking About People, Not God:

I'm talking about other people, here, not God. And that's important. God gets a pass, basically. We assume, if we stop to think about it, that God is around us, watching us, engaged. There's a double-edge to this, of course: If we believe God loves us, and is for us not against us, and will work out all things for our good, we don't sweat God's spiritual presence with us, and we feel safe ignoring it or leaning into God's presence as we have need.

If we're anxious, fearful, distrust God for any reason, the idea of God watching is us only moderately more creepy than an elf-on-a-shelf, that snitch who's just waiting to report our bad behavior to Santa.

But when it comes to God, Christians generally accept God's presence with us always--generally ignoring it, although the greatest Christian spiritual writers in history have found God's constant presence, by way of the Holy Spirit, to be the thing that is most powerful in Christianity.

We'll come back around to God, I promise. But when we talk about the public sphere, and the private spheres of existence, we tend to mean those spheres, those areas of our lives, that are accessible or inaccessible to the presence and attention and knowledge of others. Those areas of our lives that are accessible or inaccessible to the presence, attention, and knowledge of others.

A Transition Time:

And this gets tricky right now for us. Because the truth is that we live in a society that has fewer and fewer inaccessible places.

We humans have often treated our technologies as extension of our private spheres. Life was either with people, or apart from them; our thoughts were in our heads, or out our mouths. Our entertainments were once private; and aren't, but we haven't really owned the fact that they aren't.

We read a book, by ourselves, and we think of that act as a private thing, you know? But now a company tracks the book

we buy or an app logs our reading habits. Rather than ask our questions about life, and love, and why to ourselves when we're alone, or even ask them of God, we type them into a search bar and they're noted. To carry a smartphone, or even a dumb one, is to always have our location monitored. We're basically never inaccessible. For most of us our internet service provider records every bit of information that goes out our router, from our streaming service, smart speakers, phones, and computers and how long we do what we do with them.

And while we may be okay with God knowing where we are, what we're thinking, what we watch or attend to when we're by ourselves, our society is right now having a public-conversation about how comfortable we are with corporations, and the people and algorithms that they employ, knowing these things. We're coming to terms with the fact that our technologies, now, enable the exploration and commodification of our private selves in a way that they haven't before.

Reflection:

We each have to consider how comfortable we are allowing our private sphere to be recorded, and so, in turn, to be made public. And yet, what we consider "private" has always been contextual. There are gradients of "private," stuff that's just me, and stuff that's more than me but not everyone.

When Jesus says that we deal with issues of sin against us by, first going to the person who has sinned against us, then asking one or two others along, and then finally, if the person simply doesn't care, bringing the issue to the church, Jesus is talking about a gradation, a movement, from the private to the public.

Mixing Places:

And there have always been places that aren't entirely public, and aren't entirely private in human life. This is intuitive to us. Our front yards aren't public, but they aren't private either, right? They're somewhere in between. And for many of us, we may be okay with our search and location history being like our front yards; not quite private, but not quite public, either. We may treat these things like the front yards of our selves, although with ultimate ownership tilted in the other direction.

But we have to recognize that right now there's a society-wide conversation about what is public, and what is private, and how they two things ought to relate to each other and how we ought to value them.

Christianity & Public & Private:

And I'm not mentioning all this because I think the good old days were so good, and back before cell phones people really cared for each other, you know? Kids these days don't realize what we've done for them.

I mention it because it's just true, first of all, and when we hear people arguing on tv, complaining about what people are doing where they're doing it, talking about any issue related to privacy, we don't realize that we're in the middle of a societal shift in how we understand the private sphere and the public sphere, and while that happens in every generation, we've never lived in a society when four generations existed so actively at the same time.

And I mention it secondly because Christians, the Church, ought to be the best at critically thinking about what's public and what's private, thinking about the importance of both these two things, and thinking about that special place where they mix, move from one thing to another.

The Church!

Because the Church itself is a front-yard sort of place. A place that isn't entirely public, and isn't entirely private. "Place" is the wrong word, here. The Church is a community, a spiritual family, and family is the greatest public and private mixing place there is.

This is because we believe that God is always with each of us, and yet, that we have been joined together, supernaturally, such that not a single one of us is able to completely divorce ourselves from the community and still experience a life of full integrity. We're the Body of Christ

together, each of us parts of it, but as we know, we're meant to "have equal concern for each other," because, as Paul puts it, "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it." We rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

We're simultaneously, as Paul puts it, those who are meant to "examine ourselves to see whether we're in the faith." "Test yourselves," he says, "Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?." And then he goes on to invite the Corinthians to "discover that [he] hasn't failed the test." We're ourselves, and each other's. Together, we're a "city on a hill" and together "the temple of the Holy Spirit," and yet, as Paul's letters show over and over, we're each responsible for our own behaviors, and individually will "receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad." We are together, "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession," but told by Jesus we each have a responsibility to "go into [our rooms], close the door and pray to [our] Father, who is unseen." We're told, "Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

The New Testament seems awfully concerned that we are attentive to our private spheres and public spheres of life. And here's why, I think.

Revealing, Nurturing, Testing:

It seems as if, as far as the Bible is concerned, the public is where we reveal our integrity, and the private is where we nurture it. The public sphere is where we reveal our integrity; the private sphere is where we nurture it.

And the church, in all of this, that front yard place that isn't quite public and isn't quite private? I think that confusing community is where we learn just how much our integrity is lacking, because it's in that place, among people who we aren't totally private from, and aren't totally public with, where our lack of integrity can be called out safely.

But the public sphere is where we reveal our integrity; the private sphere is where we nurture it.

And I think the reason we're so particularly disgusted by sin, by a lack of integrity, when it turns out all sorts of people knew about the terrible evil someone was doing, and the reason we're particularly frustrated when this is true of a church, is because we instinctively know that the congregation failed its role, its duty, in being a community that tests integrity, and drives one another to nurture it more fully or practice it more publicly.

So what should we do?

I think there are things to do with all this.

If the public sphere is where we reveal our integrity, and the

private sphere is where we nurture it, then if we care about integrity, we have to strengthen the resilience of the public sphere and the private sphere, and we have nurture the front yard realities of the Church.

Strengthening the Resilience of the Public & Private Spheres:

Does this make sense? If the public sphere is where we reveal our integrity, and the private sphere is where we nurture it, we have to make sure those places are strong. If the Church is where our integrity is really tested, we have to ensure that we participate in the life of the Church. The author of Hebrews calls us to “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another.”

So much is demanded of us, all the time, that we can become blind to just how public our lives are, and so much is demanded of us all the time that we justify and excuse all sorts of avoidance when it comes to our private lives. But if integrity is fundamental to our existence as followers of Jesus, we can't just say we're too busy to pay attention.

We should nurture the resilience our public spheres, and our private spheres, those areas of lives that are accessible, public, or inaccessible, private, to the presence, attention, and knowledge of others.

Practically:

And I mean, I'm tempted to go big and broad, here, you know? Ignore my own life and jump right to the institutional-level! Let's talk about how we shouldn't privatize public resources or institutions, or what it means to ensure there's a commons that everyone has access to, and how these things relate to societal integrity.

But what I know that we can do, and know that we must do, is nurture the resilience of those public and private areas of our lives. So. Some tips, then.

Evaluate:

We have to evaluate where we're at. And, you know, I mean "where we're at" both figuratively and literally.

What are the public spaces in our lives? What do people see? Where do we go, and if people have access to us, what part of us do they have and when?

The things we do, the places we go: What are they?

And what are the private spaces in our lives? What is only accessible to us and God? The activities, thoughts, emotions that we have, which others don't have free access to: What are they?

Again: What are those areas of lives that are public or private, accessible or inaccessible to the presence, attention, and knowledge of others.

Evaluate: A Guess

Here's my guess: I think we'll discover that we have almost no private sphere at all, almost no place or activity that only God has access to. And if the private sphere of our life is where we nurture integrity, then that's a real problem. It's not just a moral problem, though; it's an identity problem. If we don't nurture integrity in our private spheres of life, then whatever it is we improvise in public, when it comes to our character, isn't going to be what we want to give, it's going to be whatever comes out, our reactions instead of what we've nurtured. And what worries me about that is how we'll feel when we just react, because whatever we do, we won't feel in control, we won't feel like we have integrity. And, you know, as a pastor I want us to feel in control of our responses; it's a better experience of living.

But we don't evaluate things for evaluation's sake, right? I mean, there's no point in that.

Create Private Places:

And unless I'm just way off base, it's our private places that are disappearing; we are, after all, shaped by the forces in our society actively eroding our private spheres.

We have to increase our private places. And, look, I'm alive, too. Life intrudes on us. I get kids and work and chores and pets. But I also know how much time I have that I let other things claim. We all know how many entertainments we escape into--books, movies, games, tv. We all know how much we got lost online.

But Jesus assumes in today's passage that we can get away, that we have that privilege. He himself was able to sneak away in the mornings and pray, and the dude was actively saving the universe. We have the Holy Spirit, too. What we lack isn't even intentionality or drive; our lack in making private time for ourselves and God who's always with us comes not from bad intention or escapism, but it comes, by and large, because we forget after a long days work or a bad night's sleep or a rough morning at work or with our kids to create any private sphere for ourselves. We're so exhausted by life, and so unpracticed in making time for ourselves, that the first thing we do in a quiet moment is play with our phones.

I don't want to guilt trip us, and I include myself in the "us," but that's no way to nurture integrity. Just because having a private sphere is so much work doesn't excuse us from it. And, I'll push some more: Jesus didn't say "if" you go into a secret place to play. He said "when."

Ask For Help!

And we can't create private places where we can nurture integrity without each other's help. If you're married, and you love your spouse, it's important to ask them, "How can I help you make some private space in your life?" And whether or not we're married, we're part of a church. Much of what it means to be a part of this community, where our public and private spheres mix, is to not just have our integrity tested, but ensure that we each are nurturing a deep private sphere, and revealing our integrity in the world, too. I can list ways we can do this; most of what we need to do is just, oh, ask each other. "Is your private life resilient to all the things that erode it? Do you have a rich interior life, where you reflect on what it means to be you, and pray with God about all the things life brings you?" We need to ask, "How can I help you remember to nurture your private life?"

And you know, it only feels weird and vulnerable and artificial to ask questions like that of each other because we haven't been asking them of ourselves often enough.

So, I mean: I could go on and on here, right? But if you have no private self, no area of life that's inaccessible to the attention, presence, and knowledge of others, I'm not sure how we're nurturing integrity, because I'm not sure if we can be deeply aware of what God is asking of us in the places we live, the public places where we're meant to reveal our integrity and God's love, both. If it's out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks, if we're not nurturing in the

privacy of our hearts an abundance of forgiveness, affection, and integrity, then whatever's coming out isn't going to be good. If we're not in touch with our own thoughts, then there's very little opportunity for "the renewing of our mind," much less the space we need to "to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Conclusion:

We could talk more about all these things, but let's not right now. The church is the community that tests our integrity. Our private lives, our private spheres, is the place where integrity is nurtured. Our public lives, our public spheres, are the places where we reveal that integrity to the world. God is always with us, but it's only in private that we really develop the habit of paying attention to God. Evaluate what spaces, what places, in your life are accessible or inaccessible to the knowledge, the attention, and the presence of others. If what we discover reveals we simply have no room to cultivate an interior life at all, then it's up to us to build a resilient private life, and be attentive to how we reveal our integrity in public.

No one can force the pursuit of a rich private life on us, but no one has the power to stop us from having one, either. More than many things, the responsibility and power to live well publicly and privately is on us, and what's at stake is our integrity. Let's all reflect on that.