

From Loneliness to Solitude

Psalm 25:14-18 John 16:29-33
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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On the Sunday before Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, it would be reasonable to expect a sermon on social justice, human equality, or freedom from oppression. It would also be understandable to expect a sermon addressing the unspeakable human tragedy in the aftermath of the massive earthquake earlier this week near Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

But instead, I decided to go ahead with my intention to deal with something that's been on my mind lately – the issue of loneliness and its effects on the lives of those who suffer from it. It's an age-old predicament.

From **Psalm 25**, the author cries out to God in anguish, "**Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.**" Loneliness. It has been called the "great leveler" for it knows no limits of race, economic class, social status, age, gender, or anything else.

In his 1975 book, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, renowned author on Christian spirituality, **Henri Nouwen**, writes, "**Loneliness is one of the most universal human experiences. It is also one of the most universal sources of human suffering today.**" In the 35 years since Nouwen wrote that statement the effects of loneliness appear to have become even more widespread in our society – even as our technology to communicate has increased dramatically.

There was a survey taken of psychiatrists and clinical psychologists in which they were asked: What is the most frequently expressed complaint? The number one answer: loneliness. Experts also say that it is a primary contributor to an increasing number of incidences alcoholism, drug use, promiscuity, depression, and even suicide.

What is loneliness? Well to begin with, we must not make the mistake that our culture often makes by equating being lonely with being alone. A person who is alone is not automatically lonely. And a person can be very lonely in the midst of a huge crowd of people.

Webster's Dictionary defines loneliness not as simply being alone but also as **a sadness from being alone, or as a feeling of bleakness or desolation**. Loneliness is one of those emotions that is often accompanied by other emotions, such as anxiety and fear. Loneliness is a feeling of being disconnected, unplugged, left out, isolated and alienated. In a book entitled *Through the Wilderness of Loneliness*, author Tim Hansel writes:

Sometimes there's nothing quite as desperate as feeling all alone. Trapped in our own isolation, it feels like you are in a house with all the windows blackened out so that there is no sunlight coming through. There is an inner darkness that can't seem to be pushed out.

Have you ever experienced something like that? I must admit that I have at times in my life, and I would suspect that many of you have as well. Often in the midst of our own loneliness, we feel like we're the only ones in the world who are lonely. Yet there are some social experts that suggest that **we are living in the most lonely period in human history.**

Well that's some of the bad news about loneliness. Is there any good news? **Does being a person of faith, for instance, affect this issue of loneliness in any way?** I would answer, Yes! To begin with, we need to let go of any understanding that being lonely is somehow a reflection on us as being spiritual weak. **We, like the psalmist, must admit that we are not immune from these empty feelings of desolation.**

Unfortunately, you can't buy anything over the counter to cure loneliness. You can't heal it by reading a book. You can't run, drive, or fly from it to a new solution. Nouwen advises that when we are lonely **we must stop looking for a new friend, a new lover, or a new community (including the church!) with the expectation that it is their responsibility to take our loneliness away.** For when we look to *others* in this way our relationships easily become clinging and greedy for attention and affection.

So instead of running away from our loneliness, Nouwen counsels that we have to face it and turn it into what he and others describe as "solitude." **It is possible to move from a desperate state of loneliness to a peaceful state of solitude.** Nouwen suggests that this can be accomplished, in part, when we begin to **stop reaching outward in order to fulfill our needs, and start searching inward.**

To ease the pain of loneliness, there must be **connection.** As strange as it sounds, solitude can lead to getting connected. Connection with others, yes. But also a connection with ourselves, and an experience of and connection with God. This is at the heart of all spirituality.

Since loneliness occurs deep down within us, the only hope for a solution must also come from that deep down place where we can recognize how near God is to you and me. So, begin by spending some quality time with the most important person in your life - YOU! That is not a selfish, narcissistic statement. Rather, that's part of loving yourself the way Jesus commanded.

One of God's great gifts to us can be time spent alone - time to be quiet and reflective. Jesus was well aware of this. That is why he often left the crowds and even his disciples behind to spend some quality time alone with just himself and God. Nouwen goes as far as to suggest that **we should look at loneliness as an invitation – an invitation to connect with God.** For in solitude we hopefully learn to not only hear our own inner voice, but also better hear the still, small voice of God. Many find this experience leads them to start dealing with the real, burning issues in their lives. Nouwen believes this is so important that he states, "The development of this inner sensitivity is the beginning of the spiritual life."

Solitude, therefore, does not ultimately separate us from others but instead brings us into a deeper communion with them. We can strengthen a mutual respect and a greater appreciation of each other's individuality, whether it be with a spouse, partner, friend, or a complete stranger.

Now concerning the all-too-frequent feelings of worthlessness and failure that often accompany loneliness, remember that our sense of worth must never be based on how many phone calls, letters, emails, texts, or visits we receive. They're great when they happen, but when we *expect* them as a necessary way to calm our fear of being alone, we become victims of our own self-complaint and self-pity. And we must be

constantly aware of the great trap of self-rejection, which can be associated with all this.

So when it's hard to hold onto a sense that you are an important and valuable member of society and of the Church, remember this: **God thinks you are of great worth.** We are more important and valuable than we can ever know. So celebrate the many things that make you special – the things that make you, YOU. It is then that we should share those things through acts of kindness, caring and compassion. It is then that we should reach out to others. In doing so God allows us to recognize the divine that dwells in each and every person. I, for instance, have come to experience how hard it is to feel lonely when I'm ministering to others!

Our faith has something else important to say about our fear of being alone. We must never forget that **being a Christian means belonging to a community. This sense of belonging is one of the most important reasons to become an active and regular-attending member in a congregation. It's one of the most important things we have to offer here at College Hill.**

And since loneliness is as much a societal problem as it is a personal one, we must never lose sight of our responsibility to include and nurture others. We do that through genuine hospitality. As we discussed last Sunday, that's also part of what our baptism is all about – being a valued member and part of the family of God.

But what about those times when we really do find ourselves alone? In today's Gospel passage from John 16, as Jesus is about to be arrested and crucified, he tells his disciples, his friends, that they will all desert him – which they do. But Jesus was assured that he wouldn't be completely alone. He wanted to share this assurance with his friends so that it would bring them peace when they, in turn, would experience inevitable loneliness and affliction.

Jesus said to his friends, "You will leave me alone, yet I am not alone, because God is with me." I know I probably say this too often, but remember that God promises to always be with you - **YOU AND I ARE NEVER COMPLETELY ALONE! - EVER!** Sometimes I think we forget this.

To put in another way, when Tim Hansen wrote that loneliness and isolation are like an inner darkness, he added; "however, there's a great truth that when you can't push the darkness out, you can let the light in. We may be lonely, but we are not alone." Let me close with another profound quote from Tim Hansen:

Loneliness is like a caterpillar in a cocoon. It feels lonely and isolated, but it is God's way of preparing to give us new wings of freedom. As we journey from loneliness to love, we do it through the tunnel of solitude - where we again discover that God loves us truly and fully for who we are and not who we [or anyone else] think[s] we should be.

Amen!