

"CONQUERING LONELINESS"

by

R. Charles Grant, D.Min.

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

Bryn Mawr, PA

Readings: Psalm 13
I John 4:7-12
Hebrews 12:1-2

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time - August 15, 2010

I John 4:7-12

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Hebrews 12:1-2

1Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

In a book entitled *Lonely in America*, Suzanne Gordon calls loneliness A NEW AMERICAN TRADITION. Our contemporary way of life. She notes we live in isolated, protected neighborhoods. Walk down a lane in one of our suburban neighborhoods in the early evening, and what are you likely to see? High fences with security gates. Privacy fences shielding houses and their inhabitants from public view, much less neighborly interaction. Air conditioners humming. Men and women pass on the street with blank faces. Everywhere you hear the sounds of silence and see evidence of the lonely in America.

These are the signs of SELF IMPOSED loneliness. Loneliness by design. People who WANT to be alone and be LEFT alone, thank you. But consider also the multitudes AFFLICTED with loneliness. Surveys show that the loneliest people in America are - college students! Followed by divorced persons, welfare recipients, single mothers, rural students, homemakers, and the elderly - *in that order*.

Then there is the other megatrend of our times: MOBILITY. Today, men and women are rootless: People entering the job force today will move on average 14 times and work in a score of different jobs. 55% of all Americans live more than 500 miles from home. No wonder people are lonely. *They don't know anybody*.

And loneliness is not limited to the old or the mobile. Youth, too, know about loneliness. Merton Strommen, in his contemporary classic on youth and faith, *The five cries of youth*, interviewed high school students, to identify their emotional and spiritual needs. Their #1 need? Self esteem. And #1 burden? LONELINESS.

The reasons for loneliness are both numerous and complicated and quite simple. Some people are lonely because all of their friends have died or moved away. Some are lonely because they have moved to a new location and have been severed from the roots of their childhood and not found new friends to replace the old. Others are lonely because they bear such painful emotional scars that they are afraid to respond to those who would be their friends. And some people are lonely because they are simply so darn disagreeable!

Now, I suspect many of you are saying to yourselves right now, "The preacher is not talking about ME. I have plenty of friends! If anything, I do not have enough alone time." And being the engaging, healthy, outgoing people many of you are, I agree, many of you may not be lonely at all. But I would invite you to reflect on the difference between *being alone* – which many of us seldom are. And *being lonely* – which can be your state of being even in a crowd.

So I would suggest to you we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses to the lonely people of our world. Which leads me to ask, "What can and should we *as the church of Jesus Christ* DO ABOUT IT?"

I think we begin by **REAFFIRMING THE CHURCH AS THE COMMUNION OF THE SAINTS**: Rabbi Harold Kushner asks, "**What does religion offer that we lonely human souls need? In a word, it offers community. Our place of worship offers us a refuge, an island of caring in the midst of a hostile, competitive world.**" (*Who Needs God* 103)

Christianity is not an individualized, privatized religion. Christian faith is a CORPORATE experience, lived in communities called churches.

In first John we read that the distinctive characteristic of the Christian community of the church is the love the members have for one another: By our love for one another the world will know we belong to Christ, John writes. It is the love we have for and share with one another that transforms the church from a gathering of strangers into a communion of saints. Not a community of holy people, but a living, breathing, body of persons who confess a common faith, who offer a common prayer, and share a common life together. A communion. A communion of saints.

As the contemporary church of Jesus Christ we fall short of our calling if WE are not living out our faith as a communion of saints.

A fellowship of care and concern for one another. An arena in which despair and loneliness are met, battled, and overcome. A place where each person is greeted warmly and with affection - because each person is *held* in deep affection. The church is and ought to be a communion of the saints.

And if we are to be a communion of saints, we need to RECOGNIZE and RESPOND to THE FACE OF LONELINESS. Most of us know a lonely person when we see one. ALL of us know lonely people. Many of us ARE lonely. Persons who are lonely because of death or divorce. Persons plagued by personal demons of depression. Youth who are struggling with questions like "Who am I? Do other kids like me? Am I too tall or too fat or not attractive? Do my parents like me? Does anybody like me just the way I am?"

We all KNOW lonely people. But it is not enough to RECOGNIZE loneliness. As Christians, as members of the communion of saints, we are called to **RESPOND TO LONELINESS**.

In his book *I and Thou*, Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote that there are two ways of relating to the people in our lives:

We can see other people as OBJECTS, that is, they serve a function for us, but we are not concerned with how they feel about the transaction.

OR, we can relate to others as SUBJECTS, letting ourselves be aware that they have feelings about what is happening even as we do.

I REENFORCE your loneliness when I treat you as an "it".

I RESPOND to your loneliness when I encounter you as "thou" - another precious human being.

How can you respond to loneliness? How about a phone call to someone whose phone seldom rings. Or five minutes of greeting when you meet on the street or at the mall. A birthday card. Befriending someone whom others shun. A few tomatoes in season. Simply being neighborly. Sharing just a little bit of your whole life, to bring some vitality to one whose life is empty and lonely. Is that too much to ask?

Recognizing and responding to loneliness. We should do that. We CAN do that. **It is more difficult for us to FACE UP TO OUR OWN LONELINESS.** Again, Rabbi Kushner observes, "**More than any other human problem, loneliness, the absence of meaningful human connection, drains the joy and the sense of purpose from our lives.** (90)

One reason OTHERS are lonely is *YOU and I are lonely as well.* Many of us are the lonely people who know the sounds of silence. And we cannot help OTHERS, or find wholeness for ourselves, until we face up to the loneliness in our own lives.

Loneliness. We all have known it. It's part of living, of course. Life is NOT one big party or one continuous therapy session. Life has its ups and its downs. But if you have had more DOWNS than UPS lately, maybe it's time you did something about it. About *your* loneliness.

What can you do about your loneliness? *How about call your pastor.* (You have at least seven to choose from; one of us is bound to be working when you need a pastor). Call your doctor. Call your friends! And when your friends DO CALL YOU, when others DO REACH OUT to you, when the love and presence of God comes you in human form, *receive it!*

The scourge of loneliness is so overwhelming. How can we overcome it in ourselves? How can we possibly meet the needs of all who need a friendly word and loving presence? Can we conquer loneliness?

Loneliness can be conquered because we have a PIONEER who has gone this way before. One who has walked this lonesome valley: Jesus Christ, the living presence of God. Jesus endured great loneliness in his life. His closest friends did not understand his mission and frequently let him down. His family was confused about who he was. In his darkest hour, even Jesus felt alone, cut off from God his father.

But Jesus, the HUMAN Jesus, overcame his loneliness. Jesus overcame his loneliness through his FAITH in God, and by his abiding faith in his friends - even when they deserted him. And because of that faith, his friends bounced back and formed that loving fellowship that became the church.

So also, because of Jesus' victory, WE can overcome the loneliness of our lives, too. For we have a pioneer and perfecter who has shown us the way. We have a friend, a faithful friend, in Jesus.

And, we have something else, something Jesus did not have: we have that GREAT CLOUD OF WITNESSES which is the church. The living community of the church possesses all the strength we need to conquer loneliness.

Today's sermon title is based on the title of a book a friend and colleague of mine wrote. In a book entitled *Conquering Loneliness*, Harold Warlick recalls a truth all sports teams and sports fans know: the HOME COURT ADVANTAGE: a team playing on its home court usually plays better and is a stronger team than when playing on the "road".

Consider our Phillies. Not counting last night's games game, the Phillies are 64-51 overall. But only 26-31 *on the road*. At home, the Phillies are 38-20! If they could win on the road the way they win at home, they would be 76-40 and in first place *by 8 games!*

The home field advantage, the home court advantage provides the winning edge.

My friend Harold Warlick suggests the CHURCH is our HOME COURT. This communion of the saints, this great cloud of witnesses, is just the "edge" we need to defeat the darkness of a lonely life. Not because we are "perfect". But because we share a common home base.

In the church we have the home field advantage. The church is just ordinary folks, with a most extraordinary savior: the pious and the not so pious, the faithful and those seeking faith, the lonely and those rich in human relationships – all bound together by a most amazing and gracious love!

Dear friends: we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. We have a pioneer and perfecter of faith. It is time to conquer the loneliness of our lives!

In the words of the author of I John: **Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another...Because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.**

And by the grace of God, and through the love we have, one for another, loneliness, your loneliness, will be conquered. AMEN.