

Jan 12 *Unafraid – Living with Courage and Hope*

“Friendless and Alone?”

Psalm 139: 1-14

John 13:34-35

One of the great fears we have is of being alone. We lose a soul mate after many decades. Our friends and family are all busy living their lives, they try to make time for us but many days seems to stretch on forever with us being all alone. For some of us this is a fear of what our future might look like. For others it describes our situation right now. Today we are going to look at this fear and see how and why we should confront it.

What is loneliness? It is the feeling of isolation we experience at times, the feeling that we have no one with whom to share our life. It's not the same as solitude. We all need alone time. Loneliness is real, and when you have lost a partner, it is likely a part of your existence for the rest of your days. There is no way to completely replace that intimacy. But there are ways to combat its isolating, numbing power over us that can cause us to withdraw from life.

In the second creation story found in Genesis 2 and 3, God places the first human in the Garden of Eden. Then for the first time God said something was not good: “Then the LORD God said, ‘It's NOT GOOD that the human is alone.’” God's response was to create the second human being. We are created to be in community. We don't have to be married, but we do need human connection. Even introverts, those who see themselves as hermits or loners, need companionship. We are 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.

I think this need of companionship springs from the first nine months of our lives. We are in our mother's womb, 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?

Loneliness is a part of life. But chronic loneliness can have serious emotional and physical consequences. One study in Great Britain said that long-term loneliness has the same impact on physical health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. In Great Britain and America, researchers are now speaking of an “epidemic of loneliness.” Too often we isolate ourselves from others behind the walls of our homes spending many hours alone.

Sometimes we allow our normal experiences of being alone move into a fear of being alone, and of being unloved. When someone says they are busy and can't have lunch with us, or don't want to go to a movie with us or some such thing, instead of accepting that this is part of life we tell ourselves things like, “No one likes me, and no one will ever like me. I'm too dumb, I'm too fat, I'm not likeable.” This turns into, “I am lonely now, I'm going to be alone forever, and I'll grow old and die alone”

So, since we are in the midst of an epidemic of loneliness and many of us fear being lonely now and forever what can we do? The first thing, and it is very hard at times to do, is to intentionally re-engage with people, even when we don't want to do it. It may be, if we're retired, to take a part time job. It may be to volunteer in some way here at the church, join a new club or organization where you will connect with new people. Invite someone new to go out to lunch after church. As much as we enjoy our friends and groups, the memories from the past cling to them so when we have lost a partner we should do something new. Another possibility is to volunteer to take an active role in a club you have been in, to force you to be engaged. The older we get the more important this staying engaged, re-engaging, becomes.

I think of a conversation I had with a woman at our community dinner. I have told this often to people. She came up to me before the meal and said, “This is my first time here and I am not happy about being here!” Realizing that there was more to the story than her possibly disliking the menu for the evening, I found a moment later to talk with her. It came out that her husband had died about six months prior. Since then she had quit attending her bridge group, going out to lunch with friends and more. She sat in her house most days, with the blinds pulled, feeling depressed and sad. She only went out to get groceries and to go to her doctor. She had lost quite a bit of weight and was

starting to have other health problems. Her daughter who lived in another part of the country became very concerned. She read about our meal online. She called and reserved a spot for her mom and then called her and told her what she had done. She then said, "Mom, they are expecting you and it would be bad manners not to go." Her very proper mother decided that she would honor the reservation. But she didn't want to be there. As God's grace would have it, she sat across from another recently widowed woman and they had a wonderful conversation. Before leaving she said to me, "I think I will be back next month." She returned and was a regular for about 9 months when she came up to me and said, "I won't be back. I don't need you!" She then went on to talk about all she was doing, friends she was going out with and more. Forced into community she began to miss it and seek it out and her health improved, her weight stabilized and more.

Why is community so important? Beyond the ways it feeds our souls we need to remember that we were created for relationship with God. You were made to love and be loved by God. You likely know the familiar quote from St. Augustine: "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. On multiple occasions, people in the Bible were called "friends" of God. Throughout Scripture we find the biblical authors describing what is often called their "relationship with God." Jesus described God as Father—not the 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: "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".

The other way to change from fear of loneliness or the acute isolation of loneliness is to intentionally strive to live our faith each day. The "Christian spiritual life" means, in large measure, redirecting your imagination from thinking no one could love

you and you'll always be alone or that you have lost a love and nothing will ever make up for it to imagining that you are loved so much that God in Jesus would die for you, and that God is with you always. You can talk with him, listen for him, pour out your heart to him.

I love the Psalmist's picture of God always with us in Psalm 139:
"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."

Using our imagination to picture Christ by our side helps us profoundly. We speak to him. We read Scripture and listen for him. We remember how he said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Families used to set an extra place setting at their table and pray, "Be present at our table, Lord." I know of one woman who after her husband's death set a place at the table each Sunday after church and said, "Lord, who do I need to invite to sit here in your name this week?" She would then call until one or many were at her table each week. Seeing them as Jesus' representatives warmed her heart and melted the ice of loneliness.

When you fully grasp the truth of the gospel, you know that you are never alone and never unloved. You are loved with a love that will not let you go. God says to you, "I know you. I know you better than you know you. I know every cruddy thing you ever did—and I love you more than anyone else ever could." Imagine that! This should also help us to reach out to others in love.

We can all fear being chronically alone. It saps our life and our spirit. But God has an antidote, community! We were not created to live alone. So give to God your loss, your doubts and your fears. Welcome those around you, push yourself to be engaged with others and you will be blessed as you also are a blessing to others.