

LONELY CROWD

Psalm 25:16-22

*(ideas and language are partially from
Jonathan Sacks, Morality)*

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Robert Putnam, an American political scientist, has documented the loss of social capital in contemporary America, the loss of the bonds that join us to one another in relationships of mutual responsibility and trust. He tagged the loneliness of our day as “bowling alone.” He noted that more people than ever were going bowling, but fewer than ever were joining teams. Thus, we are all bowling alone – or doing life all by ourselves. The reality is we have moved, even more so since Putnam’s work, from a “we” society – that is, “We’re all in this together,” to the “I” society – that is, “Hey, I’m free to be myself.” And the loss of community has consequences, one of which is social isolation. (Jonathan Sacks, *Morality*, p. 23)

This move from “we” to “me” has been made evident in various ways. One is use of language. Measuring over time the change in the use of pronouns, we see that, indeed, we have moved from a “we” culture to an “I” culture. Jonathan Sacks, the chief rabbi of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth of Nations from 1991-2013, charted the frequencies of the words “we” and “I” in English and American books, year by year from the years 1900 to 2008. In his book, *Morality*, Sacks notes that the use of “I” begins to fall from 1900 to 1965, at which point it begins a precipitous rise. And from then on, the first person singular dominates. It’s all about me, myself, and I.

In a similar study, Nathan DeWall at the University of Kentucky studied the lyrics of Top 10 pop songs between 1980 and 2007 and discovered that the use of first person plural nouns – we, us, our – has declined, while first person singular pronouns – I, me, mine – have increased.

In fact, we see it in the lyrics of religious songs, too, do we not? None of us can forget the change of emphasis from hymns like “We Gather Together” to “Lord, I lift Your name on high,
Lord, I love to sing Your praises
I’m so glad You’re in my life...”

There is something vital about community, there is something about church, there is something about being on a team – you’re not bowling alone, you’re bowling on a team – that requires you to compromise. You don’t always get your way. You have to “take one for the team.”

Now Rabbi Sacks tells a Jewish joke – it’s from a rabbi; it’s okay. One year the Yeshiva University Rowing Team lost all of its races, the joke goes. To find out what they were doing wrong, they sent an observer to watch the Harvard University team in action. Three days later, the observer came back shell-shocked. “You won’t believe it,” the spy from the Yeshiva rowing team said.

“You know what we do? They do the exact opposite. They have eight people rowing and only one person shouting instructions.” Of course, the joke being that on the Jewish rowing team there were eight people yelling and one person doing the rowing.

Being in community requires working together and taking instruction. Being on a team has its “give and take,” to be sure.

But being alone is hard, too. In fact, in our Psalm today – Psalm 25:16-17 – David says, “Turn to me and be gracious to me, God, for I am lonely and afflicted. And the troubles of my heart are enlarged. Bring me out of my distresses.”

Many prisoners have testified that solitary confinement is as terrifying as physical torture. John McCain said of the 5 1/2 years he was a prisoner of war in Vietnam that being kept in solitary “crushes your spirit and weakens your resistance more effectively than any other form of mistreatment,” (Jonathan Sacks, *Morality*, p. 26)

And our lives have changed. The more technology we use, the less we interact with each other. And the reason many of you would rather text than have a telephone conversation is it keeps you in control. You can choose what and how much to respond versus actually carrying on a boundary-less conversation that might cause you to have to embrace your human side.

There was a cartoon on November 4, 2019, in the *New Yorker* magazine that showed Humphrey Bogart wearing an ivory dinner jacket and a black bow tie, sitting alone at a bar with a glass of bourbon in his hand. In front of him is an electronic device. He turns to it and says, “Alexa, play ‘As Time Goes By.’” A powerful image for an age in which communication technology is smarter and faster than ever before, but in which human interaction, direct face-to-face, skin-to-skin, focused I-You encounters are all too rare. We’re becoming a lonely crowd.

So severe is the epidemic of loneliness that in 2018, Tracey Crouch was given the task of becoming what the press dubbed as Britain’s first-ever Minister of Loneliness.

Of course, loneliness isn’t new. It goes all the way back to Genesis 2:18, the second chapter of the Bible, when God says it’s not good for a person to be alone. And Adam gives up a rib to have a helpmate.

What prompted the appointment of a Minister of Loneliness was a 2017 research report by the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness that showed that more than nine million people in Britain feel lonely. Two hundred thousand older Britons have not had a conversation with a friend or relative in more than a month.

In the United States, more of the same. A 2018 Cigna survey showed that 46% of Americans feel alone. Forty-three percent say their relationships are not meaningful, and they are isolated from others. Fifty-four percent feel like no one really knows them well. We all long to be known, don’t we?

And guess what age group is having the hardest time? Young people, between 18 and 22 years of age. In this electronic age, fewer people are joining teams, going to church, or joining clubs. “I’ll just catch it on the livestream or the podcast.” Podcast church is not church at all.

What is left out of the equation is face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh contact – a hug here, a hand shake there, a humorous remark with a gracious grin. How many of us have witnessed two teens sitting side-by-side in a coffee shop, “best friends,” each ignoring the other as they are held hypnotic prisoners of their smart phones.

I want us to notice three things about loneliness.

I. Loneliness leads to sickness.

Psalms 25 is what Old Testament scholars would call an individual lament – that is, not when a nation cries out to God with all their woes, but when an individual – in this case, David – cries out to God. In these verses, a sense of loneliness emerges. David is surrounded by troubles and enemies, and nothing in his world offers fellowship or consolation. And he desires for the friendship of God, of which he speaks hopefully. He prays that the Lord will “turn to him” (v. 16) and put an end to his loneliness.

We all witnessed during the Covid-19 crisis that when we isolated senior adults, when we isolated ourselves, there was a price to be paid that just might have been as high as the virus itself. People dying alone in the hospitals, with just a nurse by their side. And thank God for him or her. We all saw the pitiful picture of the senior adult husband going by the nursing home to visit his wife, and all he could do was stand outside and place his hand upon the glass between them, as if to mimic an authentic touch.

Would you believe that a Surgeon General advisory in this year, 2023, raised alarm about the devastating impact of the epidemic of loneliness and the isolation in the United States. The Surgeon General called for action to address the public health crisis of loneliness. The article reads, “Today, United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released a new Surgeon General Advisory calling attention to the public health crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection in our country.” The Surgeon General warns that “Even before the onset of Covid-19, approximately half of U.S. adults reported experiencing measurable levels of loneliness. Disconnection fundamentally affects our mental, physical, and societal health. In fact, loneliness and isolation increase the risk for individuals to develop mental health challenges, and lacking connection can increase the risk for premature death to levels comparable to smoking.” Insufficient connection (or loneliness) gives a 29% increase in the risk of heart disease, a 32% increase in the risk of stroke, and a 50% increase in the development of dementia for older adults. And, finally, lacking social connection increases the risk of premature death by more than 60%.

Mental health challenges – depression and anxiety double when you feel lonely. Thirty-three percent of young adults are living with a mental illness in the U.S., and much of that can be traced back to loneliness and isolation. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm about the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States,” 5/2/23)

These aren't my words, these are the words of the Surgeon General of the United States of America.

A *Psychiatric Times* article by Julian Lagoy, M.D., says that loneliness is linked to increased rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, domestic abuse, and yes, of course, suicide. Loneliness is not necessarily the result of being alone – you can feel lonely surrounded by others. It's an isolation which makes the world feel like a threatening place. Loneliness makes us critical of ourselves. And when those negative expectations are confirmed by the behavior of others, we end up in a loneliness loop. And we become awfully anxious and pessimistic, reaching the bottom of the barrel on our self-esteem. (“Julian Lagoy, M.D., “COVID-19 Loneliness,” *PsychiatricTimes.com*, 5/13/2021)

V. 17b: “Bring me out of my distress.

Conversely, people with active social lives recover faster after illness. A study conducted by the University of California in 2006 showed that of the 3,000 women with breast cancer who were studied, those with a large network of friends were four times more likely to survive than women with few social connections. (Jonathan Sacks, *Morality*, p. 29)

There is a second thing I want you to see. Not only does loneliness lead to sickness,

II. Loneliness leads to sin.

This can happen in several different ways. I have noticed it most as I watch a student become isolated from her peers. The crowd she wants to run with won't make a place for her at the table. There is no seat for her on the “cool” van. So, she is tempted to compromise her moral boundaries in order to find a friend – because everyone has to have someone.

A dear friend of mine who is addicted to substances – alcohol and otherwise – looked back over his life and wrote in his life's history,

“Because I am alone, I try to find friendships to feel accepted and ease the pain of abandonment. While trying to fit in, my standard for relationships would decline moment by moment. Instead of trying to embrace my uniqueness, I gravitated towards the weak and the immoral. Although the hallways of my school were always packed full of students, I always felt isolated and unwanted...This matter of trying to find acceptance in relationships buried me into a hole of depression. I was swayed to make friends with people who had different moral values than I did. The more I tried to fit in and not be myself, the more alone I felt...I was desperate for connection, and I gravitated to those with very low standards and morals.”

He concluded that even bad friends were better than no friends.

And God help the kid that doesn't have some group to identify with, for we all long to be a member of one tribe or another. And trying to fit into a tribe, we'll do whatever the tribal leader asks us to do so we won't be alone, so we'll have a place.

I've seen students compromise every value or moral they've been taught in order to be recognized. And then later, maybe a few years later, they say, "Oh, all that's changed. I was going through a really hard time right then. Those were my dark days, and my soul has clarity once again. Forgive my fall, pastor. I was lost, but now I'm found."

Verse 7 – "Do not remember the sins of my youth.

Verse 18 – "Forgive all my sins."

There is power in a group. Ecclesiastes 4:12 says, "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A chord of three strands is not quickly broken." A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand together, back-to-back, and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple braided chord is not easily broken.

When you're in isolation, they'll break you. That's why Student Ministry is so important. That's why The Loft is going to be culture changing for so many kids. You've got to have some place, somebody, some culture that stands with you for Christ, or you will fall.

Loneliness leads to sin.

There is a third thing I want you to see.

III. Loneliness leads to "I"solation

I was speaking this week with a young man who is not a member of our church, and I asked in the course of a conversation, making no mention of this week's sermon, "What's your greatest fear? What's the horror of your heart." He said, "Being alone. Not finding friends. Not forming relationships."

Remember Ecclesiastes 2:4-8, 11.

I enlarge my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees...I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces...Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.

Notice, the first person singular – I, I, I, for myself, I, for myself, I. And what did it yield? Vanity, chasing the wind.

Isolation is destructive.

I want you to notice what happens at the very end of Psalm 25. At the end of the psalm, verse 21, the psalmist is waiting for God to intervene in his loneliness. And then the most unexpected turn. “Redeem Israel, O God, out of all his troubles.” What had been true for him was now true for all of Israel. He turns from self to the corporate people of God, the community. Maybe he realizes here that he, himself, is not the answer. The answer is bigger, broader. The answer is community.

One of the longest longitudinal research exercises, the Grant Study, began in 1938, tracking the lives of 268 Harvard students (at the time, Harvard was a male-only college) for more than 80 years, seeking to understand what characteristics – from personality type to intelligence to health, habits, and relationships – contributed to human flourishing. The project for 30 years was directed by George Vaillant. He was interviewed in March 2008 in a newsletter to the Grant Study subjects. Vaillant was asked of this longitudinal research, “What have you learned from the Grant Study?” His response was clear. “The only thing that really matters in life is your relationships to other people.” A 2017 summary of the study concluded: “Close relationships, more than money or fame, are what keep people happy throughout their lives....Those ties protect people from life’s discontents, help to delay mental and physical decline, and are better predictors of long and happy lives than social class, IQ, or even genes.” (Jonathan Sacks, *Morality*, p. 111-12)

The best way to cure loneliness is to focus on others. Find a person who is more lonely than you are and reach out and be the answer to their cry to God for a friend. And as you get out of your own “I”-solation and focus on “Us,” on community, on helping someone who needs a friend, then, miraculously and surely, your loneliness will be overcome by community.

Life is about relationships. Period. Our relationship to God and our relationship to His people.

I know there are some people who like being alone, and solace is found in solitude for them. That’s true for all of us at times – even true for Jesus when He withdrew to the mountain. But even then, it’s relationship, isn’t it? Then you’re with God – community with the Father.

Church is a family. If you’re a member of First Baptist Church, you’ve got something to do almost every day. There is daily community here. There is love here.

Jonathan needed David. Naomi needed Ruth. And you – you need us. And we need you.

Yes, the human condition is about relationships. About staying true, loyal, committed to one another despite all the tensions and setbacks and misunderstanding and backslidings and all the multiple ways in which we fall short. It’s about consecrating the bonds between us as the people of God, as a community of worship, and transcending our solitude.

The over-emphasis on “I” and the loss of “we” leaves us isolated and vulnerable. Indeed, as the Bible begins, it is not good to be alone. (Jonathan Sacks, *Morality*, p. 35)

We must always cultivate a culture of connection.