Sermon 01-26-20

Friendless and Alone?

UnAfraid: Living with Courage and Hope

Genesis 2:15, 18, Psalm 139:5, 8-10, John 13:34

**Sermon Starter**

We continue today to explore the things we fear as human beings, and to consider the keys to living UnAfraid, facing life with courage and hope. Today we turn to what is a fundamental need we have as human beings, and the anxiety, worry or fear that we sometimes experience when it is not met, or when we fear it won’t be met. That universal need is companionship and love.

Sue Bourne, a filmmaker who produced the BBC Documentary, *The Age of Loneliness,* notes that, **“We’re all a bit scared of loneliness – of being alone. Of being left. Of not being loved. Or needed. Or cared about. “Lonely” hits a spot of fear in all of us even if we don’t acknowledge it.”**[[1]](#footnote-1)

Loneliness is the feeling of isolation that we feel at times – the feeling that we have no real companions with whom to share our life. It’s not the same as solitude – we all need alone time – so this is not the problem. With Kelley not working, we spend a lot of time together. However, every once in a while she packs up her purse and heads out to do some shopping. She wants some quiet time - alone time – to do what she enjoys without me being there asking, “Are we done yet?”

But though we need alone time, we are also wired as human beings for companionship – for someone to share our lives with, to talk to, to listen to – someone who cares about us and enjoys being with us.

You’ll recall that in the Genesis 1 God creates our world and all that is in it. Genesis notes, after each thing God made, **GRAPHIC: God saw that it was good.** At the end of creation in chapter one we read, **GRAPHIC: God saw everything he had made: it was very good.**  In the opening verses of Genesis 2 God places the first human in the Garden of Eden, and then for the first-time God said that something was not good. Listen, **GRAPHIC: Then the LORD God said, “It’s NOT GOOD that the man is should be alone …”** John Milton, the 17th century author of *Paradise Lost*, once noted that **GRAPHIC: Loneliness is the first thing which God’s eye named not good.** God’s response was to create the second human being.

Most animals have this need. If you have pets, you know they always want to be in the room where you are. As you know, we have dogs. **GRAPHIC: Whenever we sit down,** be it to watch TV, read, or pray, the dogs want to be right with us. As close as they can get.

We don’t have to be married, but we do want human connection. Even those who are introverts, or who see themselves as hermits or loners have a need for some companionship. This springs from the first nine months of our lives – we are in our mother’s wombs, enveloped by another, hearing her heartbeat, her breathing, her muffled words. We’re never alone. Is it any wonder that when we’re tiny infants we wake up in the middle of the night crying, often not for food, or to be changed, but simply to be held.

We will all know loneliness from time to time. But some will also experience a fear of loneliness, of being alone, of being unloved. Once more we **catastrophize** – we tell ourselves things like, “No one likes me, and no one *will ever* like me. I’m not smart enough, I’m too fat, I’m not likeable,” or simply, “I am lonely now and I’ll always feel lonely and there is nothing I can do about it. I’m going to be alone forever, and I’ll grow old and die alone.

I was struck by two quotes I read this week: Einstein who famously noted that, **GRAPHIC W/PHOTO: “It is strange to be known so universally and yet to be so lonely.”** And Oscar winning actress Anne Hathaway who noted when she was 22, **GRAPHIC W/PHOTO: Loneliness is my least favorite thing about life. The thing that I'm most worried about is just being alone without anybody to care for or someone who will care for me.**

Listen, loneliness is a part of life. We’ll all experience it from time to time. It usually passes. But chronic loneliness is persistent, and can have serious emotional and physical consequences. One study in Great Britain said that chronic loneliness, day in, day out long term loneliness, has the same impact on one’s physical health as **smoking 15 cigarettes a day**. In Great Britain and in America researchers are now speaking of an “epidemic of loneliness.”

There are several reasons why modern people may be experiencing greater loneliness. Only 24% of Americans live in the city where they grew up – the latest research I can find says the average American will move 10 times in their life – and every time we move we lose most of the meaningful relationships in our lives.[[2]](#footnote-2) It used to be people had two or three jobs in a lifetime. An article in *Fast Company* last year noted that today’s employee who wants to get ahead should plan on “switching jobs every three years for life.”[[3]](#footnote-3) So there is a loss of friendships with co-workers. Then the significant number of marriages that end in divorce affects friendships. When we get older, we retire. Most people leave behind their work relationships. An increasing number of people move when they retire to a sunny place like Florida or Arizona, leaving behind neighbors and friends and church family to start rebuilding a network of new friends. Sometimes this works out great, sometimes it undercuts the long-term relationships we’ve developed over a lifetime.

Finally, there is technology, which can help us stay connected, but often leaves us more isolated than in the past. We speak in 140 bit sound bytes, but we no longer hear each other’s voices, look into each other’s eyes, or experience the touch of another. When things are going rough, this **PHOTO: TEXT MESSAGE WITH A SAD FACE** is simply not the same thing as this: **PHOTO: A HUG**. So how do we live without fear of loneliness and being unloved?

**II. Therapeutic Tips:**

Therapists offer different suggestions for how to address our fear and anxiety around isolation. Often chronic fear of rejection relates to childhood experiences of abandonment rejection or abuse. Perhaps as an infant we were left alone for long periods with no one to attend to us, or as children a parent left the home or died. These can leave us feeling insecure about our relationships, or insecure about whether we are worthy of another’s love and friendship. They can leave us with anxiety that those in our lives will eventually leave as our parents did.

Similarly, if we experienced regular rejection as a child, we might have tapes that play in our head that saying things like, “No one would really want to be my friend.” Those who struggle with chronic loneliness tend to interpret every social interaction in the light of their childhood experiences and in the most possible negative way. If someone doesn’t respond to an e-mail within an hour, or a day, it can’t be that they were busy, or missed the e-mail. It must mean they don’t like me. If someone walks by without talking or looking at me it can’t be that they are preoccupied, it must be that they are mad at me. If someone is in a bad mood it can’t be that they have other problems, it must be that they don’t want to be around me.

Once again, seeing a therapist regularly to help unwind these kind of thoughts is important to finding mental health. Therapists invite their patients to pay careful attention to negative thoughts when they occur, to question their validity, to test if the assumptions were really accurate before jumping to conclusions, and to practice assuming the best instead of the worst.[[4]](#footnote-4) There are a host of other therapies for addressing this kind of maladaptive thinking and behavior.

So, among the common-sense therapies, though we don’t want to do it, is to re-engage with people. If we are retired, it may be to take a part time job. It may be to volunteer, to join a club or organization where you will connect with people. And it may include getting a pet – someone to talk to, though the pets cannot fully serve as surrogates for people. The older we get the more important this becomes. Often a plan is mapped out for combatting loneliness that includes these things.

It’s interesting that we spend a fair amount of time developing our retirement plan. But researchers in this field note that the single most important indicator of your happiness in retirement is relationships. **It’s not how much money you have, or moving to Scottsdale that ultimately determines how happy you are in retirement, but having at least a handful of meaningful relationships.** If we invested in those long-term relationships like we invest in our 401K we’re likely to live long, healthier and happier lives.

**III. God and the Church**

That leads me to the gospel and the spiritual resources we have to draw upon when facing our loneliness, our feelings of isolation, of being unloved, and our fears related to these things. So much of the gospel is about this. It is our nature, our human condition, to have a longing to be loved, to love, to be in relationship with another.

Study after study has found that people who have faith, who are involved in their church or synagogue, who have relationships with each other, who are involved in serving others, are happier and less lonely, healthier and live longer than those who are not.

This is what church looks like – worship, but more than worship, it is Christian community – it is relationships that include volunteering together, growing together, classes, small groups, support groups, home groups, youth group, young adults, singles, crossroads, and in all of these loving one another, bearing one another’s burdens, and being the body of Christ.

An AARP study that came out two years ago, noted that people involved in their faith community were 40% less likely to report a sense of loneliness than those who were not. We need relationships, and that is part of what the church is about – from children’s Sunday School to youth group, to Sunday School classes, UMW circles, and all the rest. It is not good for the humans to be alone – God made not only companions, but the church.

I’d end with this idea – the existentialists philosophers spoke about loneliness being a fundamental part of being human. But they often failed to understand that the reason this is so is because we were created for a relationship with God. You were made to love and be loved, by God. You likely know the familiar quote from St. Augustine, **GRAPHIC W/IMAGE: Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.** The deep longing in our hearts is in part a longing for companionship with God.

It is interesting but on multiple occasions people in the scripture were described as “friends” of God – Abraham was called the friend of God in scripture.[[5]](#footnote-5) Exodus 33:11 says that God spoke to Moses as a man speaks to a friend. The Psalms reflect the deep relationship God’s people might have with God.

Throughout scripture we find the biblical authors describing what is commonly called their “relationship with God.” Jesus described God as Father – not the kind of angry, mean, vindictive and loveless father some seem to preach, but a Father who loves his children deeply, who shows mercy to them, who protects them and holds them fast.

Christians speak of their “personal relationship with Jesus” – a friendship with Jesus. Jesus embodies God, is God with us, and we, in our relationship with him, share in a relationship with God. Jesus said to his disciples in John 15:15, **GRAPHIC: 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.**

Joseph Scriven famously captured the idea in a poem he wrote in 1855, that became a well-loved hymn, “What a friend we have in Jesus.”

The concept of the Christian spiritual life is redirecting your imagination from thinking no one could love you, and you’ll always be alone, to imaging that you are loved so much a man would die for you, and that God is with you always, and talking with him, listening for him, pouring out your heart to him. It is being aware of the presence of God, the love of God, the mercy of God and making it your heart’s desire to walk with God. I love how the Psalmist captures this in Psalm 139, **GRAPHIC:**

**You hem me in, behind and before,**

**and lay your hand upon me…**

**Where can I go from your spirit?**

**Or where can I flee from your presence?**

**If I ascend to heaven, you are there;**

**if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.**

**If I take the wings of the morning**

**and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,**

**even there your hand shall lead me,**

**and your right hand shall hold me fast.**

Once again, instead of using our imagination to imagine that no one will ever be our friend, that we will always be alone, we use our imagination to picture Christ by our side. We speak to him. We read scripture and listen for him. We picture in our mind’s eye that he is by our side. We remember how he said, **GRAPHIC: “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”** It is what families used to do when they would set an extra place setting at their table and pray, “Be present at our table Lord.” It is what I do when I take a road trip and pray for Jesus to be my pilot and the Holy Spirit my guide. If we fully grasped the truth of the gospel, we would know that we are never alone and never unloved. We are loved with a love that will not let you go. God says to us, I know you. I know you better than you know you. You are beautiful. And I love you. Imagine that!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Scripture Reading for Sunday, January 29, 2017

Genesis 2:15, 18

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it…Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”

Psalm 139:5, 8-10

You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me…

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? …

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

John 13:34

I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other.

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/04/10-reasons-people-lonely-the-age-of-loneliness> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Barna [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.fastcompany.com/3055035/the-future-of-work/you-should-plan-on-switching-jobs-every-three-years-for-the-rest-of-your- [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-science-success/201010/the-cure-loneliness> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 2 Chronicles 20:7 and James 2:23 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)