



As you came in today, you passed a poem on the wall written about 400 years ago by clergyman and poet John Donne, who said, "No man is an island." We've used those words, and that point of view ever since, in the name of community, compassion, justice, punishment, war, democracy, religion . . . no man is an island, we're all in this together. We're all *connected*. John Donne's poem ends with:

*Any man's death diminishes me*

*Because I am involved in mankind*

*Therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls*

*It tolls for thee.*

We have an effect on one another whether we like it or not . . . but let's jump forward a few hundred years and hear from someone who possibly wanted to be an island, but settled for physicist and sometime political and social philosopher, Albert Einstein, who said:

*My passionate interest in social justice and social responsibility has always stood in curious contrast to a marked lack of desire for direct association with men and women. I am a horse for single harness, not cut out for tandem or team work. I have never belonged wholeheartedly to country or state, to my circle of friends, or even to my own family. These ties have always been accompanied by a vague aloofness, and the wish to withdraw into myself increases with the years. Such isolation is sometimes bitter, but I do not regret being cut off from the understanding and sympathy of other men. I lose something by it, to be sure, but I am compensated for it in being rendered independent of the customs, opinions, and prejudices of others, and am not tempted to rest my peace of mind upon such shifting foundations.*

I think Albert and John might have had a spirited debate - except that Albert might not have considered debating John worthwhile . . . just a hunch.

So . . . we're here to talk about cowboys and choirs. People who tend to be part of a group, and those who generally like to be independent.

As I've thought and written about this idea over the last few months, honestly, I'm less clear now about just who's a cowboy and who's in the choir. Most of us have our moments when we join the crowd and moments we go our own way.

If you were here in this sanctuary last week, several people who don't usually want the spotlight were brave enough to stand up here and tell us some very personal details of their lives. By opening their hearts, telling the truth about their pain and their triumphs, they knew they might help the rest of us to better deal with our pain, to know we're not alone. They knew it was their moment to step out of their comfort zone, stand up and speak, and be brave. And they were.

How about you? Do you like the dynamics, or maybe the safety, of teamwork, community and shared responsibility? Or are you likely to go it alone, where you're not limited by the opinions of others, standing by your decisions and being responsible for the results?

It seems to me that most of us tend to go one way or the other. Personally, though I've been in bands and boards, casts, committees, communities and choirs, I lean in the cowboy direction. And so I had to trust

myself to end up in this pulpit today . . . I really liked the title, Cowboys and Choirs, so I jumped in the saddle, turned the horse loose and said, let's see where this takes me . . . and now, friends, I invite you along for the ride.

The inspiration was the uncertainty and guilt I sometimes feel when I say no to being a joiner. I don't want to say yes and then regret it! I don't want to feel I'm wasting my time. Maybe I could contribute more in a different way. Or maybe I just don't want to do whatever it is but I say "yes" anyway. What was I thinking? I'm spending an evening stuffing envelopes when I could be . . . well, I don't know, maybe sitting at home not stuffing envelopes! Or, I could be having dinner with my family. Or writing a song that's going to change lives everywhere! Don't ask me how that's working out . . .

On the other hand, *why* don't I *want* to join the team? My friends are there, what's wrong with me? After all, what they're doing is pretty important! So . . . what gets in the way? Maybe insecurity? . . . thinking, they're all better at this than I am, I don't want to embarrass myself. Or, "if I go to that meeting, people will ask me things out about me that I just don't want to talk about."

But saying no could also be the right decision at the time. Seems to me we should trust our instincts to guide us to our own best choices. Cowboys, you know, are pretty good at trusting their choices.

When I heard the song, Tried, True and Tested, it led me to reading a Louis L'Amour novel. He wrote 89 novels of the old west during the 1900's. His heroes were rough, tough and ready, still, light and steady. His heroes were also men. I'm pretty sure that John Donne, writing 400 years ago, used the term "man" to mean "person." But to Louis L'Amour, it was clear that cowboys were men.

Seems to me the legendary cowboy personality reflects traits generally found in men, but not always. So the cowboy I'm talking about is a metaphor for an approach to life, a personality . . . something you might see in yourself or in others. I'll continue using "cowboy" and "men" in the spirit of Louis . . . and because saying "cowpersons" is just too weird . . .too weird . . .

The cowboy of legend often rides alone, going into town mainly for the saloon, the brothel, and the cafe, probably in that order, engaging only when necessary, and riding on when he feels like it. When he sleeps, maybe on the hard dirt ground, he keeps his pistol at his side, since he doesn't trust anyone and trouble could come from anywhere.

But this cowboy usually makes strong moral choices. He doesn't start fights but doesn't hesitate to get into one for the right reasons. For justice, for fairness, for revenge on the bully. He pays for his own whiskey. He's kind to women and children, but often emotionally distant from both.

The rock opera, Jesus Christ Superstar, hit Broadway in 1971. In the show, Mary Magdalene, aching from her unrequited love for Jesus, sings, "I don't know how to love him, what to do, how to move him." Isn't that the same story told in so many country songs about ladies who tried to love cowboys?

This cowboy is independent and keeps largely to himself, not imposing his beliefs on others. But then, there's the cowboy superhero, who does have an agenda . . . to right wrongs, chase the bad guys away and leave the place better than he found it. He still rides away, leaving the folks he touches behind, to learn the lessons he brought to them, or not. You might think about Hopalong Cassidy, definitely the Lone Ranger. And of course . . . Jesus.

Let's think about Jesus. Oh, c'mon, let's!

Jesus didn't ride off into anonymity, but he sure wasn't a member of the choir. As a rabbi, a teacher . . . Jesus wasn't waiting for people to set the agenda, he dictated it. Involved with the community, yes, but not of it. He set himself apart, even when he engaged with those around him. A super-hero cowboy all the way.

So, leaving the super-hero part out of it, what makes me more of a cowboy than a member of the choir? For starters, if there was a choir here today, I could point out that I'm over here and they are over there. Besides that, let's look at the evidence.

In my early days as an entertainer, I mostly performed solo. I liked making my own decisions, having the responsibility, and the rewards. At 18 years old, performing at open mics at Los Angeles folk clubs, I ended up as part of a 13 man group born at West LA's Troubadour night club. We played The Troubadour and other venues around the area for a year before disbanding.

At that point a few of the members were working on a different kind of group, with a different approach to music, and they invited me to come to a rehearsal, see what they were up to and maybe join them. I went to the rehearsal. Not hearing the music that stirred my soul, I said, "no thanks, I've got other things to do." It took them about 6 months to hit local stages and another few months for LA and the rest of the nation to hear their first hit song, *Along Comes Mary*, as they emerged as The Association, one of the most successful pop groups of the 1960's.

Soon after that, I became a member of a 20-person singing and dancing group . . . hard to imagine, I know, but yes, I did the Charleston on network TV . . . the group was called the Doodletown Pipers. Yes, really. After performing on the very popular Red Skelton and Danny Thomas TV shows and making a record, I again said, no thanks, I've got other things to do. Good thing I got out of there in time, because before long they had their own network show for a summer or two, and quite a run on tour and in Las Vegas.

So I guess that's where I established my cowboy credentials . . . stop at the edge of town, take a look and ride on. Oh, yeah . . . and don't look back.

Cowboys and choirs. There's a joy and a hardship in both. In a group, it's fun to share the glory when we've succeeded in our goal, whether it's getting out the vote, or doing a show, or putting that last envelope in the mail . . . or blending our voices in the perfect harmony of a choir. And when things don't turn out as planned, crying together can be more healing than crying alone.

In a choir, the goal is to create a unified sound made up of many voices, a sound much bigger than any single voice. You have to connect with the other singers, to listen, to adjust, to give it all of your attention and energy, and get your satisfaction from hearing that one magnificent voice made up of many voices. But you can't just disappear in a choir. Everyone carries the load, and your voice might be the catalyst that inspires confidence in others.

The liberal traditions that a lot of us share, politically and religiously, are strongly tied to a belief in community, with many of us working toward shared goals. That's where many voices have far greater power than any one alone. There's power in numbers. The power of the congregation, the community, the country . . . the choir.

But wait! The choir needs the creative juices of the composers. The music the choir sings wasn't written by a committee. Most likely, the composer worked alone when he or she wrote the piece, and either that person or possibly someone else working alone arranged it for many voices. And, in keeping with the theme, that person is often known as the lone arranger . . .

So what happens when the cowboy joins the choir? Well, here's one possibility that happens to be my story. Living in Colorado in the 70's, I was mostly a lone folksinger. Then I met a couple of guys who played with me, but it was still my show. As we grew from 3 to 4 to 5 and then 7 people, I saw the things others could do well, often better than I could, and I enjoyed playing bass or drums or clarinet occasionally instead of always being front and center. We went from Steve and backup guys to a group that shared all of our talents and supported one another.

I managed the band as well, and over time, my energy stopped flowing to the creative side. I stopped doing much of what made me love performing. Instead, I let others take a lot of that responsibility. After awhile I felt I was watching the group that I started, and then I did that literally, stepping away from performing during the last year of our seven years together to manage the band full time in hopes of reaching a greater level of success.

I did that with my eyes wide open. But looking back, I see it as something of a retreat. My passion was for communicating what was important to me, what moved me. Maybe I wasn't confident enough in my talents, so I turned the power over to others. Without question, I loved the band and the people in it. I was proud of who we were and what we accomplished. I wasn't backing away because of the music or the people. Though I had some success and a great degree of satisfaction and joy as a songwriter, musician and entertainer, when I saw someone who I thought was doing it better, I lost a fair amount of faith in myself.

But what they couldn't do better was be me. If I'd thought enough about it, I might have asked myself, "do I have more to say than I'm giving myself credit for? How badly do I want to say it?" I could have used a bit of Harry Chapin's single minded focus and ego.

We're not all meant to go it alone . . . and we don't all belong in the choir. If you're a leader, let yourself lead. We need you. If your joy is being part of the choir, supporting and being supported by a community, we need you.

If your passions are so great that you don't have room for your family and friends, maybe that's how you make your greatest contribution. Or maybe not. The results, and your own conscience, will be the judge. History has often changed because of someone's selfish devotion to a cause, at the expense of social graces, intimate relationships, quality parenting and most of all, the expectations of others.

I expect that most of us here today share something. We care. We don't look the other way. We're willing to give a hand to our neighbor, to act when we can stop an injustice, to comfort a friend or a stranger . . . or to join others addressing the political and social issues affecting all of us. But how we do that comes from who we are, not from what others expect from us.

I don't want to ignore the many people who say "yes" not because that's where they're most comfortable, but rather, because they see a concrete, urgent need. They're not willing to say "someone else will do it." Neither cowboys nor choirs, they are treasures. We talked about super hero cowboys. They may be our super hero choir members.

If you make your choices because you care, there are so many ways to contribute. Maybe as part of a team, maybe by doing it your own way, even if others don't understand you.

Don't forget that you have options. If you're in the choir, and your comfort zone feels too small, go for a solo. If you're a cowboy, next time you stop at the edge of town, even though your habit is to ride on, maybe a little voice will tell you to see what those folks are up to. And maybe you'll give it a try. The trail will still be there tomorrow.