

## LONELINESS AND BELONGING

Genesis 3: 1-13; Romans 16: 1-16

Loneliness. The statistics are pretty startling. According to a recent study conducted at McMaster University in Hamilton, 25-30% of Canadians across various age groups are reporting persistent loneliness and social isolation as major sources of distress. Earlier this year, the prime minister of Great Britain, Theresa May, appointed a government minister to a newly created government office to deal with the apparent epidemic growth of loneliness in that nation and the health costs associated with it. According to one scientific report, loneliness is “worse for one’s health than smoking 15 cigarettes a day, is as dangerous as obesity, and increases the likelihood of an early death by 26%.” The outgoing U.S surgeon general reported that “loneliness is associated with greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression and anxiety.”

But what is loneliness exactly? In an online publication called ‘Open Democracy’, Peter Coville describes loneliness as: “that permanent vague aching sensation in your chest when you haven’t meaningfully engaged with another human being for days or weeks or even months, and yet, here you are, alone once again.” Others, like the late Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands in her autobiography, writes about what it’s like being with people all the time and yet feeling lonely. This means, loneliness is not simply about being physically alone. It is also about being unable to connect meaningfully with someone even if there are people around.

One more point. Even though the studies and reports referred to don’t distinguish between men and women, according to other studies, men in particular suffer from loneliness even more than women. Emotional connection, sharing vulnerabilities, being listened to and interacting in deeper, more meaningful ways rather than competitively... this is something men are often socialized to avoid rather than seek out. The rugged individual who is independent and self-sufficient has been romanticized in our society, and this is especially true for men. On this Father’s Day, it is important to remember that learning to engage emotionally and learning to share oneself is not easy or straightforward, and this is probably even more true for men than for women. How to learn to do this, within one’s family, with a friend or within a community, is an urgent necessity.

But why this epidemic growth in loneliness in our more western societies? I’ve already mentioned the idea of the rugged individual, independent and self-sufficient. Independence and self-sufficiency is an important value in our society, but it can also be a liability to greater mutuality and interdependence which is necessary for building deeper connections with other people. Robert Coville, whom I’ve already mentioned, also suggests that loneliness is the negative consequence of “the modern desire for individual freedom from the restrictions and constraints from traditional institutions and forms of life... Increased demand for individual liberty tends to produce lonely individuals.” The price for our

striving for autonomy as individuals free from all constraints, self-sufficient in every way, has also led us to become, according to Coville: “willing agents of our own enslavement.”

But as Christians, we have to go on step further than Coville and the studies cited. Loneliness and its causes are not just about health, happiness and the social costs of mental and physical well being. No. We have to also engage the deeper moral dimensions of loneliness. Moral well being is connected to spiritual well being which is connected to social and mental well being. So, what are the moral dimensions of loneliness? Let us ponder our scripture readings beginning with the first book of the bible – Genesis.

The first section of this book describes in story form some primal claims about what makes us human before the great whole we Christians call God. As humans are like pieces of the larger whole. If we are connected properly, we are serving the larger whole and a larger purpose. If we are disconnected, fragmented or broken off as individual pieces, we are not only disconnected from God and our larger purpose, we are disconnected from our deeper created selves.

The problem, according to the opening story of the bible, is that the first humans – who represent all of us – make choices that sever their connectivity to the larger whole. God and the first humans, the first humans and all of creation, are deeply connected. Adam and Eve choose self-sufficient individualism, because they are persuaded that they can create their own purpose, their own values, their own lives without any need for connection to a larger wholeness or anyone else.

In our story, the temptation to cut off connection comes from the serpent. The serpent is crafty and persuasive. The serpent represents that voice contrary to our nature that lives within us all in some way. The first thing the serpent does is create suspicion. “Why can’t you eat of any fruit from any tree? Do you trust this “God” with whom you seem so bound up in communion? God is controlling you. God doesn’t want you to think and act for yourself. Why don’t you decide what’s right and wrong? Why don’t you make up your own rules and run your own life? Why do you need anyone else?”

Even though there are truths in such thoughts, what suspicion does is undermine trust, and trust is essential for building deep connections of intimacy between people. I will only share myself with someone I trust. If I am suspicious of someone; if I am in competition with someone; if I see someone else as a threat or as out for themselves, ready to take advantage of me, I cannot develop intimacy of connection with them either.

But we’re talking about God and we’re talking about core relationships between human beings who are called Adam and Eve. What happens when they trust only themselves and not each other? “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.” Taking on the burden of being your own moral compass, your own creator of purpose, your own self-sufficient, independent self, brings on a burden of responsibility you cannot bear. Nakedness represents fear and insecurity. Adam and Eve recognize they’ve made a mistake in severing their connection to the whole. They are on their own now and it is lonely and threatening.

And once suspicion grows between humans and God, what happens next? They begin to blame each other – Eve blames the serpent and Adam blames Eve. Suspicion leads to mistrust, leads to blame, and the shame and burden of nakedness leaves humans further lonely, threatened and seeking to cover their inadequacy any which way they can.

What's the alternative? In creating the world and creating humans, the first story tells us that the greatest purpose for humans is to fulfill their destiny as creatures made in the image of God. God is relational and seeks relationship. The energy of creation and the energy of relational connection is love. Humans are part of that larger chain – created out of love to pass love on in response by connecting with other creatures and the earth. Whatever our individual abilities, talents, relationships and experiences may be, we are created to offer these to the larger whole and a larger purpose motivated by love. Love is the way we connect and commune with others. Love is not a moral value we create ourselves. It is given to us because it's part of created constitution as human beings. When we are connected to love we are alive. When we disconnect from love and the whole, we are alone.

So then, if we follow this story's revelatory insight, we are told that the loneliness is not just caused by becoming our own individuals. No. It's becoming our own individuals by defining ourselves over against others and the earth which is our mother. We have disconnected ourselves and we have found ourselves naked and we are profoundly lonely. So how do we reconnect ourselves in a way that is genuine, without giving up our individuality?

Our New Testament reading gives us a picture. It gives us a picture of the deep relationship connections that make up the church community in Rome. The apostle is writing this letter from far away. In his final words he wants to send greetings and thanksgiving to all kinds of people who have made his work and his life rich and meaningful. He mentions, Phoebe, for example, a female deacon and elder of the church. He mentions a couple – Prisca and Aquila. He mentions many others too. He refers to all kinds of ways they are connected, and alludes to all the things they have risked and shared together. We can imagine how they have laughed and cried together, shared personal joys and sorrows, hopes and dreams, frustrations and fears... The apostle may be writing this letter from a prison cell. It can feel terribly lonely. And yet, dictating this list of names with so much rich content speaks of one who feels deeply connected no matter what fate he suffers.

And one final thing about the community of the church, in particular, and what's possible. One of the most prominent philosophers in the world today is Martha Nussbaum. The book that shot her into philosophical acclaim is entitled: "The fragility of goodness." Basing her insight primarily on ancient Greek philosophers, she argues that goodness, like love, cannot be developed and sustained by individuals alone. Goodness, like love is a fragile thing. The push and pull of life, the constant change all around us we cannot control, the ups and downs of relationships, health, finances, jobs, and much else... all of it can make our inner life and our moral commitments to goodness, love and mercy very

fragile. We need people around us, and especially a community of people whose focus is moral goodness and love.

Think about it. This is exactly what the church is supposed to be focussed on, what we here are focussed on. Yes there are many things we do here and many reasons we are here. But our driving purpose is to explore our connection with the whole we name God and to renew our purpose to love well in our lives. Our purpose here is to support one another by listening, sharing and encouraging the growth of our individual gifts and talents, by acknowledging and praising one another, but also being challenged together to find ways to express and live love in our lives out there in the world. We are called to be the hands, feet and heart of Christ together and as individual human beings. We need each other and we need this place to inspire and reinforce these values for them to become strong and sustainable through the many ups and downs life will bring.

Loneliness is a big problem and in many ways a modern problem in our developed world like never before. The rugged individual romanticized in our western culture has encouraged it. Belonging to a community can make a big difference to engaging loneliness. But belonging to a community that focusses on goodness and love as the most important purpose for our lives can make the biggest difference of all. May you and I give thanks for this community of belonging we call Armour Heights, and may you and I as individuals discover ever more our purpose and responsibility to contribute to the whole through this community, receiving as we give and giving to receive a fullness that will bless us even more.

Let us pray: You see us, O God and you know us... we are connected to you whether we know it or not, recognize it or not. You are the wholeness and we are but a fragile piece... But connected with you and with others, we find greater fullness... Meet us in our loneliness and help us reconnect in ways that nourish us heart and soul... Amen.