



“LONELY?”

John 17:6-11, 20-23

Rev. Shawn Lewis-Lakin

First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan

Perhaps you’ve seen the headlines...

- “Surgeon General Says There’s a Loneliness Epidemic” (*The Washington Post*, October 4, 2017, McGregor).
- “The Surprising Effects of Loneliness on Health” (*The New York Times*, December 11, 2017, Brody).
- Or the article in this past Friday’s *New York Times* by Arthur Brooks, president of the American Enterprise Institute, that was titled, “How Loneliness is Tearing America Apart.”

Or seen the statistics...

Earlier this year, the insurer Cigna released a study that included these findings:

- 46% of us are sometimes or always lonely.
- 27% rarely or never feel as though there are people who really understand them.
- 43% sometimes or always feel that their relationships are not meaningful.

This same study suggests that loneliness is as likely to lead to an early death as high blood pressure, lack of exercise, or smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Or, perhaps you have or are experiencing it...

Thanksgiving was Thursday. December 1st is next Saturday. The four Sundays of Advent. Then Christmas. While many experience Thanksgiving and the Christmas season as times of fullness, for others the holiday season is when the loneliness they experience day by day becomes acute.

* * * * *

In thinking about loneliness, it is important to understand what it is. It is possible to have multiple social interactions and relationships yet still be lonely, when the quality of such relationships do not meet our expectations.

A person with a vast network of social relationships, with thousands of friends on social media, can still be lonely when they recognize that these relationships have no depth and meaning, or when the perception is that others are enjoying life at a level they are not. It is also possible for a person to be relatively solitary yet not be lonely, because the relationships they do have are of high quality.

United States Senator Ben Sasse has a *New York Times* bestselling book titled, “Them: Why We Hate Each Other and How We Heal.” Sasse begins his book by looking at what he describes as our loneliness epidemic.

Sasse then suggests that what we are experiencing politically—in our culture, in our society, yes, sometimes, even in churches, even in families—is a reaction to loneliness. As an attempt to treat their persistent loneliness, Sasse theorizes, people create “tribes” of “us” vs. “them” to create an artificial sense of identity and belonging. Secure within their tribe, they lash out and hurl personal insults at the opposition instead of engaging in reasoned and intense dialogue.

Loneliness is real. It’s impact individually is unhealthy. It’s impact culturally is corrosive. So, my questions are these:

- **If loneliness is an epidemic, can the church offer healing and hope?**
- **If loneliness is at the core of a corrosive culture, might the church offer a model for the world of a different way of being together, even when we disagree?**

My answer to both questions is yes. By the grace of God, yes.

* * * * *

Jesus, at the end of the farewell discourse in John’s gospel, is a solitary figure. In his prayer, Jesus shows us what we—what the church—has to offer a society in which loneliness is epidemic.

This is John’s gospel, so Jesus’ prayer is rich in metaphors and meaning. Jesus prays:

I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Jesus may be a solitary figure praying, but he is not lonely. He prays that those who follow him may be one as we—God and Jesus—are one. In solitude he identifies as “we.”

This is John’s gospel, which in chapter 1, verse 1 says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer—three persons, one God—from the beginning a one that is more than one, that is we.

In Jesus, the fullness of God—Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. In Jesus, the full community inherent in the God we know as three.

And us: each of us is created in the image of God. In each of us, God, fullness, richness, community, because we are created in God's image.

I think that this why real, authentic, caring relationships—quality relationships—are so critical for us. Because they go to the core of who we have been created to be.

Then God said, "It is not good that one should be alone; I will make a helper to be a partner." (Genesis 2:18, paraphrased)

This is a truth of the Genesis creation narrative: we are created for relationship. With God. With each other. As Jesus prayed, I in them and you in me. Many together as one.

"Individual Christian"—it is a term that is an oxymoron. As Christians we are communal; we are by definition in relationship, with God and with each other.

* * * * *

What is the basis for the relationships we share? What draws us to this place, to worship, to stand side by side singing hymns, praising God, praying, praying with each other and for each other?

- Is it because we have shared political outlooks? No, not necessarily.
- Is it because we agree about how scripture should be read and interpreted? No, not necessarily.
- Is it because we all like each other? No, not necessarily. (Sorry... I am your pastor, I am probably not supposed to be so honest.)

We come together to praise God, to pray, to think about what our faith means to us, because we recognize that doing so—that being in community with each other—is not a matter of agreement or being of like mind, rather it is essential to our identity, it is who we have been created to be.

We do not have to think alike, or believe alike, or even love alike...because we recognize that what unites us is the Christ in each of us. We live into the prayer of Jesus, that we might be one as Jesus and God are one; that we might find common space and relationship, not because we think or look or love alike, but because we recognize the Christ in each other.

* * * * *

In a commencement address that the author Kurt Vonnegut delivered almost 45 years ago, he said this:

What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.

Might this, might we—a faith community, a congregation—be that which Vonnegut dared those he addressed to create? A stable community. Might we—yes, we—be a place that people can call home, a place of healing and hope for loneliness that is epidemic?

By suggesting this, I don't want to suggest that those of us who attend worship will never experience loneliness. We will. We do. What I want to suggest is that we as a church can and should be a place of healing and hope for the lonely, including the lonely in our midst. What does this look like?

It looks like this: communal worship where we come together as one to worship, to sing, to pray together.

It sounds like hearing your name spoken by another, when following worship, the one sitting down the pew from you says, "Mary, it was good worship with you. Will you come with me to Fellowship Hall for coffee?"

When I am normally over there and serving as the liturgist and I suggest to you that when the ritual of friendship pad returns from being passed you return it open so that you can take note of those seated near you and greet them by name after the service, I really do want you to do that. What we do here—when we sit together and worship together with an expectation to greet and welcome each other and speak each other's names—may be the only place in a week when the one next to you hears their name spoken by another.

A priority for us as a congregation is discipleship ministries. Small groups that meet for prayer, study, discussion, fellowship; small groups in which people do life and faith together, are at the core of discipleship ministries.

On Tuesday mornings I attend a small group. It meets at 6:30 a.m. I am not a morning person. I usually arrive closer to 6:40 a.m. than 6:30 a.m. A year and a half ago, when I started attending, it was because I was the staff person designated as the liaison to it. Tuesday morning guys, if you are here, this is my confession: I was showing up because it was part of the job. Now, well, when I arrive, people greet me. As a member of the group, I've shared concerns and celebrations and asked for prayer. I've prayed for and with others. And around that circle that shares in prayer, I've discovered that I am not alone in what I name as prayer needs.

According to the records we keep, about 20% of those of you here for worship on any given Sunday are a part of a discipleship group, a small group that meets regularly to do life and faith together. There is an announcement in today's bulletin about Advent study groups. Next Sunday, our Winter Program Guide will be included in your worship bulletin. It includes nearly 200 opportunities beyond worship for you to connect and to be a part of the life we share as a congregation. My invitation to you, my challenge to you, is to find a place beyond attending worship, to connect, to grow in community. If you need help, talk to me, to Pastor Lindsey, our discipleship pastor, talk to any of our pastors, or to Mary or Karen in our membership office. And if you attend a group and it doesn't seem like a good fit, try another...

This is one of the things about the group of which I am a part: I can't tell you who in the group is a Republican or Democrat or Independent. I have a few ideas, but political affiliation is not that which brings us together. Being of one mind on critical issues facing our community, our nation, or even our church, is not what unites us when we gather. What unites us is our commitment to see the Christ in each other, and to be the Christ for each other—to listen, to pray, to grow together. What makes a group of guys meeting at 6:30 a.m. work? What makes it a place of healing for loneliness? Perhaps Jesus' prayer, "...that they, that we, may be one as Jesus and God are one—Jesus in us and God in Jesus...."

Let me share an additional impact that being a part of this (communal worship) and that being a part of a small group has on me. It makes me less inclined to hit the like button on vitriolic social media posts that divide persons into us versus them. Am I passionate in my political outlook? Yes. Do I have theological viewpoints and faith perspectives about which I feel strongly? Absolutely.

At the same time, I sit in a pew and join in song with others who are at different places than I am. And I sit in a circle and pray with persons whose political perspectives are different than mine. And that makes it hard for me to demonize those with whom I disagree, to look at them and see them as "other."

If loneliness is an epidemic, can the church offer healing and hope?

If loneliness is at the core of a corrosive culture, might the church offer a model for the world of a different way of being together, even when we disagree?

My answer to both questions is yes. Yes, through the grace of God.

* * * * *

Thursday was Thanksgiving. Turkey. Stuffing. Mashed potatoes. Gravy. Sweet Potatoes. Pumpkin pie. Apple pie. Pecan pie. Pecan pie—my favorite.

Two weeks ago, at a forum with delegates to the Special Called General Conference of the Global United Methodist Church, the Rev. Melanie Carey shared a parable. The parable was from a book titled *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and The Teachings of Plants*. The author is Robin Wall Kimmerere, a Native American woman of the Potowamoni tribe, a biologist, author and teacher. The parable was from a chapter titled: "The Council of Pecans."

Kimmerere writes:

Nut trees don't make a crop every year, but rather produce at unpredictable intervals. Some years a feast, most years a famine, a boom and bust cycle known as mast fruiting.

If one tree fruits, they all fruit—there are no soloists. Not one tree in a grove, but the whole grove; not one grove in the forest, but every grove; all across the county and all across the state. The trees act not as individuals, but somehow as a collective. Exactly how they do this, we don't yet know. But what we see is the power of unity. What happens to one happens to us all. We can starve together or feast together. All flourishing is mutual.

We make a grave error if we try to separate individual well-being from the health of the whole. The gift of abundance from pecans is also a gift to themselves... Together, the trees survive, and thrive.

In telling the history of her people, Kimmerere writes,

We have always known that the plants and animals have their own councils, and a common language. The trees, especially, we recognize as our teachers. [The wisdom of the pecans:] Stick together, act as one. We Pecans have learned that there is strength in unity, that the lone individual can be picked off as easily as the tree that has fruited out of season....

* * * * *

I invite you to hear again the words of Jesus' prayer for us:

Holy One, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. My prayer is that all of them may be one, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity.

May we, through the grace of God, through the prayer of Jesus, be such a community. A lonely world—lonely people in this place—need us to be such a community. A corroding and corrosive culture needs us to be such a community. May it be so. Amen.

-
- Brody, Jane E. *New York Times*. 11 December 2017. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/11/well/mind/how-loneliness-affects-our-health.html>>.
- Brooks, Arthur C. *New York Times*. 2018 23 November. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/23/opinion/loneliness-political-polarization.html>>.
- Cigna. 1 May 2018. <<https://www.cigna.com/newsroom/news-releases/2018/new-cigna-study-reveals-loneliness-at-epidemic-levels-in-america>>.
- Khazan, Olga. *The Atlantic*. 6 April 2017. <<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/04/how-loneliness-begets-loneliness/521841/>>.
- Kimmerere, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 213. Minneapolis.
- McGregor, Jena. *The Washington Post*. 4 October 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2017/10/04/this-former-surgeon-general-says-theres-a-loneliness-epidemic-and-work-is-partly-to-blame/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4bf46c26d05a>.
- Sasse. *Them: Why We Hate Each Other - And How to Heal*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Hobart and William Smith Colleges*. 26 May 1974. <<https://www.hws.edu/news/transcripts/vonnegut.aspx>>.