

“Loneliness: the Fear of Being Alone”

Date: October 18, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Genesis 2:18; John 14:18, 27

Occasion: Unafraid, series

Themes: Loneliness, fear, love, friendship

We all feel lonely at times. Covid-19 has only exaggerated a problem which many people had even before the pandemic. Loneliness is a feeling of sadness that comes from a sense of social isolation – from feeling alone, as though we have no real companions with whom to share our life.

Loneliness is not the same as solitude. We all need solitude from time to time. I enjoy kayaking with friends; I also enjoy kayaking alone – it provides a special kind of peace. Before the pandemic I also took monthly retreats to Mt. St. Benedict for a day of reflection, alone. It was a day of prayer and study and inner reflection.

We do need times of solitude, but we are also wired as human beings for companionship. We need people with whom we can share our lives, talk to, listen to, people who care about us and enjoy being with us. On the other hand, it is also possible to be surrounded by people and still feel lonely. The cure for loneliness is not merely being around people.

Seventeenth-century poet John Milton wrote: “Loneliness is the first thing which God named *not good*.” Milton was referring to Genesis 2, in which God places the first human in the Garden of Eden and then says, “It is not good that the human is alone.” At the very beginning of Scripture we find the human need for companionship.

Now, not everyone is meant to be married, but everyone, including the most introverted among us, needs some human connection. I think that is part of what has been so hard about this pandemic – being isolated from the people who used to give our life meaning and companionship. We miss the

interaction of other people, do we not? I'm sure, that's part of what is driving people to gather more frequently, sometimes dangerously so. But it is that *need* to interact with others.

Some people find it *difficult* to associate with others because they didn't form strong attachments in their infancy. Or, sometimes the intimacy felt conditional, and they only felt loved if their parents or significant care-taker was pleased with their behavior. If not, they felt love was withheld.

Some people have an insatiable need to be loved and affirmed and they almost suffocate other people, they are so needy. Still others fear rejection, and so they sabotage relationships and reject others first – even people they care about – out of fear of being rejected by the other.

Not all loneliness comes from attachment concerns. It may be that we recently experienced the loss of a friend; perhaps they died or merely moved away. But we miss them. Some struggle to know how to develop meaningful relationships; they lack the skills. We can also feel lonely when we're going through a period of depression, or isolation – like we are now.

Some people fear the loneliness they feel *now* will last forever. Maybe they feel unloved and fear *no one* will ever care about them in a meaningful way. Maybe they tell themselves, "I'm not smart enough, or pretty enough. I'm lonely now; I'm going to be lonely forever; and I'll grow old and die alone." They catastrophize their feelings and that doesn't help.

When we've lost a spouse, this fear of loneliness is particularly pronounced. The longer a couple has been married, the harder it can be to work through the feelings of loneliness.

Loneliness, like fear, is a part of life. It usually passes. But chronic loneliness can have serious emotional and physical consequences. One

medical study showed that sustained periods of loneliness can have the same impact on your physical health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

The problem is made worse because America is a very mobile country; we move a lot. On average, Americans move 11 times during their lifetimes, and each time they do it can mean losing meaningful relationships. We used to have only 2 or 3 jobs in our lifetime. Now, we are told, people may be changing jobs as much as every three years. Every time you change jobs, you leave friends behind.

When we retire, many people move to new locations, such as sunny Florida or Arizona. When they do, they leave behind neighbors and friends and their church family. Sometimes relocating works out great; but sometimes it undercuts long-term relationships developed over a lifetime.

Divorce can lead to loneliness because one of the casualties is often a couple's entire network of friends. And one last contributing factor of loneliness today is our modern technology. An email doesn't take the place of an eye-to-eye conversation, and an emoji doesn't replace a hug. Many people today are missing handshakes, a kiss on the cheek, or a good old fashioned hug.

So, what do we do about this pandemic of loneliness? Well, often when we feel lonely or fear being alone, we tend to do the opposite of what is needed. Instead of reaching out to others, or going where others are, we withdraw in fear. Too often, lonely people drop out and quit trying to connect. They tend to isolate, which only perpetuates the problem.

One of the common-sense responses is simply to re-engage with others, no matter what it feels like at first, and it can feel awkward for a while. Many, who feel lonely in retirement, take on part-time jobs and suddenly feel connected again. I've personally seen single individuals volunteer at church

and develop meaningful relationships, grow in their self-confidence, and stop their isolating lifestyle.

For some, it may involve getting a pet, someone to talk to. And though a pet cannot serve fully as a replacement for human engagement, pets often help to take the edge off their loneliness.

Because of the pandemic, it has been harder to reconnect with people. Many of the activities we used to do have either been taken away from us, or we don't feel safe doing them yet. But that is still not a reason to remain totally isolated.

Writing and mailing cards can be a wonderful way to engage with others. It will brighten your life, I'm sure. You're cheering up someone else, by reminding them you're still thinking of them. And my guess is, they will be so grateful, they call you to say thank you. And won't it be wonderful, to hear their voices again?

Or, you could just skip the card and call them yourself. Many people who feel isolated also engage in self-pity, wondering why no one ever calls them. Why not pick up the phone and make the call yourself? Don't wait for the other person. Believe me you will bless them as well as helping yourself. The best way to make a friend is to be a friend.

When it's possible, and when you feel it's safe, you might consider doing some volunteer work, such as visiting at a nursing home, helping at a soup kitchen, visiting a veteran's hospital, volunteering at an animal shelter. Match your interest with a need in the community, and it gets you out of the house, interacting with others and making a difference in the world.

I invite you to consider finding your church directory and start making some phone calls. It doesn't matter if you know the people or not. Just reach out to them, tell them who you are, and ask how they're doing. Believe me;

a lot of people will be glad to hear from you. What? They don't answer the phone if they don't recognize the number? Then call someone else. Call until you get an answer. Don't be discouraged.

There is one other relationship I don't want us to forget, and that is our relationship with God. As a Christian, I believe that our loneliness is not only a yearning for others, but also a yearning for God's love and daily, deep relationship with him. This deep longing in our hearts is in part a longing for companionship with God.

As Protestants, one of the hallmarks of our faith is having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He is not only Lord and Savior, Jesus, God's Son, is also our friend. In John 15:15 Jesus says, "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing. But I have called you friends."

One of our beloved hymns, written by Joseph Scriven, beautifully describes this friendship with the Lord. "Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care? Precious Savior, still our refuge - take it to the Lord in prayer. Do thy friends despise, forsake thee? Take it to the Lord in prayer. In his arms he'll take and shield thee, thou wilt find a solace there." The hymn is called, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

My dear friends, rather than believing that you are unloved and will never be loved, you can trust you are already loved with a love that will never let you go. Therefore, please trust that God through Christ is your best friend, and know that you can go to him anytime, anywhere, and he will be there for you. Friends, you are loved with a love that will not let you go. Count on it. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*, by Adam Hamilton. New York: Convergent Books, 2018. pp. 114-129.