

LONELINESS & FRIENDSHIP

John 15: 1-17

They were friends for decades... Cyril and his buddies grew up together playing hockey and other sports, and decades later in mid-life they were still hanging around together and playing sports. But being guys and all, even as they laughed and played together and even helped each other out, emotional connections were another thing altogether.

Cyril himself had grown up in a household where there was a lot of screaming and yelling, especially when his dad came home drunk. Any time Cyril had done something well in school or in a game, his dad had been quick to point out some flaw or deficiency just to slap down any potential chip on his son's shoulder. "Character-building," is what he called it. And even though Cyril claimed he was the stronger man for having a tough father-figure, the reality was he had trouble opening up to anyone. Cyril could not talk about himself to anyone, especially if such talking required some opening up of emotions like fear, anger, regret, sadness or any vulnerability for that matter. Opening up was a recipe for being slapped down. Much safer to keep things inside. And so, even as Cyril had lots of friends and was rarely ever alone, he was lonely. He had never succeeded well with any intimacy when it came to relationships. He had had partners and had even explored his sexuality, but things always broke down when more intimate sharing was involved. Cyril's inner world was a dark cavern best left locked up. But he was struggling with a profound feeling of loneliness and more so with age.

Fauzia had always been a good daughter and a good neighbour. She had always been there to help her family and anyone in their building who needed support in some way. One of the things people always said about Fauzia was that she was a good listener, compassionate and attentive. But there was also something a neighbour once told her that had begun to bother Fauzia more and more. This neighbour told Fauzia that she was great at listening and giving of herself, but she was bad at sharing anything about herself. And more, this neighbour even had the gall to criticize Fauzia for being incapable of opening up herself to receive from others. How could this be? Wasn't life's purpose all about serving and giving? Was this neighbour so ungrateful at all the listening Fauzia did to her many problems with her family and health over the years? And yet, Fauzia was beginning to get in touch with a certain void in herself, a certain emptiness, or was it a sadness? Was it loneliness?

Who knew Fauzia the person? Did she know herself? Was she afraid she would start crying and never stop if she dug a little deeper? Sure people could say she was the best neighbour, daughter or friend, but what about Fauzia herself? Well, Fauzia never believed there was anything worthwhile to share about herself. She wasn't that interesting. She didn't want to bore or tire someone else with her concerns and struggles whatever they were given how she experienced being bored and tired often enough listening to people go on and on about their

concerns and struggles. And yet, Fauzia felt alone. For all the people around her and in touch with her all the time, Fauzia felt alone. How could this ever change when she kept a part of her shut off from people. The risk of being discarded was too great. Her value had always been in what she gave to others, not anything in herself.

Then there's Derek. His whole life Derek was taught to study and work hard to make a success of his life. After university graduation and landing a great job, Derek's whole world became his company firm. Both at work and going out after work, at parties and celebrations too, Derek's world was the community of colleagues who had also become his closest friends. And yet, Derek also felt that his workplace was a place of competition. Everyone was jockeying for position and for approval from the management at the top. Even as people shared themselves, said and did all kinds of things, especially after a few drinks, Derek had seen that everything can become a reason to compete, judge and compare. Whether it was the office, social media, the car you drove, the boyfriend/girlfriend you had, the place you lived... all of it was part of a game whose goal was to win. And so, how could you ever be vulnerable in that crowd?

And yet, who else did Derek really have? His family were ok but all they did was cheer him on. He couldn't let them down. And wasn't the meaning of life to succeed anyway? And yet, Derek felt profound loneliness if he had to admit it. Some days and increasingly so, he dreamed of getting off the treadmill, of being with people who just welcomed him and enjoyed him for being simply him. But could this be possible?

In the last two months we've had two podcast discussions where the theme of loneliness has figured prominently. Dr Vivek Murthy, the Surgeon General of the United States responsible for the public health of Americans across the nation calls loneliness the greatest social epidemic afflicting America, and one of the key factors cited behind much of the violence and poor health outcomes in America too. Loneliness...

In a recent podcast based on his latest book, New York Times bestseller and social researcher David Brooks also names loneliness as an ever growing crisis for North Americans. Some nations like the UK have set up separate government ministries on tackling the challenge of loneliness because of the social and health costs on the nation as a whole. In Denmark among other places, people are hired to be professional listeners, where you can book an appointment and just have someone, a stranger, to talk to and share yourself without consequence.

So what about you? Have you ever struggled with loneliness?... Perhaps this now is such a time for you?... But what is loneliness anyway?... As we have already suggested from the stories shared, loneliness is not about being physically alone. You can have all kinds of people around you and interacting with you and still feel alone. Loneliness, rather, is an inner state of being. To feel alone is to feel there is an important part of you, a deep part of you at the core of your

being, that you cannot or have not been able to share with anyone around you. Maybe fear has kept you even when others have been there and available. But often it's also that there are not the people around you, you can trust to share yourself even if and when you are ready and willing to do so. And sometimes, even as you have ventured to share something more personal and vulnerable about yourself, you were ignored, judged in some way, dismissed, or diminished by the experience. And so, never again.

You know, the word community is bandied about a lot in our world. Everyone talks about community. But at the root of the word community is communion. Communion reflects depth in relationship. How do we cultivate relationships where we experience communion with another person as we share and as we listen? And, could such an experience of communion be medicine for the illness called loneliness?

Let's dive into our scripture reading this morning as we seek out the meaning of communion and a pathway for engaging the challenge of loneliness in our world and our lives.

The four gospels each tell the same story of Jesus from different points of view and aimed for a different audience. John's gospel account has many distinctive features, and one of those features is the focus on friendship, community and communion. In a world hostile and competitive, rewarding ruthless ambition and treating compassion as weakness, the teaching of Jesus through John's gospel really delves deeply into the importance of community, love-in-relation, friendship and communion. To live in a tough world and to maintain one's tenderness and compassion, one needs a community of genuine friendship, trust and care for one another. One needs interactions that become experiences of communion.

Our scripture reading is part of a larger narrative in which Jesus is giving final teaching and instruction to his disciples. Throughout this gospel, Jesus speaks in very personal "I am" statements in which he discloses things about himself. Each of these disclosures includes concrete metaphors from the natural world, things like light, water, bread and in our reading: a vine tree that grows healthy fruit. Jesus uses this image to describe his vision of how he and his disciples ought to be connected. Jesus is the tree and the disciples are the branches. To the degree that they are rooted in Jesus, they will not only grow healthy as branches, but they will bear wonderful fruit to delight the senses.

Digging into this image of a vine tree with its branches, however, we discover a whole lot more. The word Jesus uses to describe the connection he seeks to have with his disciples is: Abide. "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." Unfortunately, the English translation for the original Greek word misses something essential in the translation. The dictionary definition of 'abide' in English emphasizes duration. To abide in something or in a relationship with someone is to endure and to last for a long time in it. To abide is also to

keep, such as in the phrase: 'abiding by the rules.' But the original Greek word used in this passage is: *Meno*. More than duration or keeping, *Meno* emphasizes depth. To abide in someone is to plant deep roots in them, to have a special communion with them. As a professor of mine would have better translated it: to abide in someone is to "be-with" them. The purpose of life, then, according to Jesus is not just to be, but to be-with. At the core of our being we are called to be-with God, and in this case, to be-with Christ as he seeks to be-with and in us.

OK, preacher, but this idea of being-with, of planting deep roots can sound way too mystical and esoteric. Can you offer something more practical? Well, Jesus goes on in this passage to do this very thing. To abide and to be-with is also to love. "As Abba has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Abba's commandments and abide in Abba's love." In other words, love is the invisible energy linking God through Jesus to the disciples, and such love then rises up within the disciples and flows back to Jesus. This same love-energy then is intended to flow through the disciples out into the world as they connect with one another and beyond. The revolution Jesus is inaugurating is a revolution in the quality of love, a being-with, a communion kind of love.

OK, preacher, this is a little more helpful, but still, can you get even more practical? OK, Jesus offers us some more to chew on. Besides abiding and loving as a being-with each other communion, Jesus adds another word in this passage: friendship. How is friendship connected to love?

First of all, Jesus says this: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." It's one thing to share something of yourself with a stranger. It's quite another to have someone you know and trust who cares about you and is ready to go to bat for you, someone who is even willing to risk it all for you. Maybe that's expecting a lot from another person, but do you have relationships with others where you and they are ready to give your very all for each other? These are relationships where you can truly share yourself.

But second, just because I believe you would give your life for me, it doesn't mean I can necessarily share everything with you. And this is true especially if there is no equality or transparency between us. Jesus also says this: "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, because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Abba." What are those barriers in us and in relation to others that keep us from totally sharing ourselves with each other? Do you have power over me or are we truly equal? Are you prepared to share with me if I share with you, or will you hold yourself back while I risk full disclosure? Jesus wants to become ever more fully transparent with his disciples so he can model for them what they may grow to be-with each other. True friendship kind of love required that kind of commitment: not only my trust that you will be there for me and give your very life for me, but also that you will share

yourself with me so that I may share myself with you. In this way we care for one another and get better at doing so as we get to know one another better in all our highs and lows.

Wow! What a wonder and a gift, no? To have that kind of friendship with another; to have that kind of intimacy with God in Christ in our hearts. But can this also be, even in modest ways, possible here in church? Can we find glimpses of connections with each other where we feel we can abide and plant deep roots of connection even if we don't know too much about each other yet? Am I comfortable sharing my sadness, my anger, my worry, my fear, my struggles and my thoughts with you trusting that you will hear me with care and not judgement or slap-dash advice? And will I find a way of serving you as a listening and compassionate presence? And will we have our moments of communion in such interaction? Can I trust that you can truly be-with me as I grow to genuinely be-with you? Can we truly grow in becoming better the hands, feet, voice and heart of Christ for each other and in our world? And can even a little more of this address something of the challenge of loneliness in our world?

Prayer: Come to us, O Spirit of the risen Christ... Abide in us and teach us what it means to abide in you... Be with us and within us as we may be in and with you... And may we be with others in ever deeper communion, cultivating the love we may call friendship... Grant us a taste of such sharing and being, O God, to soothe the loneliness that may afflict us... Amen.