

# God Between I and Thou

Dr. Stephen Jones, Preaching

First Baptist Church, KCMO

August 7, 2016

Luke 8:43-48

Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher and theologian, revolutionized the world many years ago with six simple words, or more precisely, three sets of two words. While Buber's writing can become complicated, it can also offer amazingly simple truths:

Suppose I am the owner of a company. But I only care about myself, my profit, my gain. I am only in it for myself. Buber calls this an "I-I" relationship and it describes the narcissism of our day. So much of American culture is built around "I"...what's in it for me? What do I get from this? What is my self-interest? Be amazed at what I can do! And Buber's critique of our narcissistic culture is that "I" can only be part of a healthier equation.

Again, suppose I am the owner of a large company. And I hire employees to get the job done. If you can't get the job done, you're fired. Buber would say that I am treating my employees as an "it". They are merely objects I use to reach my objectives. My relationship with my employees isn't different than the way I would treat robots on an assembly line. Robots have to be cared for, repaired, rehabilitated. But they are "its" – objects. And it is easy to treat people as objects.

For example, walk on the Plaza. You will pass hundreds of people on a crowded day. But you probably won't talk with hardly anyone, you won't engage anyone. It isn't that you wish harm to these people, but nevertheless, they are an "it" to you. You share the sidewalk, breathe the same air: but that is all. Buber calls this an I-It relationship.

Sometimes, even in relationships that are supposed to be marked by intimacy, we forget what it means. Dave and Jane are in a relationship that spanned decades. Everyone admired them. Dave was once asked the secret of their long marriage. He responded, "Our relationship is healthy because two nights every week a candlelight table is reserved at our favorite restaurant. The finest wine is ordered, and a delicious meal is savored, and a long, slow walk home concludes a wonderful evening. Jane goes on Monday nights and I go on Thursdays."

Suppose I am the owner of a medium-sized company. But I consider my employees part of a larger family, as my colleagues, and it is important for me to take them seriously as persons, not just as a cog in a wheel, but as persons of worth. And to build a deep sense of comradery and shared vision among my employees. Then, I have an I-Thou relationship with them.

Again, I am walking on the Plaza and it's crowded, but as I walk along, I am looking into peoples' faces, greeting them, smiling appreciatively with them, and where possible, engaging in interesting dialogue, perhaps enjoying a street musician with a small crowd. This can be an I-Thou relationship with perfect strangers. Jan and Janelle and I were part of the 800,000 last fall

at Union Station celebrating the Royals winning the World Series. We couldn't see the stage, we couldn't hear hardly anything that was said. But being there in that crowd, to celebrate hometown pride, and pride in the Royals, it brought our city together. It was so crowded to the point that if one person had to leave, the entire crowd had to part just to let them pass. This could have resulted in frayed nerves. But it did not. The whole crowd swelled with pride, of being a part of an historic occasion that we would remember for the rest of our lives. In that sense, my relationship with that crowd, was an I-Thou relationship.

So, Buber's six words, or three two-word sets are:

--- "I-I" which describes today's narcissism: what's in it for me.

--- "I-It" – which describes treating others as objects or functionaries. And in truth, you're in a long line of traffic, and you're just sitting there in your car waiting for an accident to be cleared, and the people around you are just in your way. They are an annoyance. If they had stayed home, you could drive around the accident and be on your way. You work for the Sprint Corporation. What's your relationship with someone who works on the other side of the campus? You can't know each other. It isn't practical. You have an I-It relationship. You go to a crowded restaurant. You don't engage people sitting around you at other tables. You have an I-It relationship. You fly on an airplane. You have an I-it relationship with the other people on the plane.

Let me tell you a story, however. When we were returning from our three-month sabbatical in Asia, we stopped over at the Tokyo International Airport and waited for persons to board. We had flown from Singapore and it was a typical flight: we all treated each other courteously. But we didn't engage each other. It was an I-It relationship among the passengers. But something happened on the trans-Pacific flight. Two hosts got on the plane accompanying 10 Korean babies who were coming to the United States to be adopted. One host sat next to me and I asked, "How can you possibly take care of 10 babies for this long flight with only two of you?" And the host answered, "It's easy. Look around at all these businessmen who have been separated from their children for a few weeks. You watch what happens." Sure enough, in about 20 minutes, I was carrying a baby up and down the aisle, and so were a whole group of businessmen, and grandmothers, changing diapers, feeding with bottles, entertaining them. And that entire section of the plane became a community. And when we landed, we stood around and applauded the waiting parents eager to meet their new adopted sons and daughters. It was an I-Thou experience I will never forget.

--- I-I, I-It, I-Thou. Simple. And yet it contains so much truth and describes the way we relate to the world around us.

Buber also describes the way we relate to God in these same terms. Many people relate to God as an "it," a far-off remote being on a cloud. In so many of our prayers we treat God as an "it". We pray by telling God what to do: God, be present with us this morning. God, hear our prayers. God, solve this problem. God, bring world peace. Lord, heal the sick. This also treats God as an "it", who serves at our direction.

But we can relate to God as a Thou; Buber calls God: *The Eternal Thou*. God as Thou is when we do not attempt to grasp God, direct God, or control God, but rather open ourselves up

so that God centers our lives, fills our consciousness, graces our daily existence. God as Eternal Thou comes between us, fills up the spaces between us, infuses us with grace. The Eternal Thou is thus fully present in our midst.

In the church, we speak of this as communing with God. When the church comes together to commune with each other in the Spirit, to commune with God in holiness and truth, then we relate to God as an Eternal Thou and our relationships with each other are transformed.

When God comes between us, we are no longer isolated individuals, we are brought together through God's Holy Spirit and we sense the one-ness of the Jesus Community. Oh, what a powerful experience, what a transforming encounter. We don't compete, we don't compare, we don't worry about how we look to each other. We enter into communion with one another through the Spirit of Christ. This is the Eternal Thou and whenever a church experiences this – tremendous things start to happen! We are no longer withheld from one another, no longer apprehensive about each other, no longer guarded, but we open our hearts to receive the Spirit who moves through us, between us, and among us.

You recall the famous story of the woman who had been “suffering with hemorrhages for 12 years.” She had spent all the money she had on physicians and no one could help her. “She came up behind Jesus and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped.” (Lk 8:44) Then the woman tried to hide herself, to draw back into the crowd. She wanted something from Jesus, she touched him and she got what she wanted. Time to go home.

But Jesus wasn't in to I-It relationships. He sensed something had happened and he didn't want it to be anonymous, distant or remote. He stopped the crowd as they were walking along and asked, “Who touched me?” (Lk 8:45) “All denied it.” Finally, Peter said, “Rabbi, the crowds surround you and press against you. Dozens of people have touched you.” (8:45)

No, Jesus said. “Someone touched me, for I felt the power of that interaction.” And he began searching among the crowd. “When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling and falling down before him. And she declared in the presence of the crowd why she had touched Jesus and how she had been healed.” The touch and the resultant healing weren't enough for Jesus. He didn't do “walk-by healings.” The woman was kneeling in the dirt. And Jesus must have raised her up so that he could look deeply and lovingly into her eyes. Any first-century Jew would know that a woman who had been discharging blood for 12 years was unclean. Constantly, fully unclean, resulting in her isolation. She must have committed some sin; done something terribly wrong to bring this fate upon herself. And Jesus not only healed her by stopping her bleeding, but listen to what he said, “Daughter,” he said. Daughter means that she is now restored as a Daughter of Zion. “Daughter of Zion, welcome back to the community of the righteous. Come and re-take your place. It is your faith that has made you well.”

Jesus didn't want an I-It relationship with the woman. He wanted an I-Thou relationship. And it brought about two healings: her bleeding stopped and she was restored to her community of faith.

In the same chapter is a story of a man who lived in chains on a remote hillside beside a flock of pigs. Many demons possessed him and he acted like a wild man. Neighbors were scared of him – so frightened that they kept him “under guard with chains and shackles. He lived isolated among the tombs.” (Lk 8:26f) And Jesus walked over to him, and took him seriously and asked, “What is your name?” The man answered, “My name is Legion.” This man had not likely been addressed with lovingkindness by anyone. Not for years. Maybe never. “How can I make you whole?”, Jesus asked. Legion cried out in fear, “Do not torment me, I beg you, Jesus, Son of the Most High.” (28) The only thing Legion knew was to fear other people. And Jesus ordered the demons out of the man. Again, it was an I-Thou encounter with a man others had treated as a danger to himself and to them.

Time and again, Jesus interacted with people on a deeply human level, in a way that took them seriously, with compassion and agape love, he reached out, he touched them, he embraced them, he set them free. He treated them as a thou and they, in return, so often recognized the Thou in Jesus.

And this is how Jesus wants to relate to us today. Not just as an historical teacher over 2,000 years ago. That is an “I-It” way of relating. He wants to be our savior, our healer, our friend.

What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!

What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer...

Can we find a friend so faithful, who will all our sorrows share?

Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the Lord in prayer.” (Joseph Scriven, 1855)

Jesus wants an I-Thou relationship with us. And he wants us, as his followers, to have I-Thou relationships with one another.

If my goal as your pastor is to worship at the altar of bigness and come to First Baptist Church to fill the pews to overflowing, then you are an “it” to me, a number, one of the people who will fill the pews – and of course – make me look successful. That is not pastoral ministry. My role as your pastor is to love you, to stand beside you, to pray with you, to enter into mutual friendship together and to build one another up. That describes an I-Thou relationship.

At the end of our vacation in Florida this past week, I took our children on an outing to swim with the manatees. Manatees, as you might know, are related to elephants and they are immense creatures with elephant-like skin. They are vegetarians. They have no predators in nature and they are completely harmless. When you first jump in the river and one of them swims beside you, it’s frightening because you can’t imagine the huge size of these animals. They can reach 13 feet in length and weigh up to 1300 pounds. And yet, once you relax, and if they are in the mood, they love to brush up against you. Our daughter and daughter-in-law were swimming together and a large manatee came up to them and rolled over on his belly and let them rub his tummy. You can’t help but fall in love with these lovable creatures! Jump in the water with them and it’s an I-Thou relationship. That’s how God wants us to interact with nature. According to the first story of creation in Genesis, God created something different every day and said, “Behold, this is very good.” We are invited to experience the goodness of the world around us in an I-Thou relationship instead of a relationship of using, taking, depleting.

Jesus used a variety of words to explain the reign of God. He said, “The reign of God is breaking into the world. It is close at hand. It is near. It is among you. It is within you.” All these ways to describe the I-Thou relationship.

Every time we celebrate communion together, we break bread and drink together from the cup, we celebrate the I-Thou relationship which Jesus offers us. There’s nothing remote about Jesus. There’s nothing detached about Jesus. With Jesus, there is only loving engagement.

It was a very strange invitation to Jews when they first heard it: to drink blood and eat flesh. On the surface, this was abhorrent to Jews with their dietary laws. But Jesus wanted us not just to remember him, but to take him into our lives, into our bodies.

And so we break the bread and drink the cup together to celebrate the I-Thou relationship to which Jesus invites us, and to experience God as the Eternal Thou – to become filled with the Holy Spirit, and then bring us together, so that there is no longer distance with God or between us. May it always be so! Amen.