

Well-Cared-For

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Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 14, 2023

Scripture

Ezekiel 34:11-16

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep and will sort them out. As shepherds sort out their flocks when they are among scattered sheep, so I will sort out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them into their own land, and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strays, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

John 14:15-21

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me, and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

Sermon

The U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, recently released a health advisory that has received considerable attention in the press. A recent *New York Times* article about the advisory surfaced in many conversations over the past two weeks. It came up in Bible study and adult education discussions. Yesterday, we were at the Books in Bloom festival in Columbia to hear Eric Klinenberg, and he, too, referred to the advisory. Klinenberg is a professor of sociology at New York University and the author of an important book, *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* (Broadway Books, 2018). Klinenberg spoke eloquently and movingly about the critical place libraries hold in democracies. It was Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) who called libraries “palaces of the people.” His talk was followed by a panel discussion on the new library to be built in Columbia along Wilde Lake. Libraries provide social infrastructure; they bring people together out of their isolation into a space that can be transformational, where connections are made, relationships emerge, a place opening up new horizons of meaning and greater self-knowledge and awareness. A library can help to address this health concern that Murthy warned about.

According to the surgeon general, Americans have become increasingly lonely and isolated, and this lack of social connection is having a devastating impact on so many aspects of our lives, particularly mental and physical health. Murthy writes, “At any moment, about one out of every two Americans is experiencing measurable levels of loneliness. This includes introverts and extroverts, rich and poor, and younger and older Americans. Sometimes loneliness is set off by the loss of a loved one or a job, a move to a new city, or health or financial difficulties — or a once-in-a-century pandemic. Other times, it’s hard to know how it arose but it’s simply there. One thing is clear: Nearly everyone experiences it at some point. But its invisibility is part of what makes it so insidious. We need to acknowledge the loneliness and isolation that millions are experiencing and the grave consequences for our mental health, physical health and collective well-being.” For, Murthy notes, “Loneliness — like depression, with which it can be associated — can chip away at your self-esteem and erode your sense of who you are.” [1]

An epidemic of loneliness and increased social isolation was on the rise before COVID, but COVID accelerated it, leaving us with considerable mental health challenges. It’s very difficult to find a therapist, counselor, or psychologist these days. There are long wait lists. A psychologist friend here in Baltimore said COVID has been great for psychologists and liquor stores. Murthy highlights how “Loneliness and mental health concerns often go hand-in-hand. The new data shows that adults with mental health issues are more than twice as likely to experience loneliness as those with strong mental health. Given this association and widespread mental health concerns following the pandemic, the need to continue to raise awareness about loneliness remains.”

Who is lonely today? People from underrepresented racial groups (primarily Black and Hispanic adults) are likelier to be lonely. People with lower incomes are lonelier than those with higher incomes. We’ve all heard about social isolation in seniors; however, recent studies show that young adults are twice as likely to be lonely than seniors. But it’s not a competition. And women are just as likely to feel isolated and alone as men. [2]

We know that we are wired for connection. An article in *Scientific American* about ten years ago uncovered the neuroscience of human connections. [3] But as people of faith, we’ve known this for thousands of years but tend to forget it. It is not good for human beings to be alone (Gen. 2:18). We were created to be in relationships with others, created for community. We were created to connect, to relate—relate to people and God and with ourselves. Again and again, through the pages of scripture, we see that God wants us to live together, to love one another, remove the hate, face our fear of the other, and learn to live together. And the voices of scripture want us to see and know that God wants to live together with us, be in relationship with us, walk with us, love us, and grow with us. We were not created to be alone.

The work of the church and other faith communities is critical for the well-being of our society. Loneliness and isolation are social issues but they’re also theological, religious, and faith issues. The Ezekiel passage is not the lectionary for the date, but I chose it because it’s a good pairing with John’s Gospel, which is, because they both highlight an image of God that we need to recover today, that God doesn’t want us to be orphaned or alone. Jesus tells us that the Holy Spirit will be our companion to keep us close to God and one another. And we heard through Ezekiel of God’s desire to be our shepherd, a true shepherd, who brings together lost, scattered sheep, who brings them back into the fold. God will search for us—and God does search for us because God wants to be near us, close to us—to rescue us, who tend to wander away from the path that leads to life and get lost. “I will seek the lost,” and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak...I will feed them with justice” (Ez. 34:16).

The church is called to *want* what God wants, and what God wants is for all God’s children to dwell together, to care for one another, live and flourish with a sense of connection, belonging, safety and security. Ultimately, this is what the church, this community, is all about. What we have here, what we have glimpsed here in the life of the church, is good and precious and holy and what the world needs. It breaks my heart that so many in our society have left the church, primarily because, for many, it was not a place of belonging, acceptance, safety, and connection. People like to say today, “I’m spiritual but not religious.” One can be spiritual alone but not religious. Maybe we need to reclaim the word “religious” and the use of the word “religion.” From the Latin *religare*, “religion” means to link (as in “ligament”); it means to link or connect or bind *back* to the source, to God, to our first love, to love itself. It’s all about connection. “Only connect,” E. M. Forster (1879-1970) wrote in *Howard’s End*, “Only connect...Live in fragments no longer.” Let us be about the work of making connections, building community, and cooperating with the Holy Spirit, who is unceasingly at work breaking down the walls that separate us, creating, forming, building a safe space for all God’s sheep, for all God’s children, to live *together*. Come, Holy Spirit. Come!



Image: Isle of Skye, Scotland

Sources

- [1] “Surgeon General: We Have Become A Lonely Nation. It’s Time To Fix That,” The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/30/opinion/loneliness-epidemic-america.html>
- [2] “The Loneliness Epidemic Persists: A Post-Pandemic Look at the State of Loneliness among U.S. Adults” The Cigna Group, <https://newsroom.thecignagroup.com/loneliness-epidemic-persists-post-pandemic-look>
- [3] “Why We Are Wired To Connect,” Scientific American, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-we-are-wired-to-connect/>