

Message: Alone, But Not Lonely

Are you lonely?

“Albert Einstein once said, ‘It’s strange to be known so universally and yet to be so lonely.’ You can be the most active person, volunteering like crazy or hosting every activity, but be filled with loneliness.”¹

That’s true inside and outside the church. We all know popularity and success don’t seem to work – Hollywood shows us that. Yet we’re supposed to be happy, well adjusted people if we follow Christ. So why do we still feel empty, isolated and disconnected?

Are you lonely? I don’t have to ask for a show of hands, I know the answer: YES. Many of us here today are lonely. We feel isolated, empty and filled with intense, unfulfilled longing. There just doesn’t seem to anyone you can REALLY share your feelings, frustrations, joys or concerns with. That doesn’t mean there aren’t people around. Some of the loneliest people in the world are in relationships that don’t give life. They’re just a way to pass the time.

Loneliness doesn’t discriminate. Author Judith Shulevitz defines loneliness as “the want of intimacy.”² It doesn’t matter whether you’re young or old, rich or poor, we all suffer from it. Loneliness affects us all, regardless of our gender, race, sexual identity, social or political position or citizenship. Most of us don’t suffer from mental illness or chronic depression. We’re just human.

In the Christian tradition of St. Augustine, there’s an understanding that loneliness is an inevitable part of the human condition. In this line of thinking, we’re made to be in union with God, but unable to fully satisfy that need on this side of heaven. We can’t escape our loneliness, no matter what we do to encourage intimacy. While there’s an element of truth there, I believe it’s an insufficient response to the predicament of loneliness. Rather than just saying “that’s the way it is,” I think it’s an invitation for us to talk more openly about the loneliness we’re all likely to experience during different seasons of life. So let’s do that.

¹ <http://www.crosswalk.com/faith/women/are-you-lonely.html>

² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2013/september/its-inevitable-were-human-were-christian-and-were-lonely.html>

If you're lonely today, you're in good company. Sociologist Robert Weiss estimates more than one-quarter of the American population feels extremely lonely at some time during any given month. In a 2010 survey by AARP, nearly 40% of American adults over 45 felt lonely.³ While people of all ages feel it, loneliness strongly affects teenagers and reaches it's highest peak in people between the ages of 18-25.

Having faith doesn't mean we won't be lonely. Moses, Joshua, Nehemiah, Job, Solomon and other prophets show us they were lonely. Check out the Old Testament books of Ecclesiastes and Lamentations sometime. “Mother Teresa once said the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible form of poverty. She described loneliness as the leprosy of the modern world.”⁴ Strong words.

Few people want to admit they're lonely. Pastor John Ortberg writes, “People will readily acknowledge being too busy because that makes them sound important, but to say ‘I'm lonely’ is kind of like saying ‘I'm a loser,’ and nobody's going to like a loser.”⁴ You're not a loser!

God promises to be with us in our loneliness. God promised Abraham, Jacob, Moses and the Israelites that he would be with them. God said to Joshua, “*I won't desert you or leave you*” (Joshua 1:5). If you're like me, there are times when I've read God's words and thought, “Well, I was hoping for something more.” When we're feeling isolated and empty, it seems like God's absent. The trouble is that I'm rarely quiet or patient enough to wait for God to meet me. I want the answer – NOW! Okay, tomorrow at the latest. Perhaps what's more deeply true is that we don't fully believe being alone with Jesus will satisfy us, even when we're lonely. That's a limitation in us, not in God.

There are a number of factors that can lead to loneliness. People may feel lonely due to a change in their life, such as a broken relationship, a new job or loss of a job, death of a spouse, separation from family members and friends, or illness. Young adults may feel isolated if they fail a test, don't have a driver's license or have people make fun of them. Stressful situations make us feel isolated and alone.

³ <http://www.todayschristianwoman.com/articles/2014/december-week-3/loneliness-epidemic.html>

Culture plays a role. Our culture is increasingly one of isolation and anonymity, where we have to produce for a consumer economy. Many of us have a sinking feeling of being unloved and unknown, with no value to anyone else. That’s not true! Technology can have a role, as we try to numb ourselves with too much TV, social media or other means to distract ourselves. People have more mobile lives. We move more often. Family strength is weaker and divorce rates higher than thirty years ago. The sense of belonging to a larger family – like being near grandparents or the presence of the church, has also decreased. The connectedness we once shared has steadily declined with every generation since World War II.⁴ Marriage isn’t a cure. People often experience the most intense loneliness in their marriages. When a marriage suffers from a lack of intimacy, loneliness follows.

The irony of loneliness is that it’s not about being alone.

Loneliness and solitude are different things. We can feel most lonely when we’re with other people. “Loneliness means knowing in our heart that we were created to really, truly know each other in the deepest sense, but we feel stuck with superficiality.”⁴

“Dannah Gresh from GirlsGoneWise.com shares an illustration.

Dannah has a friend whose seven-year-old daughter was killed in a tragic car crash. There was an outpouring of grief from friends; however, people just didn’t know how to step outside of their ‘superficial’ mode to offer real comfort and reach the grieving mother’s heart. They were uncomfortable with the reality of the situation. The most common way people approached the woman was to talk about her minor injuries, completely ignoring the fact that her daughter was killed. When Dannah and her friend talked, they talked about the little girl. They mostly talked about things that seemed small: her messy room, her favorite movie or that she loved horses, but the conversation moved to deeper hurts from there. One day, Dannah’s friend confessed that because the people she knew didn’t want to talk about her daughter at all, she felt lonely most of the time.”⁴

⁴ *Op. cit.*, *Crosswalk*

What can we do? We can admit the truth and stop hiding: we're lonely. Rather than putting up a good front and keeping our loneliness secret, let's take our masks off and share what's really on our heart. When we hide, we're starving our soul and it desires to really, truly be known. We can only be fully known by someone who loves us. The degree to which we feel unknown and unloved is the degree to which we feel lonely.

Jesus experienced acute loneliness. His disciples fell asleep when he wanted them near, denied him and ran away when his need was greatest. In the darkness of loneliness, Jesus confessed unshaken confidence in the presence of God. Just before his arrest, Jesus said to his disciples, "*You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for [God] is with me. I say this to you so you may have peace*" (John 16:32-33).

There's a lifeline in Jesus' words. To see it, we have to remember the wonderful thing Jesus taught us, "*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life*" (John 3:16). God loves you. You're worthy of God's love, forgiveness and restoration. When we're lonely, it's hard to believe that. It's hard to make the first move. Our confidence is low. God makes the first move. Jesus wants us to come close, because he knows what we're feeling. When we feel abandoned, Jesus knows, because that's what he felt when he was on the cross (Matthew 27:46).

Jesus knew God was with him in the darkest moments of his life. We have the same assurance and hope. We're not alone. When all our other relationships fail and our confidence is lost know this: God's grace is up to the task (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). God's power is perfect love and it's strongest when we feel most alone. God is there. It may take time, but Jesus will wait until you're ready to turn to him.

How does this apply to our lives? I think the answer is found in our relationships. Rather than building relationships based on convenience, which are easily lost, leaving us isolated and empty, let's build true relationships. The first relationship we need is a deep relationship with Jesus. The reason: Jesus' love isn't bound by anything in creation. Jesus' love overcame hate, prejudice, evil, violence, apathy, disease and all the limitations of this world, including death. That means Jesus' love

will never fail you, no matter how long it takes for us to realize it. This step requires faith.

The second relationship we need to build is with one another. We all need a few, deep relationships. I'm not talking about coffee hour friends. I'm talking about people we can tell our secrets to in confidence and trust. This step takes courage. It takes time. It takes a commitment. Try it, it works! It's important, because if we can't take our masks off, how close are we? Choose life over loneliness. Take a risk. One pastoral note: I am here for you, but cannot maintain 130+ deep relationships. It's important for you to connect with one another.

Let's stop listening to the voice of low self-esteem saying we're unlovable. Let's stop the self-defeating “stinking thinking” saying we're unworthy. Let's stop worrying about what we can't control and focus on what we can control – our attitudes, decisions and actions. Stop waiting for others to invite us to join them. Let's go, sit down next to someone and introduce ourselves. All of us should do this, not just those who are lonely. If you've lost some of your social skills and don't know how to talk to other people, that's okay. Keep trying and ask for help. That's a great way to find real friends. Not everyone is open to new relationships, but most people are.

The third relationship we need to build is with a group. Small groups at church are a great opportunity and antidote for loneliness. We have groups that participate in worship, study groups, small groups, scouts, youth activities and fellowship. There's a list available on the table out front or you can call the office. We'll be happy to connect you. We're a church family, and as we grow larger, we need to grow smaller. Small groups are an excellent way to build friendships, grow spiritually and be active in your faith. It's a great antidote to loneliness.

When we embrace life in this way, we have something to offer to our friends and neighbors. Guess what? They're lonely, too. Those outside the church may not have a group or close, deep relationships. Most of them don't have a relationship with Jesus. We can share these things. That's what it means to spread good news. Don't be afraid to introduce yourself to your neighbor, at the coffee shop or market.

I want to offer a warning. When we're lonely, it's easy to fall into the trap of the quick fix. It can take lots of forms: the new romance or sexual encounter, the new thing you bought or a thrilling experience. These things only fill space in our head, not in our heart.

A word used to describe the nature our relationship with God and others is *caritas* (charity or virtue). Thomas Aquinas teaches that *caritas* is “friendship with God that ultimately leads to deep friendship with one another.” In that space, we learn to cultivate more genuine depths of safe intimacy with one another not merely for our own sakes but for the sake of the one who first called us friends and never sent his disciples out alone.”³ In that space, we're safe, loved and secure.

Where is that space? Look to your right. Look to your left. Reach out and hold the hand of the person(s) seated next to you. Look up at the cross. That space is here. Now. In God's presence.

Isaiah 41:8-10 (NRSV)

But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, “You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off”; do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

Psalms 25:15-17 (NRSV)

My eyes are ever toward the LORD, for he will pluck my feet out of the net. Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress.

Matthew 18:12-14 (NRSV)

What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.