

The Ministry of Loneliness
Psalm 22 and Mark 14:32-42
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First UMC Baraboo
Pastor Marianne Cotter

Today we look at what our faith has to tell us about loneliness and what to do about it. The British people have a minister of loneliness. Christians have our own minister of loneliness: Jesus. Jesus ministers to our loneliness in three ways: 1) he shows us how to be alone; 2) he reminds us to invest in what really matters 3) shows us one thing that we can always do to cure our loneliness.

Jesus, our minister of loneliness, shows us how to be alone. Being alone is not the same thing as being lonely. We all spend some time alone and some time with people. The same was true with Jesus. The gospels tell us Jesus was often alone by choice. After his first reported healings in the gospel of Mark “Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer.” (Mark 1:35) After the feeding of the 5,000 “..... Jesus went up onto a mountain to pray.” Jesus’ alone time was when he connected with his Abba. Jesus knew how to be alone and he knew how to be with people. Jesus walked, talked, moved from one place to the next, shared his life with the twelve and the women who gave him so much support. He was with his inner circle and he spent time with the crowds. In all of this he models for us what it means to be a healthy and whole when we’re alone. The key is: never expect anyone else to take away your loneliness.

In a few minutes we will share a prayer litany: the Risen living Christ calls us by name: comes to the loneliness in us..... Jesus teaches us to be alone with God and shows us how to bear the loneliness which is part of what it means to be human. If you are lonely it doesn’t mean you don’t have a strong faith. If you say “I’m feeling lonely” and a friend replies “you’re never alone. God is always with you.” that’s true. When times are tough it does help to remember God’s steadfast love. But that doesn’t mean the feelings of loneliness won’t be there. The author of Psalm 22 was a person of deep faith. Otherwise she/he would not have started the prayer with “My God. My God, why have you left me all alone? Why are you so far from saving me— so far from my anguished groans?” The psalmist and God have been friends a long time. But now God feels far away. Others are making fun of the psalmist’s trust in God. Just as Jesus was taunted on the cross for his trust in God.

Being lonely, feeling, alone; is part of the human condition. More and more of us are living in single person households. A family, a household of one can be wonderful. If you are one of those single person households and you long for someone to share your life, that is fine and that could be a longing worth honoring. But don’t expect a life’s partner to fill that void. The same is true for married people,

those in partnered relationships. Don't expect any person, or job, money or security of any kind to fill it.

I remember the first Christmas after I got married. I was sitting in my office at the far end of the Jim Falls, WI parsonage, a lovely ranch style home right on the Chippewa River. I had a great new husband – Jim. I had a bunch of UM's in churches Jim was serving at the time who surrounded me with love as the new pastor's spouse. I had a small congregation in Eau Claire that I was serving. But on that afternoon a few days after Christmas I felt really lonely. I missed my friend back home. Though all these were good things in my life, new marriage, new home, new church – it still felt strange to be there. Single people get lonely. Married people get lonely. Children, youth adults we all get lonely. Don't expect being in a crowd of people to that loneliness. Other people can't cure your loneliness.

Once there was a farmer, a mother of a large family. Her house didn't allow her to go away into a separate room to be alone to pray. So, she'd sit in her rocker, put her handkerchief over her head and sit and pray. When she had her hankie on her head, that was the clue to the kids to leave her alone. Parents of young children, you might want to try that when you need some alone time. Jesus often used his alone time to connect with God. That's a great thing we can do when we're alone.

Let's turn now to the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. This story shows us another way Jesus ministers to us in our loneliness. This takes place during the final hours of Jesus' life. He sensed that's where all of this was leading. He did not want to die. He'd asked his closest friends – Peter, James and John -- to join him as he prayed. They were there but they weren't really there for him. They disappointed him. They could not stay awake and watch with him. He asks them to stay awake, and he goes a little farther and he prays to his Abba that this cup of suffering be taken from him. And after finding Peter, James and John asleep after he asks them to watch and wait with him: "Stay alert and pray so that you won't give in to temptation." The time Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane Praying in the Garden, Jesus felt extremely lonely. After his arrest and trial, as he walked up the hill to the Calvary he would be taunted and scorned by the crowds, for putting his trust in God.

Jesus is wrestling with the prayer "thy will be done." For Jesus there was nothing more important in life than to do God's will. That guided his entire ministry. What he prayed "thy will be done" was no different than what he prayed and tried to do every other day. When he was alone he tried to do God's will and when he was with others he tried to do the will of God. It was a lonely place to be that day, to face that suffering, to face death. But in the end it's where he chose to be. Today we remembered that lonely time through singing "Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley." There are things God asks us to do in life that will entail being lonely. You may be called to live a certain way, stand up for someone or something that others don't see as important; you may be called to take a stand on an issue which means others will

make fun of you. But it will be worth it because this is what matters to you. Jesus ministers to us in our loneliness by reminding us to invest our time in what really matters. Once we know what our highest values are, then if living according to those values means we'll be lonely sometimes, then so be it. As you give yourself to those things that really matter God will be in there in the mix.

I promised at the start to tell you one thing Jesus shows us we can always do to heal our loneliness. And it's found in the story of Jesus' crucifixion as told in John's gospel. In Jesus' moment of greatest loneliness – as he died on the cross – he also discovered he could do something to alleviate the loneliness of another. Here's how John's gospel tells the story. There were some women including his mother, as well as the beloved disciple there at the cross. John 19:26-27 reads “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.”²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that time on, this disciple took her into his home.” Jesus softened his mother's loneliness. Jesus is creating a new family: Mary and the beloved disciple who will both be part of the church that would be born fifty days later. There is a direct line between what Jesus did for Mary and the beloved disciple and what we do for each other in the church. We are ministers of loneliness to each other in the church just by showing up on Sunday. The body of Christ might just be the best antidote for loneliness because it's where we meet people face to face, in real time.

Once a woman named Anne Lamott showed up at St. Andrew Presbyterian in Marin City. She wasn't looking for a church. She didn't like Christians in fact. As a young teenager, Anne had started drinking and using drugs. What followed was years of struggles with addiction, sexual promiscuity, bulimia, and self-loathing. When she hit 30, things came to a crisis point, and in the throes of a hangover, just after having an abortion, Lamott says she felt the tangible presence of Jesus. A week later, she found herself at a Presbyterian church, pulled in by the music. Here's what she wrote later:

I didn't didn't know what I was doing there. “But I love the singing, and I feel this food coming into my soul. You know, they just let me be there. And eventually I got sober. And right before I got sober, I had a conversion experience. I found that I was really drawn to the Jesus part. And I didn't want to be..... So I now..... I saw Jesus as sort of my friend and companion whose presence I could feel all the time, much to my own horror in the beginning. I didn't want that to be the truth. I didn't want to be a Christian.” Yet Anne became a member of the church – and she began getting her life together. What happened for Anne Lamott in that Presbyterian church happens here all the time, but we just don't know it. Did you know that just by showing up – just being the church – we are able to speak to each other's loneliness? We don't take away each other's loneliness completely– no one can do that – but still loneliness does get healed in the presence of people who are authentic. We come as we are here. We don't try to be anything else. Coming to church every week matters

for lots of reasons. One is You never know how God is going to use you, in a casual conversation, to let someone else know he/she is not alone.

So, here's how you can put into practice all I've said today: We always have a time after church for conversation: fellowship hour. It's where visitors get to know us, and where people catch up and hear how each other's week went. Maybe Today at fellowship hour you could ask someone else: when you are alone what are the ways you like to spend your time? Or, What do you enjoy doing with others? Today. Around noon any and all who would like to go to a nearby restaurant to have lunch, and talk more about these and other things, all are welcome.

If you don't have enough money in your purse/pocket for lunch today, no worries. Someone is going to treat you. It's Earl Wichern. When he was a member of this church, Earl used to take the extra bulletins and deliver them to homebound people. He reminded them they were not alone. He did a lot of volunteering at the hospital and at nursing homes. That's what followers of Jesus do: little things, kind things, to remind people that the risen Christ calls us by name and comes to us in our loneliness. Earl passed away in February of this year. His family friends gave some money to the church to remember Earl. We're using that money today to fund lunch for anyone who didn't bring enough in their purse or wallet today to cover the cost. So, if you want lunch is on Earl today!

The good news is that Jesus really does come to us in our loneliness. Jesus ministers to our loneliness by showing us how to be alone and reminding us that loneliness is easier to handle if we're sure we're living in alignment with our highest values. While we can never take away our own loneliness, we can help heal the loneliness of others. God uses us – the church -- to make this happen. In life, in death, in life beyond death. God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.