

Blue Apron has been amazing for me.” “We have so much fun making these meals.” “Produce — fresh and very high-quality. Proteins [that] literally jumped out of the ocean.” “Blue Apron has changed my life for the better.”

These are customer testimonials from the website of Blue Apron, an American meal kit company. Fans of the company love the quality ingredients that show up at their doors, along with recipes that help them cook delicious meals. The only mystery is how they get proteins to “literally” jump out of the ocean!

But now, Blue Apron has apparently fallen on hard times. Back in 2017, the company was worth about \$2 billion, and its brand was sizzling hot. Then it acquired BN Ranch, “a network of sustainable meat producers.” *Fast Company* magazine reports that Blue Apron’s dreams to reimagine the food industry “soon withered.” Last September, the company was sold for \$103 million, quite a drop from its \$2 billion peak.

Similar companies are struggling alongside Blue Apron: The mattress retailer Casper, the online wine club Winc, and clothing factory Stitch Fix. They are in “a kind of zombie existence,” says *Fast Company*. “To the consumer, they are keeping up appearances, but behind the scenes, they are hollowing out ... only a brand veneer and intellectual property remain.”

We know what this feels like, don’t we? Keeping up appearances but hollowing out inside. We can find ourselves, like these companies, entering our own personal “zombie mode.” In fact, I’m fairly certain that we have all, at some point in our lives, “started to feel like a zombie.” We go through the motions without finding meaning, feeling utterly exhausted. “When we start to feel like a zombie, chances are we are struggling with burnout, or experiencing high levels of stress or distress including anxiety and low mood. Ok, so if that’s true, what can we do to get out of it?

Writing to the Romans, the apostle Paul says, “if you live according to the flesh, you will die.” Of course, in our lesson this morning he is not talking about the lives of flesh-eating zombies like the ones you see on television and in the movies. No, Paul is talking about something else. For him, to “live according to the flesh” is to live an ordinary human life, one that is dependent on human effort and ingenuity.

Such a life tends to be focused on worldly success, which is very satisfying when your company is worth billions of dollars. But along with the highs come the lows. The shoemaking company, Allbirds, was once worth \$4 billion, and it now has a market cap of \$200 million.

Apparently, everything in this life comes to an end, from innovative companies to ordinary human lives. Putting all your focus on worldly success tends to lead to exhaustion, burnout, stress and anxiety. You may be keeping up appearances, but you feel dead inside. You’re in Zombie mode.

The way out, according to Paul, is to open yourself fully to God’s investment in you. God wants to fill you with the power of the Spirit and give you membership in God’s own family. This does not involve venture capital or an initial public offering. No, it all comes from God’s loving and graceful initiative.

Most likely you have heard the term “angel investor.” Which is basically when a wealthy private investor finances a business venture out of their own resources. God can be seen as the *ultimate* angel investor, filling you with the power of the Spirit, making an investment in you out of God’s infinite resources.

God invests in you so that you will become a part of God’s family, included in the family tree by the Spirit instead of by the flesh. Paul says that “all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” The result is that you never have to feel hollowed out or empty, living without meaning or direction. “Being Spirit-

led,” says Bible professor Richard Carlson, is “a prime mark of membership in God’s family.”

And what a gift it is to be part of God’s family. We enter this family through adoption, which means that God makes a conscious choice to select us. As members of God’s family, we can call God, “Abba! Father,” just as Jesus did! We can experience the “Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” And we can enjoy the benefits of being “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.”

God. Spirit. Christ. They are our closest family members, once we allow ourselves to be led by the spirit of God. And they represent a set of relationships that will fill us up instead of emptying us. Like a bullet to the brain, membership in God’s family is a sure-fire cure for zombie mode.

For many churches, today is Trinity Sunday, the day each year in which a focus is put on God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is lifted up in our prayers and hymns and other elements of our worship service. Although Paul never used the word “Trinity” in any of his letters, he clearly understood that the one true God existed in three distinct persons. A critical aspect of the Trinity is that God — in God’s own self — is a family: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Talk about a game-changer! The Trinity reveals that God does not exist in some kind of individual isolation, but exists in a loving network of relationships. The Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Spirit, the Spirit loves the Father, and all are mutually supportive and interdependent. There is never any hollowed-out zombie existence in the Trinity. No, within the family of God there is always love and direction and meaning and purpose.

The same is true for us, once we are part of God’s family. When we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit, we become children of God, and this means that

we can experience the deep love and strong connections constantly being experienced by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. When we follow where the Spirit leads us, we find ourselves filled with the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” And those spiritual gifts are the polar opposite of zombie mode, in which we keep up appearances but feel hollow or empty inside. Filled with the fruit of the Spirit, we can make life-giving connections with God and the people around us.

As you are most certainly aware, isolation is on the rise in the United States. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy calls it an epidemic. Recently, about 50% of adults in America have said that they have experienced loneliness. And that was before the pandemic cut off so many people from friends, loved ones, and support systems. But there is hope, according to the surgeon general. “Religious or faith-based groups can be a source for regular social contact,” he writes, “serve as a community of support, provide meaning and purpose, [and] create a sense of belonging around shared values and beliefs.”

When churches, like ours, provide opportunities for contact and support, they are following the example of the Trinity. When congregations provide people with meaning and purpose, they are being led by the spirit of God. And when we Christians serve our neighbors, we are picking up our crosses and following Jesus Christ.

Paul makes it clear that being “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” involves self-giving. He says that we suffer with Christ “so that we may also be glorified with him.” While such an approach might sometimes involve extreme sacrifice, it usually involves a willingness to put others first. Such a life “entails selflessness, suffering, vulnerability and love for the sake of others,” says Bible scholar Carlson. This life “is not an option; it is a full and indispensable component” of a Spirit-created life in the family of God.

Selflessness. Vulnerability. Love for the sake of others. Although such attitudes and actions might seem like they would deplete us, they actually fill us up. In the Spirit-led family of God, the antidote to hollowness, to our emptiness, is service to others.

On the Blue Apron website, one customer writes, “*Blue Apron has changed my life for the better.*” That may be true when it comes to preparing delicious, healthy dinners. But to fill more than our stomachs, we need the recipe provided by the apostle Paul. Start by following the lead of the spirit of God. Then, call God your “Abba! Father!” Finally, suffer with Christ so that you can be “glorified with him.” Spirit, God, Christ: They’re the surefire cure for zombie mode. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.