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Never Alone: Facing Loneliness
John 14:16-17, 25-27, Joshua 1:1-9

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you an Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in^[h] you.

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Advocate,^[i] the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Do you know what ***God said was the first "NOT good"*** in creation?

If you read Genesis,

God creates everything, and calls it good....including Adam,

BUT then God says..... it is ***NOT GOOD for Adam to be alone.***

Being alone—that was the first "not good" at the creation of the world!

Loneliness is NOT good, we all know that, right?

Loneliness is one of those ***universal feelings***—

It's something that ***everyone*** faces at some time in their lives.

This fear, ***knows no boundaries*** of age, gender, background, or nationality.

Humans everywhere can and do get lonely.

One thing that has always touched me is the loneliness of ***Mother Teresa.***

She described it as ***"the darkness."***

As part of the process of her sainthood,

Rev. Brian Kolodiejchuk read through 6,000 of her letters.

For the book, *Mother Teresa, Come Be My Light*, he included letters pertaining to her vows, her "the inspiration" and also ***"the darkness."***

The "darkness" she felt, was her term for feelings of loneliness and abandonment when she didn't feel close to Jesus.

In a letter from 1961, Teresa wrote:

"Darkness is such that I really do not see—neither with my mind nor with my reason—the place of God in my soul is blank—There is no God in me—when the pain of longing is so great—I just long & long for God."

Over time, Rev. Joseph Neuner, her a spiritual adviser, helped Teresa realize her feelings of loneliness actually **increased her empathy for** the people she served. Ultimately, she identified her loneliness with that of Jesus. Shona Crabtree, *"Book Uncovers a Lonely Desolate Mother Teresa"*, Christianity Today, August 30, 2007.

In fact, many of the saints throughout the centuries have had times in their lives referred to as the '**dark night of the soul**', Times when they felt all alone.

What about you? When have you felt this way? Are you lonely today?

Even the most devout Christians have times of loneliness.

Thankfully, these are **seasons**,
the eventually **give way to light and peace**.

It's just hard when you are in the midst of it, isn't it?

Even Jesus experienced loneliness—

remember the times that his disciples fell asleep while he was praying in the Garden of Gethesemane before going to the cross?

Remember when many followers in John 6, turned away and left because they just couldn't take his teachings?

I think that **Jesus** probably did feel lonely,

Hebrews 4:15 says:

For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.

Loneliness, the fear of being alone, or unnoticed,

is so universal that **we will face** this fear---

regardless of who we are, or what we do,

How much money we have,

how many people are in our family,

or how many Facebook friends we have!

We can **ALL feel lonely**---even the most **gregarious**,
even the **hermits** who just want to be left alone.

I feel it as a **pastor** at times,
even in a church of over a hundred beautiful people!
I have felt it, even in my **large family!**

And it's not God's best for us.

None of us want to be alone and unnoticed,
even those who claim to be hermits or loners---
in fact, we've seen just how desperately some loners
desire attention and connection,
and even seek it in deadly ways.
We all need human connection, and companionship!

Today many could argue that we have an **epidemic of loneliness**—
we are so **connected on social media**,
and so **disconnected** in person, to real people, face to face.
We are also **super mobile**---rarely staying in same house or job for very long.

How many times have **you moved** in your life?
I've moved **16 times** as an adult,
which is a bit more than the **average of 11** times,
but when you think about that,
you realize people today lose friendships and connection,
at an alarming rate!

Businesses want employees to be 'mobile',
and move anywhere, regardless of the loneliness it might cause.

Some say loneliness comes from **not having enough friends or family**.
But, Loneliness **does not come from being single**,
or from a **small family**,
or **few friends**.
Because, we **can find God's peace and joy**,
regardless of how many people are in our lives!
Our spiritual ancestors have shown us this!

In fact, **being alone with God** is actually a GOOD thing---
It's called **solitude**.

The problem is this: ***Loneliness is NOT solitude.***
Solitude brings ***peace and calm.***

We all need it—that quiet time, down time with God.
 And it's great for our mental and spiritual well-being!
 Especially introverts—we really need this quiet time to recharge!

No, ***Loneliness comes from a different place----of FEAR.***
 Loneliness is afraid of being ***alone and unnoticed,***
forgotten and overlooked—
 of ***no one really knowing us.***

Which is why we are talking about it in our ***Lenten study of Fear,***
 and being ***Unafraid!***

So, what ***would you say causes*** the most loneliness today?

Age?

Social media?

Mobility?

Not knowing your neighbors, or community?

*Probably there's some truth in ***all*** of that, right?*

Sometimes loneliness comes the way our hearts work.

In the mid 1900s a British psychologist named John ***Bowlby***
 developed a ***attachment theory.***

He suggested three types of attachment:

secure, anxious, and avoidant.

He said we become one way, due to our early years.

For instance ***abused or neglected children,***

are more likely to be ***anxious or avoidant,***

while those raised in loving homes are more likely to be ***secure.***

Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*, Convergent; New York, 2018, pg. 117-8

This does NOT mean all people from difficult home are loners, or detached.
 It DOES mean that secure people feel good about their relationships,
 and have healthier interactions.

Anxious people worry about people leaving them, or loving others more.

Avoidant people have been so wounded,

they often avoid deep connections,

which leads to even more loneliness!

What is your attachment style?

Has it ***changed over the years?***

I think mine has, with lots of God, and counseling and spiritual direction.

We ***all know people*** who are anxious or avoidant, right?

People who promise to leave their partner first!

Or who refuse to accept any love, because they might be hurt?

But the ***good news*** is ---these types of attachment can all change over time, depending on what happens to us and around us, and depending on our relationships today, especially with God.

Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*, Convergent; New York, 2018, pg. 119

We also know that some loneliness comes from ***loss and grief***.

Which is also ***universal*** ---we will all lose people, we will all grieve.

Most of us in this church know the pain of ***losing*** a child, or a spouse, going through a ***divorce***, or praying for the return of a ***prodigal*** child.

Losing a ***job*** can bring loneliness, so can losing our ***health***.

Did you know that some of the ***most famous*** people in the world have struggled with loneliness?

Einstein once said it was a strange thing to be so famous, and so lonely.

Oscar-winning actress ***Anne Hathaway*** says she feels it too!

Mother Teresa faced loneliness in a thriving ministry.

Loneliness is a ***part of life***.

We cannot avoid it, and it ***usually passes*** with time.

But if it becomes ***chronic***, did you know that it can have the same effect on our heart as smoking fifteen ***cigarettes*** a day?

Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*, Convergent; New York, 2018, pg. 12

Social media—the very thing that’s supposed to ‘connect’ us to everyone, can also cause extreme loneliness!

In 2017 *The Atlantic* magazine published a study called “*Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?*”

They found that teens today see their friends daily, about 40% less than they did in 2000.

Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*, Convergent; New York, 2018, pg. 122

That's a pretty big drop in 17 years, isn't it?
 I remember seeing some of my friends growing up all the time,
 every day after school, running around the neighborhood!
 Today, kids are **plugged into electronics** so much more—
 which gives a **sense** of connection, **without actual** connection!
 Social media can be a great TOOL of connection, but not as a substitute for it!
 All the social media can leave us with a **false sense of connection and
 community, while we are** moving farther and farther apart!
 Adam Hamilton in his book, *Unafraid*, calls social media:
"An anxiety producing machine".
 Do you agree?

Have you ever emailed or texted someone,
who either didn't respond, or didn't respond right away?
 And did you feel like they were ignoring you?
 Or that they were mad at you?
 Or misunderstood you?
 Have you ever read a message and thought---
 I can't believe they are saying that,
 only to find out later,
 that they **meant absolutely nothing negative?**
 I've experienced this, haven't you?

And I know many of you have **probably felt this about me---**
 even though most of the time I am just busy,
 and trying to get to one message or emergency at a time.
(It's kind of like when they say on the automated recordings :
"Your call will be answered in the order received")
 Sometimes, we just forget or get distracted.....never meaning to ignore!

Another problem with social media,
 is that when **people feel that fear of loneliness**
 (which is more common with more social media!),
 they tend to **misinterpret** their social interaction....you know?
 So an unanswered call or text or email becomes a **huge deal---**
 and it all stems from **FEAR**.

Then, there's the current loneliness from lack of **human contact, and touch.**

Now, not everyone is touchy feely....especially the frozen chosen!
 Not everyone has touch as a primary love language.
 But, most people need not only face to face conversation,
 we also a **handshake, a hug, a gentle pat on the back...**
 just to keep us healthy, and not so lonely.

To me, this is the **beauty of a church family, and pastoral care.**
It's ok for us to appropriately hold a hand and pray, to request a hug,
 to just place our hand on a shoulder of someone who pours out their heart to
 us, right?

So, what do we **do about this epidemic** of loneliness?

A few weeks ago I mentioned Adam Hamilton's acronym **F.E.A.R.**

F is about facing our fears with faith.

How do you **use your faith** when you are lonely?

I find that **reading The Bible** is just about the most powerful thing we can do.
 In its pages we find family history, our ancestors, who felt lonely,
 just like we do today!

We can look to scriptures like **Psalm 139:7-10**

reminding us that no matter where we go---**God is there with us.**

Or **James 4:8:** "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you."

Or **Joshua 1:** as I was with Moses, so I will be with you.

I will not leave you nor forsake you. So, be strong and courageous ..."

The E is about examining fears with FACTS.

This is important—are we **realistic** about our loneliness?

Are people **really ignoring** me? Or do I just feel that way?

Are people really leaving me out, or am I just perceiving that?

Facts are always helpful.

And **one fact we should never forget----**

is that **God** is the one who is always by our side!

The A is about taking action!

If we are feeling very lonely, **what can we, what should we do?**

Well, the thing we **SHOULD NOT do is withdraw!**

We have to summon the NIKE courage—to ***JUST DO IT---***
just ***reengage with the world***, however we can!

I once knew the most lovely saint named Mary,
an older woman with poor health, couldn't leave her home much,
but ***she wrote the most meaningful handwritten letters***
of encouragement.
Maybe that's why I like to write today.

What ***actions can you take*** to combat loneliness?
An ***AARP survey in 2014*** revealed that retirees
who are involved in a local church or synagogue are ***40% less lonely!***

What a ***great commercial for being part of a family of faith!***
But it does take effort! And we have to actually show up!
Join the ministries, serve, reach out, listen and be a friend,
so that you can have a friend!

Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*, Convergent; New York, 2018, pg. 126.

In 2016 Great Britain created a help line called ***The Silver Line---***
For lonely people to talk to someone compassionate.
Adam Hamilton's church started something similar called ***The Silver Link***
ministry. These servants, mostly retired,
go to nursing homes and visit residents who have no family or visitors.
Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*, Convergent; New York, 2018, pg. 125.

Do you know what they've found is the
greatest indicator of joy and happiness in retirement?
Surprisingly, it's NOT a good retirement account!
It's good ***relationships***,
not what we have, or where we live, or who we live with.
It's ***love. Friendship. Personal connection.***

God always reminds us in the Bible that ***it is more blessed to give***
than to receive—and I think this applies to loneliness.
If we want to overcome our fear of loneliness,
we need to ***reach out and be a friend....to find a friend!***

In Matthew 9: 1-8, we read about ***four friends*** who lowered their paralyzed friend down through the roof of a crowded house, so that Jesus could heal him!

Talk about great friends!

These ***stretcher-bearers*** are so needed in our world today!

Are we willing to be a stretcher-bearer?

To be a friend, to find a friend?

Proverbs 27:9-10 says: *Sweet friendships refresh the soul and awaken our hearts with joy, for good friends are like the anointing oil...of God's presence.*

Ecclesiastes 4 says:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up the other...

The final letter in F.E.A.R,

R means ***releasing all our fear and loneliness to God!***

How?

What about spiritual practices?

What about the ***breath prayers*** I've been teaching the kids?

Or ***Bible promises of God's presence*** with us?

What about ***praying for and with one*** another?

And ***reminding ourselves, that the Holy Spirit is*** inside of us!

What about doing our part in the body of Christ, the church?

Paul says in **1 Corinthians 12**, *the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it;*

if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

This is the beauty of a small church, and our prayers of the people—we can truly care for each other!

Using faith, facts, action and release.

involves ***investing in real people***---not just the Facebook friends, or Instagram followers....We need to invest in ***one another***.

And when we are lonely, ***we need to visit the lonely***.

And be involved in church.

And 9 times out of 10, ***we have to make the first move***.

Actually, **God has already done *that***.
We love, because God first loved us (**1 John 4:19**).

All this brings us back to what Jesus promises us today
is ***closer than our own breath***.
The gift of the ***Holy Spirit inside*** us.
This Spirit who ***brings*** hope, and help.
Our companion, our Comforter, our Advocate, at all times.
The ***Holy Spirit is God—not just a feeling*** we have as Christians.

It's easy to wonder, ***do I really feel*** God's presence?
But that's not the point.
We have ***Holy Spirit's presence, even when we don't feel it***.
God is **ALWAYS** with us—whether we feel it or not.
Haven't you loved someone, even when you didn't feel the love?
That's how it is for us ***with God sometimes*** too.

So, do ***you experience*** loneliness?
Do others ***around you feel it?***
What steps will you take to reach out?

Paul said in Romans 8:38:
That nothing, in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus
And **Jesus** reminds us in Matthew 28: 20:
I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Friends, hear the ***Good News of the Gospel*** today:
We may face the fear of loneliness.
But hear the truth: ***We are never alone, or unnoticed, or abandoned.***
And with God's help, we can overcome loneliness by reaching out.

***May God give us the courage to live unafraid,
without the fear of being alone.***
And to that, all God's people said, Amen.